From the Director:

The Politics and Ethics of Professional Responsibility in the Educational Leadership Professoriate

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Our current economic condition has been frequently compared to that of the Great Depression, which was described in a 1933 edition of The Nation (“Mr. Roosevelt Must Lead,” 1933/2009) as a time when “effective leadership and prompt and vigorous action [had never] been more imperative,” and “where the problems had never been more complex and difficult.” It seems that historical moment has met its match. And like that earlier period, we are fortunate to have leaders with vision, courage, and an ability to inspire hope in the face of much despair.

However, we cannot wait for the President, our legislators, state governors, mayors, superintendents, principals, deans, department chairs, activist groups, or anyone else to make change for us. We have to be part of the change process. In his inaugural speech, President Obama (2009) identified “hard work and honesty, courage and fair play, tolerance and curiosity, loyalty and patriotism” as the values upon which our success depends, referring to these values and practices as “the quiet force of progress throughout our history.”

During the past two decades, the debate over American public education has taken place within a context of intense partisan rhetoric. Private sector economic motives have become increasingly prominent, as has the use of education as a wedge issue to further broad, unrelated policy agendas (Krugman, 2007; Shaker & Heilman, 2004).

Paul Krugman (2007), in his book, The Conscience of a Liberal, described such matters as the result of “Movement Conservatism,” a well-organized machine of media organizations, think tanks, and political organizations fueled by economic interests, which has as its primary purpose the reversal of New Deal and related social policies.

In surface-level critiques of education, critics have asserted that the public education system should be brought under the control of effective central authorities. Mayoral control, standards, and high-stakes testing movements are obvious cases in point, exemplifying a troublingly popular definition of reform.

States have experimented with professional preparation, inviting a wide range of alternate providers subject to varying quality control and accountability. For-profit ventures have been invited to provide alternative certification in the interest of quality and efficiency. Meanwhile, state department leaders are being influenced not by research but by interest groups, foundations, and think tanks to adopt canned notions of leadership, preparation, and evaluation; to assess leaders and preparatory programs through such lenses; and to punish those individuals and organizations that do not fit. This is occurring at the same time that state leaders are engaging in a deregulatory ideology promoting the removal or reduction of professional certification and accreditation requirements. Even the definition and legitimization of educational research has been impacted—by limiting funding to projects that stem primarily from certain scientific paradigms (Shaker & Heilman, 2004).

The pervasiveness of television, radio, and the Internet in our lives makes frequent reports of such politicized educational news available to most of the population (Birkland, 2001). With every passing day there seems to be a new way to share news in smaller, faster, and ever more persistent bites.

We have to be aware of the consequences for ideology, action, and quiescence flowing from the politicization of educational news. The pictures constituted by news reporting, and repeated by critics in speeches, blogs, and other forms of media, continuously construct and reconstruct educational problems, crises, enemies—even public education is a monopoly; College of Education programs are cash cows; professors are lazy, opinionated, and resistant to change; and educational research is a joke. These constructed problems and personalities play a central role in winning support and opposition for political causes. They shift education out of the hands of educators, and they have critical consequences for our nation’s children.

How do we, in such a context, harness the opportunities and hopefulness that are unfolding in the wake of our most recent election? How do we remake the spectacle that education has become—how do we remake it in the image of the
schools and leadership we know our students need and deserve, generating our own, more authentic and significant constructions? What are the implications for democratic theory, political practice, and ethical responsibility as scholars and professionals? These are some of the questions we must address as a field.

Harnessing Opportunities

Generally in our profession, both individuals and organizations have responded to the many critiques, initiatives, and contextual changes in a rational, if piecemeal, fashion. Through our educational journals, newsletters, magazines, and white papers, we analyze the details of critiques, proposals, legislation, and challenges (Shaker & Heilman, 2004). At our annual meetings and conferences, our themes often reflect such critiques and ideas—accountability and standards are two good examples.

We have been civil. We have been thoughtful. We have operated under the assumption that our critics have been acting in good faith and that they, like us, at least believe that they have the best interests of education and our nation’s children in mind. We have acknowledged no critical need nor made any significant attempts to band together—our work tends to be done alone or through tight collaborations. As a result, our rejoinders have been civil and powerful in thought but wanting in impact. We must accept that this debate cannot be properly joined in a fragmented, didactic manner.

