

lifting the BARRIER

Eliminating the state-mandated licensure of principals and superintendents is the first step in recruiting and training a generation of leaders capable of transforming America's schools

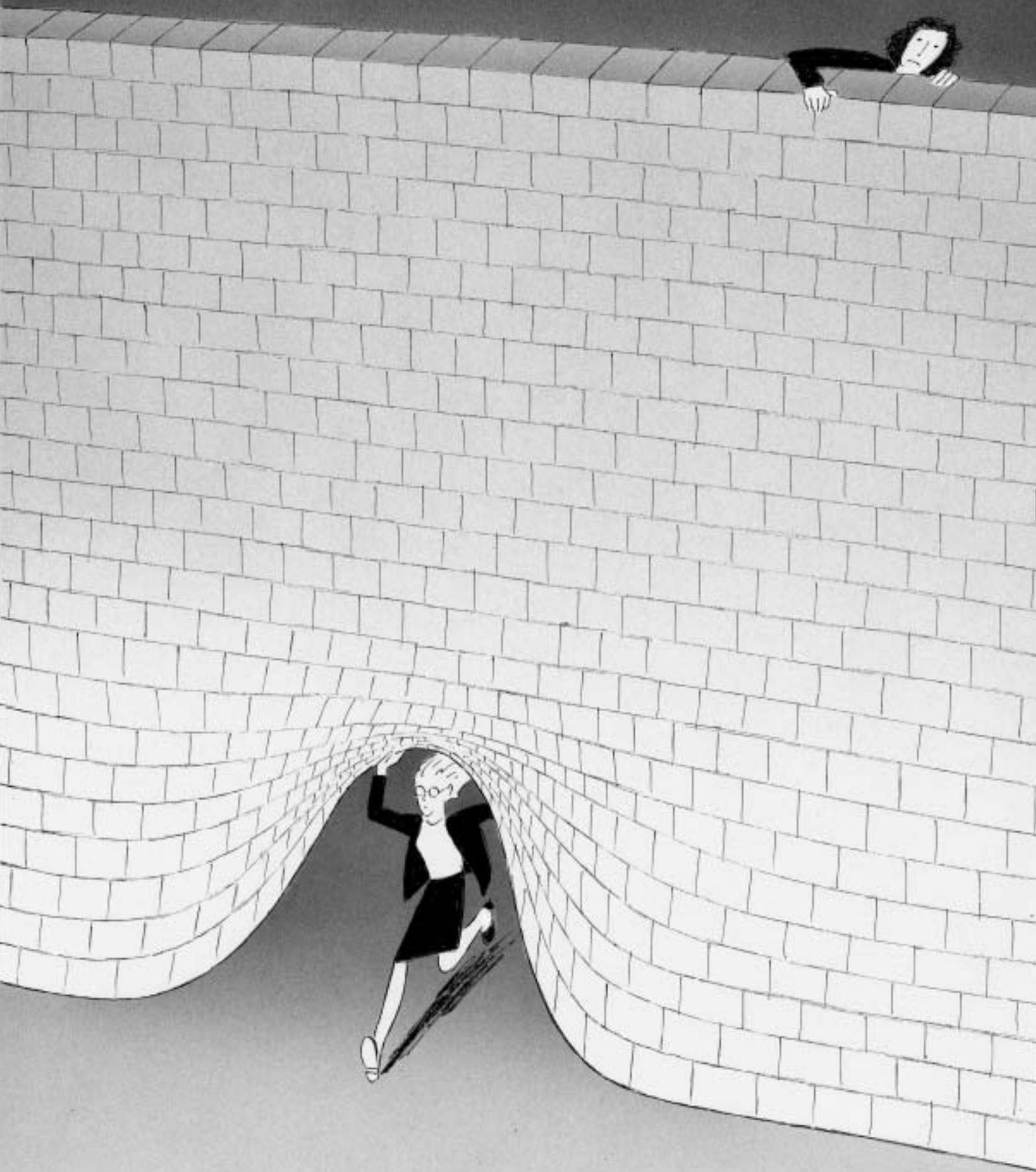
by FREDERICK M. HESS

IN THE EARLY 1990S, IBM HAD FALLEN ON HARD TIMES. THE LEADER of the personal-computing revolution was losing billions of dollars a year and looking for a new CEO. Observers were aghast when the board of directors recruited Lou Gerstner, CEO of RJR Nabisco and veteran of the food and tobacco industries. Critics insisted that his lack of experience running a technology concern would leave him at a “huge disadvantage,” wrote Doug Garr in a 1999 book about Gerstner’s tenure, because the computer business “moved at a faster pace than other industries; competition came from . . . fanatics who thrived in the often quirky and murky world of digital chaos.” It was believed that managers in the high-tech field needed both business savvy and technical skills. Gerstner was seen as woefully unprepared.

By the late 1990s, IBM was again a highly profitable technological innovator. Gerstner was hailed for engineering, as the subtitle to Garr’s account, *IBM Redux*, put it, “the business turnaround of the decade.” Might another CEO, especially one with more experience in technology, have done better? Possibly. Were the concerns about Gerstner’s lack of experience valid? Sure. However, the larger lesson is that Gerstner provided what IBM needed—a CEO “who could penetrate the corporate culture and change the company’s insular way of thinking and operating.”

Likewise, consider Meg Whitman. Formerly a brand manager at Procter & Gamble with an M.B.A. from the Harvard Business School, Whitman was hired in 1998 to lead eBay, the ubiquitous Internet auctioneer. Concerns over Whitman’s lack of familiarity with the Internet were initially widespread, but her marketing experience proved invaluable as eBay became one of the few web pioneers to actually turn a profit. Gerstner and Whitman aren’t even unusual examples; businesses often turn to leaders from outside their industries.

Recruiting outsiders has become more common in K–12 education, at least at the superintendent level. In recent years, urban school districts from New York City to Seattle have hired candidates from outside education to lead their schools. Nonetheless, the overwhelming majority of superintendents, school district officials, and school principals rise through the ranks the traditional way—first as teachers, then as assistant principals, principals, and then up to the district office. Many of them make fine leaders. But the fact is that the traditional route to K–12 school management is not serving the nation well. The public school system suffers from a lack of effective



