school leadership is the key to school improvement, then school principals are the people who know where the key ring hangs. In an era of accountability, of charter schooling and merit pay, of data-driven standards and skill management, school principals are the front-line managers, the shop stewards, the brigade commanders—the ones who will lead a team to new levels of effectiveness. Or not.

Indeed, the principal’s critical role in the No Child Left Behind era may just be taken for granted. There is growing evidence to suggest that the revolution in school organization, management, and curricular affairs may have left principals behind. In a 2003 report, the nonpartisan research organization, Public Agenda, reported that today’s school superintendents want their principals to display prowess in everything from accountability to instructional leadership and teacher quality, but principals themselves don’t think they are equipped for these duties. Just 36 percent of them, according to Public Agenda, believe that their tougher scrutiny of weak teachers is leading to tenure denials and only 30 percent report that student achievement is being factored into their teacher evaluations. Most worrisome, perhaps, some 96 percent of practicing principals

BY FREDERICK M. HESS AND ANDREW P. KELLY
According to recent surveys, 16% of the respondents suggest that the revolution in school organization, management, and curricular affairs may have left principals behind. The critical role of principals in the No Child Left Behind era may just be taken for granted. There is growing evidence to support this view.

A recent survey conducted by Public Agenda found that many principals report that “leadership programs in graduate schools of education are out of touch” with what principals need to know. The study also found that the typical course of studies required of principal candidates was largely disconnected from the realities of school management, though the content of these courses was not analyzed.

The study found that the typical course of studies required of principal candidates was largely disconnected from the realities of school management, though the content of these courses was not analyzed. Among Levine's thoughtful solutions: to create an education management degree like the M.B.A., to eliminate the Ed.D., and to stop districts from offering pay raises for course credit. Such structural changes are certainly welcome, but Levine's study raises a more fundamental question as to whether the content of preparation courses, in addition to their structure, must be reconceptualized.

Managing for Results—16%

In light of widespread efforts to hold schools accountable for student learning, a push highlighted by the passage of No Child Left Behind in 2001, we were interested in seeing how much emphasis programs placed on assessment and accountability within the core curriculum. To identify the amount of time spent on such subjects, we singled out all weeks spent on the general topic “managing for results.” We included in this category such topics as school-level program implementation, evaluation, quality control, improved performance, and rethinking or restructuring practices and routines. The specific focus of these weeks included issues like accountability, evaluation,
assessments, data management, decisionmaking, strategy, organizational structure, and change. Overall, about 16 percent of all the class sessions in the sample—about one-sixth of the course time altogether—were classified under this general managing for results heading.

We expected to find that many of the lessons on managing for results would be spent teaching principals to leverage accountability systems to help improve instruction and drive student achievement. No less than 63 percent of superintendents report that raising student achievement is the biggest part of a principal's evaluation, reports Public Agenda. Instead, only 13 percent of the course weeks spent on managing for results actually attempted to link school management to standards-based accountability systems, state assessments, or the demands of No Child Left Behind. Unless the topic was being smuggled in elsewhere in the course, only about 50 out of 2,424 course weeks—or 2 percent of all instruction—addressed accountability as a management issue.

Managing effectively also requires that principals be equipped to make use of data, research, and associated technology. How much attention are preparation programs devoting to these topics? We found that the “managing for results” course weeks address data, technology, or research about 29 percent of the time.

Combining the tallies in the two previous paragraphs reveals an estimate of the total amount of time devoted to using accountability, data, research, or technology as management tools. Unless courses are handling the topic elsewhere, only about 6–7 percent of all class sessions are linking these topics to effective school management. In contrast, many class sessions that ostensibly address managing for results focus on the more philosophical aspects of leadership, such as the one whose title asked, “How do we engage the moral and aesthetic imagination in the educational change process?”

Contemporary education leadership requires that principals have a familiarity with data and research. Expanding on the previous finding, we asked the broader question: What percentage of all course weeks included a description, reading, or assignment that mentioned or referred to statistics, data, or empirical research in any context? Just 11 percent of weeks did so, meaning that even the most generous estimate implies that consideration of data and research was absent in nearly 90 percent of the course weeks.

We expected to find that many of the lessons on managing for results would be spent teaching principals to leverage accountability systems to help improve instruction and drive student achievement. No less than 63 percent of superintendents report that raising student achievement is the biggest part of a principal’s evaluation, reports Public Agenda. Instead, only 13 percent of the course weeks spent on managing for results actually attempted to link school management to standards-based accountability systems, state assessments, or the demands of No Child Left Behind. Unless the topic was being smuggled in elsewhere in the course, only about 50 out of 2,424 course weeks—or 2 percent of all instruction—addressed accountability as a management issue.

Managing effectively also requires that principals be equipped to make use of data, research, and associated technology. How much attention are preparation programs devoting to these topics? We found that the “managing for results” course weeks address data, technology, or research about 29 percent of the time.