Throughout his campaign for president, then-Senator Barack Obama stressed the importance of education to the future of the nation, consistently listing it, along with healthcare and energy independence, as among his top three priorities. Obama (2008) stated,

Our kids and our country can’t afford four more years of neglect and indifference. At this defining moment in our history, America faces few more urgent challenges than preparing our children to compete in a global economy. The decisions our leaders make about education in the coming years will shape our future for generations to come. They will help determine not only whether our children have the chance to fulfill their God-given potential, or whether our workers have the chance to build a better life for their families, but whether we, as a nation, will remain in the 21st century the kind of global economic leader that we were in the 20th century.

I suggest that we carefully consider the opportunity that is offered by the Obama Administration to offer not only a thoughtful and powerful message about educational leadership, but also an impactful one. It is time to proclaim an end to the “recriminations and worn out dogmas that for too long have strangled” our education system and to work for progressive change (Obama, 2009).

How, though? How do we express the courage of our convictions? How do we begin? Are we capable of building, implementing, and sustaining an unabashed progressive agenda for our nation’s schools, one that is powerful enough to oppose and unmake Movement Conservatism—a New Deal for education (or in the words of Steve Gross and Joan Shapiro of Temple University, a new DEEL, or Democratic Ethical Educational Leadership).

How can we, university professors of educational leadership, participate? The UCEA mission and values statements suggest that we engage in collaborative partnerships, systematic inquiry, open dialogue, thoughtful critique, and responsible participation in change, based on research rather than on rhetoric and with the benefit of all children in mind.

When I dialogue with my colleagues, when I read their work, when I see them teach and mentor, I am convinced they are contributing to our ability to ensure that all children have an opportunity for excellent education and to fulfill their potential. Moreover, I trust that we, as a community of scholars, know the kind of leadership our school communities and our children need and deserve. Thus, one very important way to capitalize on this extraordinary time of hope is to remake the image of leadership and to generate and share our own, authentic construction.

Articulating Leadership

We know leadership matters. In fact, we have a growing body of evidence indicating that leadership is second only to classroom instruction among all school-related factors that contribute to what students learn at school (Leithwood, Seashore Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). This evidence supports the present widespread interest in improving leadership. Even our new Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, noted during his Senate confirmation hearing, “School leadership matters.” He explained that leadership is essential to teacher retention and teacher quality. He noted that any good school in Chicago has a great principal, and if a school does not

Linda Darling-Hammond has been portrayed as an enemy of education—as well as leaders and saviors, creating a
succession of threats and reassurances (Shaker & Heilman, 2004). We have been told have a good leadership succession plan in place, the schools’ successes will soon fall apart (“New Secretary of Education,” 2009, p. 3). This is a change, as the last administration had very little to say about leadership.

We know good leaders when we see them. We recognize effective practice, and we can articulate the characteristics of accomplished leaders. In 1997, our field was given the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) Standards, and we since have witnessed their widespread adoption by states and leadership programs. This has significantly changed leadership preparation, moving the field toward a common curriculum. However, few view these standards as signifiers of excellence. Generally, we view them as minimal standards to ensure a level of readiness in new leaders. Our programs should be driven by more powerful articulations of leadership.

**Embracing Responsibility**

Once we have clearly and satisfactorily articulated the kind of quality educational leadership that we are willing to stand behind, we must recognize and embrace our responsibilities in developing and supporting such leaders. The first set of responsibilities involves knowing how to develop such leaders, obtaining the necessary resources to prepare them, and providing the learning experiences that will support their development.

The question of whether educational leadership preparation matters has been answered: It most certainly does matter. Current research on leadership preparation suggests that highly effective leadership preparation programs are distinguishable by their features and by their influence on their graduates’ learning and career advancement (Orr & Pounder, 2007). And this influence is independent of candidates’ prior experience and initial aspirations. This research examines the impact of leadership preparation on a variety of leader practices and the influence of those practices on important school-level factors (such as teacher quality and organizational culture). This research (Darling-Hammond, Meyerson, LaPointe, & Orr, 2007; Orr & Pounder, 2007) has indicated that the following program characteristics are strongly correlated with effective leadership practices among program graduates: (a) thoughtful recruitment and selection of program graduates; (b) a coherent, research-based, and well-defined curriculum with a leadership-for-learning focus; (c) adult-centered instructional practices, including reflection on and engagement with problems of practice; (d) a competent faculty; (e) a cohort structure; (f) supportive organizational structures; and (g) well-planned, substantive, and lengthy internships.