managers at both the school and the district level. In 2002, Paul Houston, executive director of the American Association of School Administrators, said, “Five years ago, the pool of good superintendents was fairly shallow, and I thought it was as bad as it could get. I was not nearly pessimistic enough. It’s gotten worse.” In turn, 60 percent of superintendents in a recent Public Agenda survey agreed that they have had to “take what you can get” in hiring a school principal. The problem is not a lack of warm bodies, but an artificial shortage of individuals with the skills, training, and

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knowledge to lead modern schools and school systems.

The shortage is artificial in the sense that state laws needlessly limit the supply of principals and superintendents. More than 40 states require would-be principals or superintendents to acquire a license in school administration in order to apply for a job. Typically, attaining licensure as a principal requires three or more years of K–12 teaching experience, completion of a graduate degree in educational administration, and an internship (see sidebar on p. 16). In several states, candidates are also required to pass the School Leaders Licensure Assessment, an exam designed to check whether the applicants hold professionally sanctioned values and attitudes. The licensing of superintendents involves similar requirements (see sidebar on p. 17), though states are more likely to issue waivers if a school board requests one. The problem is that these licensure rules constrain the pool of potential applicants when there is no evidence that they produce more-effective school managers.

Changing Demands

In today’s reform environment, school leaders must be able to leverage technology, devise performance-based evaluation systems, recruit top-notch staff, draw upon data and research when making decisions, and motivate their teachers and students to meet state- and federally mandated goals. If the past performance of traditional school administrators gives any indication, it is unclear that teaching experience or education-school coursework provides candidates with the unique combination of technical and interpersonal skills these tasks demand. Inasmuch as private sector, nonprofit, and governmental managers outside of K–12 schooling face many of

these same challenges in their work, there is no reason why talented individuals from these sectors should not also be considered for positions as school principals and district administrators.

It is time to adopt a straightforward, two-point standard for licensing school administrators. Applicants for principalships, superintendencies, and other management positions should be expected to demonstrate the following qualifications:

- ◆ A college degree and evidence of personal integrity, including passing a criminal background check.
- ◆ Knowledge and skills that are essential to lead schools and school systems, as defined by those selecting the leader.