Combining the tallies in the two previous paragraphs reveals an estimate of the total amount of time devoted to using accountability, data, research, or technology as management tools. Unless courses are handling the topic elsewhere, only about 6–7 percent of all class sessions are linking these topics to effective school management. In contrast, many class sessions that ostensibly address managing for results focus on the more philosophical aspects of leadership, such as the one whose title asked, “How do we engage the moral and aesthetic imagination in the educational change process?”

Contemporary education leadership requires that principals have a familiarity with data and research. Expanding on the previous finding, we asked the broader question: What percentage of all course weeks included a description, reading, or assignment that mentioned or referred to statistics, data, or empirical research in any context? Just 11 percent of weeks did so, meaning that even the most generous estimate implies that consideration of data and research was absent in nearly 90 percent of the course weeks.

---

Managing Personnel—15%
A critical role for any leader is hiring, evaluating, developing, and firing personnel. We coded as “managing personnel” any course weeks that addressed relations with school employees—primarily teachers but also assistant principals, specialists, and staff members. These weeks discussed issues like recruitment, selection, induction, teacher evaluation, clinical supervision, motivation, conflict management, professional development, and termination or dismissal. About 15 percent of all course weeks were devoted to the topics placed under the managing personnel rubric.
While principals have always been limited in their ability to hire, remove, or reward personnel, they are now pressed both by expectations and by statute to play an increasingly aggressive role in ensuring teacher quality. In fact, Education Week reports that 80 percent of principals say they enjoy a great deal of influence in evaluating teachers and 74 percent say the same about hiring new personnel. The importance of good hires was highlighted by a 1999 study of 54 U.S. companies that concluded that the cost of the average managerial “mis-hire” was 24 times the failed employee’s starting salary.

There is little evidence that training programs are doing much to prepare principals for these new challenges. Just 11 percent of the managing-personnel course weeks addressed the hiring process. We also discovered that just 3 percent of the managing-personnel course weeks mentioned teacher dismissal, and less than 3 percent mentioned compensation. In all, just 21 of 360 class sessions on managing personnel addressed employee compensation or termination. Many programs did not discuss termination or compensation at all: the syllabi for 20 of 31 programs included not one class session that mentioned termination, and 23 of the 31 never mentioned compensation.

One topic that received more attention was teacher evaluation, which was covered in 24 percent of managing-personnel course weeks. However, these units generally focused on the more agreeable, supportive elements of evaluation: topics like observation, clinical supervision, coaching, or mentoring. Receiving far less attention were tough-minded areas of concern, like linking evaluation to student achievement, using systematic evaluation to identify effective and ineffective personnel, or dismissing low performers. Supportive evaluation accounted for 74 percent of the class sessions devoted to personnel evaluation, while tough-minded evaluation constituted just 26 percent. When they did occasionally touch on using evaluation to ensure instructional quality, lessons routinely focused on procedural questions (such as “Cycles of supervision: What’s due when?”) or finding ways to support problematic staff (for instance, “Supervising the marginal teacher”).

In short, there is little evidence that this attention to evaluation is well suited to help principals make difficult personnel decisions. The principal-preparation programs examined devoted barely 3 percent of total instructional weeks in core courses to the central management responsibilities of hiring, identifying, and rewarding good employees or identifying and removing ineffective ones.

Norms and Values—12%

Education school critics frequently assert that too many courses are characterized by an ideological tilt that influences content. Does the evidence suggest such a bias in principal preparation? We coded a course week as devoted to addressing “norms and values” if it exposed principal candidates to different philosophies of education and pedagogy, discussed debates about the nature and purpose of public schooling, or examined the racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic context of education (the sociology of education). In fact, only about 12 percent of course weeks had an explicit emphasis on norms or values.

When instruction does address norms and values, is there evidence that instructors are failing to expose students to diverse points of view? Obviously, such inquiry requires the researcher to make judgment calls. Coded as “left-leaning” were course weeks that advocated concepts like social justice and multiculturalism, focused on inequality and race-based discrimination, emphasized notions of silenced voices and child-centered instruction, or were critical of testing and choice-based reform. For example, course weeks coded left-leaning included “The role of the curriculum in legitimating social inequality” and “Other silenced voices? (females, gay, impaired, over/underweight, bullied, biracial, [learning disabled], religion, homeless, transient, etc.).” Class sessions that critiqued notions of social justice and multiculturalism, raised concerns about affirmative action or a culture of “victimhood,” advocated phonics and back-to-basics instruction, or were generally positive with regard to testing or choice-based reform were coded as “right leaning.” The single unit in this category is entitled, “The state and local politics of education reform” and was coded as right leaning because the author of the week’s primary reading is regarded as conservative. Those weeks that did not display clear normative direction or that included a variety of normative views were coded “neutral.” Weeks that were coded neutral included such lessons as “Are unions good or bad for public education? What does the evidence say?” and “What should schools teach? Phonics vs. whole language; multicultural education/teaching for diversity.”