Thus, our responsibility includes ensuring that we, our colleagues, our programs, and our institutions reflect these features and that they are organized and operating in such a way that we are able to provide aspiring and practicing leaders with the preparation and direction they need. For many programs this will mean change, and for some programs and faculty this will mean a lot of hard work, including program redesign, garnering or redistributing resources, expanding pedagogical knowledge, and building partnerships, among other things. Unfortunately, curriculum and program design is not typically part of one’s doctoral training. As a result, we have to look to our colleagues and to UCEA for ideas and assistance as we engage in this important work.

Now, once we have seen to these things, are we off the hook? Is that where our responsibility ends? If our house is in order, is our work done? Certainly, in some (perhaps many) organizations, just getting our house in order will be difficult enough. Think for a moment, however, about the programs you know of that are not developing the kinds of leaders our schools need. Are they beyond our reach and responsibility?

Over the last decade we have witnessed an explosion of educational leadership programs both within and outside the university community, and they are not of equal quality (Baker, Orr, & Young, 2007). In most states we have huge pools of certified but not necessarily qualified candidates. Many will never take a leadership position, but some will. Are we implicated, when any program graduates a person and certifies their readiness to lead, when that person is not ready to lead a school? Certainly, to some degree, we are.

If we, members of the educational leadership professoriate, consider ourselves to be Democratic Ethical Educational Leaders, scholars, and practitioners who are shaping a progressive agenda for educational leadership, how can we not hold ourselves responsible for the damage that poorly prepared leaders do within schools? If we are interested in offering an educational New DEEL, and if our foremost concern is ensuring leaders are effectively prepared to support the learning and development of all children, then what do we do with the knowledge that quality preparation is not universally provided? What is our responsibility? What can we do? What must we do? And what does the current context enable?

In his inaugural address, President Obama (2009) alluded to such responsibility:
Everywhere we look, there is work to be done. …Our challenges may be new. The instruments with which we meet them may be new. …What is required of us now is a new era of responsibility—a recognition, on the part of every American, that we have duties to ourselves, our nation, and the world, duties that we do not grudgingly accept but rather seize gladly, firm in the knowledge that there is nothing so satisfying to the spirit, so defining of our character, than giving our all to a difficult task.

Getting Involved

The current context enables action. I see a refreshing, encouraging mood for education in the new administration. I see an opportunity here to lead. We are not without knowledge, and we are not without tools. We understand the kind of leaders we want to see in our schools. We also have a research-based set of program characteristics that are highly correlated with quality leadership. What we must garner is the necessary courage to act with a common purpose. It is time to advocate on behalf of our profession; to advance our profession as a whole; and to move not just from thought to action, but also back and forth between thoughtful and informed, purposeful action.

We know a good program and good practice when we see it—we know it because we study it, we know it because we do it. It is time for us to make this knowledge more broadly shared, understood, and put to use. It is time that we, university faculty and school and district leaders, together advocate on behalf of education, educational leaders, and the integrity of our profession. For too long, we have been plagued by the politics of fear and critique (Young & Brewer, 2008). For too long, a climate of timidity has reigned. Leaders and leadership faculty are not powerless. Though in the past we have tended neither to access the power we have nor to use it on behalf our profession, we no longer can be content with inaction. In the words of President Obama (2009), “our time of standing pat, of protecting narrow interests and putting off unpleasant decisions—that time has surely passed. Starting today, we must pick ourselves up, dust ourselves off, and begin again the work of remaking America.”

Starting today we must harness opportunities to support our work. We must be clear about what we want, the kinds of leaders our schools and children need, and we must recognize and embrace our responsibilities. Finally, we must move between the world of thought and the world of action in our efforts to build strong leadership for our schools.

Although there is no recipe or perfectly planned way forward, we must take a stand—we must be willing to define problems and explore their causes and sources, but we cannot stop there. We also must identify who can make change. We must identify who needs information and what information they need, learn how to access these people, be able to communicate a sense of the importance and urgency of the situation, provide information on effective and ineffective practices or trends, and follow up. We must build and extend our networks of information and support. Professors and educators in general are not used to doing these kinds of things. But we must learn, because the time is now for us to get involved.

President Obama and the millions of supporters who sent him to the White House have opened a door for us to enact democratic and ethical leadership in education. Let’s go through that door together.

References