While schools and school districts might seek candidates with formal qualifications or credentials, such as teaching experience, a graduate degree in educational administration, or even an M.B.A., the lack of such credentials would not prevent someone from applying for a position. School districts would be free to consider a range of candidates, rather than only those with the requisite teaching experience and graduate degree.

This approach is similar to the deregulatory strategy many states are using to solve their shortages of high-quality teachers and to attract more mid-career professionals to teaching. However, school management positions are even more ripe for deregulation than is classroom teaching. Teachers spend most of their time working independently in self-contained classrooms. By contrast, school managers operate as part of a team and hold more amorphous responsibilities. Not every administrator needs to possess the full range of skills required to run a school or school system. While it may be important for some members of the leadership team to know good teaching when they see it, others may bring complementary skills that can be transferred to an educational setting. It is the team taken together that needs to hold the full complement of skills.

Deregulating the recruitment and training of school managers is especially crucial at a time when the K–12 education system is moving toward using standards, testing, accountability, and choice as its chief reform strategies. To thrive in this new environment, school leaders will need a background in fields where accountability for performance is a part of their everyday working lives. The ability to build effective teams, to set goals and motivate individuals toward meeting them, and to create a sense of purpose and mission in the schools is now even more urgent. Given these new demands, it is imperative that school boards not be unduly constrained by state regulations that dictate whom they may consider for school management positions.

Instead of recruiting effective leaders from other fields, public schools opt to pull an enormous share of principals and superintendents from the ranks of the nation's gym teachers. In 1999–2000, 34 percent of the nation's principals had been coaches or athletic directors. What uniquely equips a high-school coach rather than a director of a tutoring program to lead an elementary school? It might be that coaches are used to managing and motivating teams in a competitive setting and enforcing basic discipline, but this gives lie to the notion, popular among experts on educational leadership, that principals and superintendents must be “instructional leaders.”

Recruiting leaders from other fields would yield a range of benefits—including those for school administrators themselves. Presently, educational leaders enjoy little respect. While high-ranking military personnel and members of urban mayoral administrations often find themselves with plum offers from the private sector when they leave those fields, few school managers are seen as qualified to do much else. Prying open the channels between leadership in education and other fields will help reverse the tendency to ghettoize school administrators. This would force school systems to pay a fair rate for managerial talent and would create new opportunities for administrators to command the support and respect enjoyed by their counterparts in other sectors.

The new crop of managers will also demand the same tools and responsibilities that they enjoyed in other fields. School leaders who are not given the right to hire and fire teachers, reward and sanction personnel, or allocate resources cannot be held fully responsible for the results. The first to benefit from these changes will be the thousands of hard-working principals and superintendents who have grown frustrated with their inability to run their organizations effectively. This new agenda is not an attack on school administrators. It is a commitment to professionalize their chosen field.

Closing the Door to Talent

The burden of proof regarding licensure should rest on those who embrace it. Why? Licensure *prohibits* those who don't meet the guidelines from applying for work. This makes sense only if we are certain that someone who has not taught and has not completed a university-based program in school administration *cannot* be an effective principal or superintendent. If we're not certain, if we just believe that former teachers will *generally* make better principals, then licensure is neither necessary nor desirable. It's not necessary because, if former teachers and graduates of programs in educational administration are more qualified, school districts will hire them ahead of other candidates. It's not desirable because, unless we believe that nontraditional candidates *cannot* be effective, there will be times and places where the best candidate is not licensed—and districts will nonetheless be barred

from hiring her.

Meanwhile, the current approach has fostered a leadership culture that is ill-suited to manage by objective, ill-equipped to implement new technologies, and reluctant to be held accountable for student learning. Of principals surveyed in 2001, 48 percent thought it a “bad idea” to “hold principals accountable for student standardized test scores at the building level.” We need principals who welcome responsibility for student learning, whether they came from the classroom or not.

Licensure is a crude device, one best suited to ensuring that the clearly incompetent cannot prey on the public. It is especially well suited to professions like medicine or law, where practitioners are often independent and their quality of work is difficult for clients to gauge. Principals and superintendents, by contrast, work in a highly visible context—within a large public organization where their performance is increasingly monitored by state officials, local activists, businesspeople, journalistic outlets, and others.