The results suggest that there is a distinct left-leaning normative tilt in those weeks that address norms and values. (See Figure 1.) Overall, 65 percent of the norms and values weeks were coded as left leaning, 35 percent as neutral, and less than 1 percent as right leaning. Contrary to earlier suggestions that the left-leaning tendencies of elite education schools are not representative of other programs, we found that the majority of norms and values course weeks were left leaning even in non-elite programs. Interestingly, many of the traditional bogeymen flagged by education school critics were not much in evidence. For instance, the words diversity and diverse, multiculturalism and multicultural, appear only about 3 percent of the time across all course weeks.
In the end, however, the imbalance of ideological perspectives does raise cautionary flags about instructor interest in entertaining competing schools of thought on leadership. Course weeks labeled “Suturing together a conservative public agenda: markets, religion, standards, and inequality” raise doubts about whether the aim is to educate or to promote a particular agenda.

**Most Frequently Read Authors**

Perhaps as important as what topics are examined in a class is what reading material students are exposed to in the course of their studies. Consequently, we searched among the author names of the 1,851 assigned books, book chapters, and articles in the 210 syllabi studied by future principals. A reading was attributed to an individual if that person was first or second author of the book, article, or book chapter. Edited volumes themselves are not attributed to the volume editor, although chapters assigned within edited collections—including introductions or conclusions—are attributed in the manner explained above.

There is little evidence that principal-preparation programs are designed in ways to introduce students to a broad range of management, organizational, or administrative theory and practice. On the contrary, they rely heavily on texts and other works written by professors of education administration, such as Terence Deal (University of Southern California), Allan Odden (University of Wisconsin), Kent Peterson (University of Wisconsin), Michael Fullan (University of Toronto), Lee Bolman (University of Missouri-Kansas City), and Thomas Sergiovanni (Trinity University, Texas). With a few exceptions, the authors assigned in the courses we analyzed tend to focus on the unique challenges and cultural distinctiveness of education systems. Sergiovanni, for instance, has argued that preparation for school leadership is unlike that for other leadership or management roles, declaring that “corporate” models of leadership cannot work in education and, “We [must] accept the reality that leadership for the schoolhouse should be different, and…we [need to] begin to invent our own practice.”

In both substance and point of view, this list raises questions about whether aspiring principals may be encountering only a limited body of thought. Notably missing are star thinkers in the world of business management. In 2003, Bloomsbury Publishing and Suntop Media surveyed business leaders, business school professors, and M.B.A. students to assemble a list of the 50 most important living management thinkers. Of the individuals identified, only nine were ever assigned in any of the course syllabi examined. Influential thinkers like Jim Collins, author of *Good to Great*; Harvard Business School professor Michael Porter; Harvard Business School professor and author of *The Innovator’s Dilemma*, Clay Christensen; and In *Search of Excellence* author Tom Peters, who are often asked to address national education conferences and are prominently cited by education reformers,
Notably missing are star thinkers in the world of business management....

Influential thinkers like Jim Collins...Michael Porter...Clay Christensen...

Tom Peters, who are often asked to address national education conferences and prominently cited by education reformers, were not assigned in any courses in the sample.

has suggested, growth and advancement come not merely from new inventions or unearthing new resources, but from entrepreneurial decisionmakers’ configuring personnel, practices, operations, and resources in new and more effective ways.

Conclusion

Because preparation of principals has not kept pace with changes in the larger world of schooling, graduates of principal-preparation programs have been left ill equipped for the challenges and opportunities posed by an era of accountability. In addition to changes related to program structure, such as those raised by the recent high-profile Teachers College study, the question of content is pivotal; principals receive limited training in the use of data, research, technology, the hiring or termination of personnel, or using data to evaluate personnel in a systematic way. The reading lists suggest that aspiring principals receive little exposure to important management scholarship or sophisticated inquiry on education productivity and governance. In short, there is reason to doubt whether they are mastering the skills requisite for success as school leaders in the 21st century.

The primary concern is not ideological bias but the apparent narrow-mindedness of today’s instructional focus. The lack of attention to serious thinking on management or to topics like research, accountability, or termination, suggests an emphasis on preparing candidates for the traditional, pinched world of leadership—and a failure to teach the things they have traditionally been empowered to do—monitor curricula, support and encourage faculty, manage facilities, and so on—but do little to equip them to take advantage of tools newly available to school leaders. Almost 30 percent of total instruction focuses on technical law or finance questions, 11 percent addresses curriculum and pedagogy, while the discussion of staffing focuses more on traditional faculty oversight than on exploiting new managerial tools. Principal-preparation programs that pay little attention to data, productivity, accountability, or working with parents leave their graduates unprepared for new responsibilities and likely to resist or mishandle new freedoms—resulting in micromanagement, poor decisions, or the misuse of accountability instruments.

Currently, a number of preparation programs are considering or undergoing ambitious redesign efforts. However, the Southern Regional Education Board, whose Leadership Initiative is driving preparation reform in its 16 member states, has cautioned: “Redesigning leadership preparation programs does not mean simply rearranging old courses—as staff at some universities and leadership academies are inclined to do.” Whether preparation programs will answer that challenge remains to be seen. Meaningful reform of principal-preparation programs must retool the content so that it matches the challenges confronting principals in 21st-century schooling.

Frederick M. Hess is director of education policy studies and a resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute. Andrew P. Kelly is an education policy researcher at AEL.