

THE MYTH OF THE SUPERPRINCIPAL

By Michael A. Copland

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Position Opening: School Principal, Anytown School District.

Qualifications: Wisdom of a sage, vision of a CEO, intellect of a scholar, leadership of a point guard, compassion of a counselor, moral strength of a nun, courage of a firefighter, craft knowledge of a surgeon, political savvy of a senator, toughness of a soldier, listening skills of a blind man, humility of a saint, collaborative skills of an entrepreneur, certitude of a civil rights activist, charisma of a stage performer, and patience of Job. Salary lower than you might expect. Credential required. For application materials, contact...

While this job description intentionally exceeds the bounds of the ridiculous, one need not retreat too far from parody to authentically capture the current set of demands facing our nation's school principals. Consider the following excerpt from an actual job listing recently posted for an elementary principalship in a large, urban school system:

- Under the general direction of a "cluster leader," the elementary school principal provides direction and leadership within the assigned school. This involves overseeing the management of the educational program, decision-making and communication processes, business operations, staff and community relations programs, and the physical plant.
- The principal directs the establishment and maintenance of a school climate conducive to student achievement and learning, including overseeing the enforcement of school rules and regulations, the implementation of disciplinary measures, when necessary, as well as serving as a catalyst to motivate and empower staff, students, and parents to become active participants in the efforts to increase student achievement by improving the educational experience and program.
- The principal facilitates and coordinates the implementation of various cluster initiatives, including school participation in the cluster council; the development and implementation of an effective school council; the development of small

learning communities; and the planning, implementation, and administration of decentralization plans.

- The principal's responsibilities include the improvement of instruction; assessment of student and program success; classroom visitations; the rating of professionals and paraprofessionals; staff orientation and staff development; program planning, monitoring, and evaluation; identification of school needs in terms of personnel and programs; providing staff development for teachers, paraprofessionals, and parent community volunteers; establishing close working relationships with the Home and School Association; serving as member of the instructional support team; fostering parent involvement in school activities; establishing and maintaining communications with business, civic, and religious leaders; working with community groups; interpreting existing school programs to the community; developing new and revised school programs to meet community needs and concerns; identifying social and emotional needs of students; ensuring the provision of programs to meet the need of students beyond the basic skills and basic curricular areas; and performing related duties as required.
- The responsibilities described above are to be seen in the context of a shared governance model which supports consultation, collaboration, and consensus among the various constituent groups within the school.¹

Yes, prevailing expectations associated with the principal's role are excessively high, and this trend may be at the root of a pressing problem for education.

A Shortage of Principals — Growing anecdotal evidence suggests that it is increasingly difficult to find school principals at a time when the demand for them is on the rise. A recent survey jointly commissioned by two national principals' groups indicates that fewer and fewer qualified people want the principal's job.² In the state of Washington during a recent school year, roughly 30 elementary and secondary principalships were held by retired educators who had been called back to "fill in" because of districts' inability to staff the positions with new faces.³ Several articles in Education Week have reported that school districts in various locales are experiencing difficulty attracting candidates for principal openings.⁴ In my community, a recent vacancy for an assistant principal at a comprehensive high school that is recognized as one

of the top public high schools in America yielded a pool of three candidates.⁵ These indicators appear to constitute an emerging trend. Moreover, if a shortage of principal candidates is a problem now, the issue is only likely to grow. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics projects a 10% to 20% increase in vacancies for educational administrators through 2008.⁶

Providing that the reports of an impending shortage are accurate, the problem can be understood in at least two different ways. First, there may simply be a shortage in the number of candidates: too few prospective principals to fill too many openings. Framing the problem in this way directs one to a host of possible underlying causes. We know, for example, that school administrator retirements alone will account for a moderate increase in openings for the next several years.⁷ Further, recent reports point to shifting educational demands, huge workloads, and lack of job security as major issues that may be fueling the growing shortage.⁸ Familiar issues of limited compensation, inadequate preparation options, high stress, and lack of respect associated with the work of school administration surely make entering the field less attractive. Yet one can argue that these issues are not new; many have plagued the profession in some form for years.