The problem with requiring school managers to earn a license is that the work of a school principal or superintendent is typically shaped by that person's immediate context. Job requirements evolve over time and differ from one milieu to the next. Leadership in other lines of work has much the same quality. This is why we cannot imagine licensing business or political leaders, and why the M.B.A. is *not a license*, but a credential that employers value as they see fit. Even in higher education, where formal credentials are required for an individual to become a professor, additional credentials are not necessary to become a dean or president. In fact, as fundraising and running a multimillion-dollar institution have become the chief responsibilities of an academic presidency, more and more universities are looking to nontraditional candidates.

Three fundamentally flawed assumptions underlie the existing approach to licensure:

♦ *Only former teachers can lead, especially at the principal level.* This notion begins with the claim that only a former teacher can provide “instructional leadership.” The belief that principals need to have taught rests on two articles of faith: that only former teachers can monitor classroom personnel or mentor teachers. Both claims are of dubious merit.

The first may have been plausible when administrators could judge a teacher's effectiveness only by observing classes and monitoring parental complaints. Today, however, there is a wealth of information on achievement, and entrepreneurial managers are finding ways to gather data on other facets of teacher performance. In addition, an effective principal can use master teachers to evaluate their peers, as an increasing number of schools are doing.

The claim that principals must be mentors is equally problematic. In very small schools or systems where no one else is available to work with teachers on curricular or instructional issues,

Certification Requirements for Principals

Selected states with medium to high barriers to certification

State	Elementary/Secondary Teaching Experience	Master's Degree	Program Summary	Test
Ohio	Two years of licensed teaching	Yes	Principal preparation program in school of education	State exam
Illinois	Two years of teaching or school service	No	Graduate principal preparation program in school of education	Certification exams
Louisiana	Five years of teaching	Yes	30 graduate semester hours in educational administration and two-year principal internship	Educational administration exam
DC	Five years in education, including three as a teacher	Yes	Master's or doctoral degree in education administration/leadership or equivalent degree	Passing score on the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium's standards-based exam

SOURCE: National Center for Education Information, 2003

administrators do play this role. But in larger schools, where most students are to be found, principals and superintendents lead teams that include a variety of individuals with different strengths. An administrator who uses her team wisely can provide more useful assistance than an overstretched leader drawing on only her personal knowledge. In recent years, a number of nonteachers have performed competently as district superintendents or charter school principals. Doctors, lawyers, engineers, and other professionals routinely work in organizations led by individuals from other fields. Are teachers alone so iconoclastic or fragile that they can work

only for one of their own?

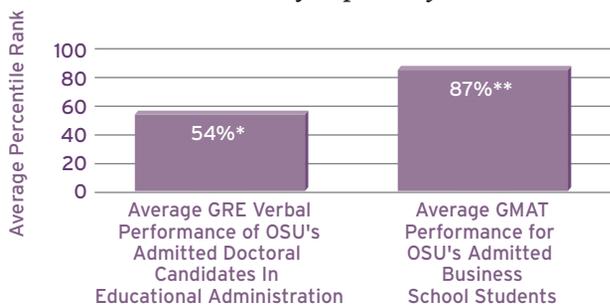
In fact, the skills that characterize effective teachers may actually hinder their performance as managers. Though experts in educational leadership argue that principals and superintendents—especially those in troubled venues—must be proactive risk-takers who engage in “creative insubordination,” research has found that “teachers tend to be reluctant risk takers.” A 2003 Public Agenda survey found that barely one in five teachers thought linking teachers’ salaries to their effectiveness would help motivate teachers or reward high-performers, while more than 60 percent worried that it would lead to jealousy. Even though 78 percent of teachers reported that at least a few teachers at their schools were “simply going through the motions,” just 23 percent thought unions should make it easier for administrators “to fire incompetent teachers.”

Even professional managers express profound anxiety about tasks like delivering negative evaluations and terminating employees. It is not much of a stretch to suggest that teachers reluctant to link rewards to student performance or unwilling to support steps to purge ineffective teachers may be ill-suited to some unpleasant but crucial managerial tasks. The years that principals or superintendents spent as teachers immersed in classroom culture may leave them hesitant to take the harsh steps that performance-based leadership sometimes requires.

◆ *Quality control.* One argument for licensure is that it screens out incompetent aspirants. But earning a master’s or doctorate in educational leadership does no such thing. Even elite programs impose shockingly little quality control. Education schools do not make it possible to examine admissions data specific to their administration and leadership programs, but we can garner a rough idea of selectivity by comparing overall admissions data from colleges of education with those from graduate business schools.

School Administration's Permissive Filter (Figure 1)

At Ohio State University, candidates admitted to its 19th-ranked business school scored better than 87 percent of all takers of the GMAT. Meanwhile, doctoral candidates admitted to Ohio State's education school, which houses an educational administration program ranked 2nd in the nation, scored higher on the GRE verbal exam than only 54 percent of test-takers.



* Reflects an average verbal GRE score of 480.

** Reflects an average combined verbal and math GMAT score of 660.

Note: GMAT scores are a combination of math and verbal scores, and thus scores on the GMAT and GRE do not directly correspond. However, students who take these exams tend, on average, to perform similarly on both.

SOURCE: U.S. News & World Report, 2004; Educational Testing Service; Graduate Management Admissions Council

Certification Requirements for Superintendents

Selected states with medium to high barriers to certification

State	Elementary/Secondary Teaching Experience	Prior Administrative Experience	Graduate Degree	Program Summary	Other
California	Three years of public or private school teaching/ services & valid credential	None required	Not required	24 semester units of administrative services program or one-year internship	No additional requirements
Indiana	Two years of teaching and K-12 license	None required	Ed.S., Ed.D., or Ph.D.	Standards-based preparation including internship	Must pass written assessment
Massachusetts	Valid educational license	Three years of administrative experience	Master's or other advanced degree in appropriate field	A passing score on an assessment of leadership, administrative skills, communication, and literacy	Alternate certification methods: administrator internships, apprenticeships, or certification by review panel
Minnesota	Three years of licensed teaching	None required	Minnesota graduate school, doctoral or other specialist program	No specific program requirements	Field experience of 320 hours in 12 continuous months as administrative aide or internship
Pennsylvania	Six years of teaching/ services, including three years with a public school certificate	None required	Graduate specialist program	State-approved, two-year graduate-level program in educational administration	Be recommended by the preparing institution for certification

SOURCE: National Center for Education Information, 2003

A few examples from the 2004 *U.S. News & World Report* rankings of graduate programs help to illustrate the point. Penn State University's 33rd-ranked business school accepted 24 percent of its applicants; admitted students had a mean GMAT score of 650. Meanwhile, the university's school of education, which housed the nation's 6th-ranked educational administration program, accepted 48 percent of its *doctoral* applicants, and the admitted students had a mean verbal GRE score of 480. Ohio State University's 19th-ranked business school accepted 25 percent of its applicants, and admitted students had a mean GMAT score of 660, while the university's education school, home to the nation's 2nd-ranked administration program, accepted 44 percent of doctoral applicants, and admitted students had a mean verbal GRE score of 480 (see Figure 1). The 13th-ranked University of Michigan–Ann Arbor business school accepted 19 percent of its M.B.A. applicants, while the education school (with the 9th-ranked administration program) accepted 37 percent of its doctoral applicants.

◆ *Professionalism.* Today, due in large part to licensure, educa-

tional administration is a subspecialization of the sprawling field of leadership and management. Experts on educational leadership dismiss the existing canon of management theory and practice, instead offering their own “educationally unique” formulations of leadership. Prominent thinkers, such as Thomas Sergiovanni in *Leadership for the Schoolhouse*, argue that “corporate” models of leadership cannot work in education. Such simple minded dichotomies are mistaken. There is no one style of “corporate” leadership; nor is there a unique “educational leadership.”

The result is training that does not expose educators to the body of thought that conventionally trained executives deem essential. Major publishers produce lists of “educational administration” texts that number hundreds of books, though they publish nothing similar on managing pharmaceutical firms, retirement communities, or fire departments. The absence of cross-pollination leaves school administration a lightly regarded backwater.