Judging from recent reports, the problem can also be framed as one of declining candidate quality. If quality is at issue, what factors contribute? Again, it's easy to jump to familiar conclusions. It is well known, for example, that students of school administration historically score near the bottom of the Graduate Record Examinations (GRE) rankings of professional fields.⁹ Indeed, failure to recruit top-quality students into the field is an issue that has frustrated educational administration for many years. Moreover, the inadequacy of administrator preparation programs is bemoaned time and again, a long-standing lament in the literature.¹⁰ Yet, as with the familiar rhetoric about a supply problem, these constraints on quality, while perhaps genuine, are not new and so can't be wholly blamed for a dearth of qualified candidates, whether real or perceived.

No, something is different about the current educational landscape, something that exacerbates both the problem of the limited supply of candidates and the perceptions of their declining quality.

Expectations for the principalship have steadily expanded since the reforms of the early 1980s, always adding to and never subtracting from the job description. As expectations have grown, the principal's role has come under more and more scrutiny. Now, two decades into the current age of school reform, one can argue that we

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have reached the point where aggregate expectations for the principalship are so exorbitant that they exceed the limits of what might reasonably be expected from one person.

Analysis of the current situation through the lens of excessive expectations leads to a hypotheses different from those commonly cited, yet one that sheds light on the two problems we have been discussing. First, this view raises the possibility that it is precisely the overwhelming expectations that currently deter those who otherwise would have aspired to the principalship — hence enlarging the supply problem. Moreover, it is possible that school district leaders and school board members, swept up by the wave of monumental expectations, may be searching for principals who simply don't exist — further intensifying notions of a widening problem of candidate quality.

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¹ City of Philadelphia Public Schools, online job posting

² Telephone survey jointly sponsored by the National Association of Elementary School Principals and the National Association of Secondary School Principals, cited in Bess Keller, "Principal's Shoes Are hard to Fill," *Education Week*, 18 March 1998, p.3

³ Sandra L. Barker, "Is Your Successor in Your Schoolhouse? Finding Principal Candidates," *NASSP Journal*, vol. 81, 1997, p. 592

⁴ See, for example, Keller, op. Cit.; Caroline Hendrie, "Tenured Principals; an Endangered Species," *Education Week*, 4 March, 1998, pp. 1-17; and Lynn Olson, "The Push for Accountability Gathers Steam," *Education Week*, 11 February 1998, pp. 1. 12-13.

⁵ Personal conversation with local school administrator, October 1999.

⁶ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Education Administrators," in 2000-01 *Occupational Outlook Handbook*, available at <http://stats.bls.gov/ocohome.htm>

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Lisa Richardson, "Principal: A Tougher Job, Fewer Takers," *Los Angeles Times*, 23 June 1999, pp. A-1, A-15.

⁹ Comparing recent GRE results with those from a decade earlier suggests that the situation is not improving and might even be worsening. See *Graduate Record Examinations: 1985-86 Guide to the Use of Scores* (Princeton, N.J.; Educational Testing Service, 1985); and *Graduate Record Examinations: 1996-97 Guide to the Use of Scores* (Princeton, N.J.; Educational Testing Service, 1996).

¹⁰ See, for example, Philip Hallinger and Joseph Murphy, "Developing Leaders for Tomorrow's Schools," *Phi Delta Kappan*, March 1991, pp. 514-20; Daniel Griffiths, Robert Stout, and Patrick Forsyth, *Leaders for Tomorrow's Schools* (Berkeley, Calif.; McCutchan, 1988); Joseph Murphy, "The Reform of School Administration: Pressure and Calls for Change," in idem. Ed., *The Educational Reform Movement of the 1980s: Perspectives and Cases* (Berkeley, Calif.: McCutchan, 1990) pp. 277-303; and idem, *The Landscape of Leadership Preparation* (Newbury Park, Calif.; Corwin press, 1992)