Surveying some of the titles prominently advertised in Corwin Press's fall 2002 catalog illustrates the problem. Widely used in administrative training are books like *Leading for*

An Army of Leaders

In about nine months, the U.S. Army turns laypeople into military officers by FREDERICK M. HESS

Consider the approach of another public organization that also wrestles with leadership preparation: the U.S. Army. After all, while educators hold the fate of innocent children in their hands, nowhere are the consequences for leadership failure as devastating as on the battlefield, where an officer's ineptness can result in the deaths of those entrusted to his care. Clearly, the need to screen out the ill-suited and ensure essential mastery is at least as great as in public education. Moreover, especially after its dramatic successes in Afghanistan and Iraq, the U.S. military is hailed as perhaps the most cohesive, equitable, diverse, and efficient public institution in the world. How does the Army select and train its leaders, and what lessons might it teach our nation's schools?

Recognizing that it never has enough good leaders, the Army provides an array of avenues by which individuals can enter its officer ranks. A handful of aspirants enlist in the Army and then seek promotion, but most apply to West Point out of high school, enroll in ROTC while in college, or apply to Officer Candidate School (OCS) from outside the military. In all cases, the Army actively recruits talent for its officer corps. While school administration programs offer training to just about any teacher who wants it, the Army works to identify and pursue promising candidates and ruthlessly screens out the unqualified. The Army recruits only a tiny percentage of officers from within the enlisted ranks, instead relying on officers selected from a distinct talent pool and trained for different roles. This approach is precisely the opposite of what is followed in schooling.

The West Point model – extensively training hand-picked aspirants from an early age – makes evident sense, as does promoting a handful of select veterans. The most interesting example, however, is OCS. The Army has devoted decades of research to ensuring that it entrusts combatants only to prepared leaders. How long does that training take? For those who enter OCS and demonstrate the required competencies, it is possible, with no previous military experience, to be in the field leading troops after only 40 weeks. Nine weeks of basic training, 14 weeks of OCS, and only 4 months of specialized preparation suffice to teach all the leadership and technical expertise essential for combat leadership.

In an ideal world, the Army would train OCS personnel for another two to three years. However, the Army recognizes that it cannot afford arbitrary barriers that might cost more in talent than they return in preparation.

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Diversity: How School Leaders Promote Positive Interethnic Relations; Caring Enough to Lead: How Reflective Thought Leads to Moral Leadership; and Leadership and the Force of Love: Six Keys to Motivating with Love. These volumes never explain why conventional management wisdom and analysis are inappropriate for schooling.

The Costs of the Status Quo

Licensure makes it more costly to seek a management position in education, making other professions relatively more attractive. If the hurdles screened out the incompetent or ill-suited, that would be one thing. However, there is no evidence and little reason to believe that one's willingness to pay tuition for lightly regarded courses during evenings, weekends, and summers says much about one's aptitude or suitability for leadership. Willingness to bear such burdens may reflect a lack of interest in teaching, a lack of attractive alternatives, or hunger for a position of authority just as readily as a commitment to learning.

It is simply not the case, as proponents of licensure argue, that school management positions are so challenging that nobody wants them. Recent years have witnessed the creation of several programs that train aspiring nontraditional principals and school district officials. In 2002, New Leaders for New Schools received 400 applications for 33 fellowship slots in its cohort of principals-in-training; the Broad Foundation's Urban Superintendents Academy had over 1,300 inquiries and more than 200 applications for 25 slots; and the KIPP (Knowledge Is Power Program) Foundation's principal academy had 410 applicants for 20 slots.

The most motivated candidates may be the least willing to sit through poorly regarded courses or to suffer procedural hurdles. In fact, an extraordinary number of entrepreneurs pursue charter school management positions—despite the obstacles, uncertainty, and reduced compensation—because they are unwilling to wait the requisite years before being permitted to seek a position in a conventional district school.

Tried but Not True

Present reform efforts fall into opposing camps. One is represented by the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium's (ISLLC) efforts to define "standards" for educational administration and to stiffen the requirements for licensure. The idea is to improve the training of potential principals and superintendents—a worthy goal, but one whose effect would be to further narrow the field of candidates.

Formed in the 1990s, ISLLC is a coalition of administrator organizations (like the National Association of Elementary School Principals), education unions, education schools, and other education client groups. In line with what these

groups have long advocated, the ISLLC standards assess individual beliefs rather than knowledge or skills. The six standards assert that school administrators should “promote student success” by doing things like “facilitating . . . a vision of learning,” “collaborating . . . with community members,” and “influencing the larger political . . . legal, and cultural context.” These sentiments are pleasing primarily to those who embrace the ISLLC’s notion of “diversity,” endorse constructivist pedagogy, and believe school leaders ought to wield political and legal levers to advance “social justice.”

The problems are made clear by the ISLLC School Leaders Licensure Assessment, which several states now use to assess the competence of candidates for principalships. While the exam’s designers claim that it is “grounded in research,” the exam does not assess legal, budgetary, management, research, curricular, or pedagogical knowledge—but determines little more than fidelity to ISLLC values. As the ISLLC’s chairman, Ohio State University professor Joseph Murphy, concedes, “[The exam] is a statement of values about where the profession should be”—or at least, where it should be according to Murphy and his allies.

Of the sample situations and questions in the on-line preparation materials, not one asks a candidate to exhibit an understanding of scholarly research, legal statute, or budgetary concepts. One sample vignette asks candidates to determine what is “in the best interest of the particular student” in a case where a high-school senior failing a class asks the principal if he can drop the class, even though permitting the student to do so is “contrary to school policy.” In the example, the principal permits the student to drop the class, and test-takers are then asked to explain whether this decision served the student’s “best interest.” Endorsing the principal’s action earns the test-taker a perfect score while those who recommend denying the request are marked down. ISLLC’s public materials indicate that graders would give a score of zero to the following candidate response: “The principal’s action is wrong. . . . Much more is learned in high school than academics. Students must learn that there are consequences for their actions. . . . If this student is allowed to graduate, the lesson he will learn is that he does not have to accept the consequences of his actions.”

The other reform strategy pursued in recent years, by large urban districts from New York to San Diego, is to recruit celebrity superintendents from other professions, such as Joel Klein, the Clinton administration’s antitrust official, who is now serving as chancellor of the New York City schools. There is nothing wrong with pursuing high-profile nontraditional superintendents. Such hires have imported a number of promising executives into the schools and challenged shopworn assumptions. However, searches for non-

traditional leaders too often devolve into a quixotic quest for “white knights.”

Most nontraditional superintendents were hired not on the basis of a reasoned assessment of their skills but because they were considered forceful individuals. The fascination with “leadership” that can be readily transferred from one field to the next has sometimes been shockingly simplistic, as with the presumption that military generals would make good superintendents because they run taut organizations or that attorneys would because they’re familiar with law and politics.

American education doesn’t need a few dozen superintendents gamely swimming against the tide, but tens of thousands of competent superintendents, principals, and administrators working in tandem. The problem with today’s efforts is that they are not part of larger efforts to recruit thoughtfully out of an expanded candidate pool, to build and support teams, and to rethink management. Instead, they are too

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often one-shot prayers in which the district hopes that charisma and personal credibility can jumpstart their moribund institutions.

In the years immediately following World War II, business administration was a minor profession, and business schools were institutions of modest repute, viewed as intellectually suspect step-cousins to university economics departments. As management became more crucial to the postwar economy, the quality of executives improved, and business schools responded to competitive forces. Businesses were forced to discipline their hiring through a new reliance on the bottom line, and business schools became increasingly selective and focused on teaching critical economic, accounting, and quantitative content in a useful and relevant fashion. Today, America’s executive workforce is admired across the globe, and its business schools are among the nation’s most prestigious educational units. This all transpired without formal licensing; neither business schools nor America are any the worse off because Bill Gates and Michael Dell never obtained an M.B.A. The world of educational leadership is ripe for a similar revolution.

—Frederick M. Hess is a resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute and executive editor of *Education Next*. This essay is adapted from *A License to Lead? A New Leadership Agenda for America’s Schools* (Progressive Policy Institute, 2003).