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Stanford Report Outlines Common Elements of Highly Effective School Principal Training and Development Programs

WASHINGTON, D.C. – April 20, 2007 – Since the early 1990s, the training of school principals – who play a vital role in school improvement – has been widely criticized as inadequate. Yet, hard evidence on the kind of training and development that leaders need to help schools and students succeed has been in short supply.

Today, Stanford University researchers and The Wallace Foundation released a new report that identifies the key features of effective programs. The report – *Preparing School Leaders for a Changing World: Lessons from Exemplary Leadership Development Programs* – provides a guide for school district leaders and state policymakers to reinvent how school principals are prepared for their demanding jobs. The report was released today at a session hosted by The Wallace Foundation during the National Conference of State Legislatures’ Spring Forum.

The report recognizes the close link between the quality of school leadership and school performance. It examines the essential skills of good leadership, key features of effective principal education programs, structures of effective programs, and successful financing and policy reform strategies. The study was commissioned by the Wallace Foundation and prepared by the Stanford Educational Leadership Institute (SELI) in conjunction with The Finance Project.

At a time when expectations of schools are skyrocketing, school principals must play an increasingly important role in helping to transform schools and classroom performance. Until recently, though, little has been known about how best to prepare principals for these challenges. This report provides new details about the characteristics of programs that are most effective in developing school leaders who can carry out the complex work of overhauling school culture, organization, curriculum, and instruction to ensure that all children achieve high standards.

“The findings show that high-performing principals are not just born, but can be made – and that those who are prepared in innovative, high-quality programs are more likely to become instructional leaders who are committed to the job and efficacious in their work,” notes Linda Darling-Hammond, the Charles E. Ducommun Professor of Education at Stanford University who is lead author of the report and, along with Debra Meyerson, also of Stanford, one of its principal investigators.

Researchers examined eight exemplary programs and the policy contexts in which they operated. They found that that exemplary leadership preparation programs were intensely focused on instructional improvement and offered a hands-on approach that closely integrated internships and coaching with academic coursework.

Rather than waiting to see who would enroll, the programs work with districts to recruit candidates who are known as excellent teachers with strong leadership potential and who reflect the local population of teachers and students. The programs choose their faculty based on their knowledge and experience of school leadership. The programs also provide the candidates with mentoring by experienced administrators.

The professional development programs provided real-world guidance on how to become instructional leaders. The successful programs are part of a system of training that begins with the preparation of principal candidates and continues throughout their careers as principals. The graduates of these programs analyze teaching practice and learn to evaluate and support teachers, plan professional development, and manage change. They also receive coaching from peers and mentors, and participate in long-term study groups and networks so that they can continue to share their experiences and talk about problem-solving strategies.

“Research has shown that school improvement efforts simply won’t succeed without effective leadership,” said Wallace President M. Christine DeVita. “This report is a milestone because it shows us with hard evidence how we can prepare and support those leaders in ways that will help us meet our commitment to educate all children at high levels.”

Program participants say they are better prepared for their work, are more likely to stay on the job, and spend more time on instruction and supporting and developing teachers. These programs also were more likely to include teachers who reflect the makeup of their communities. For example, compared to a national sample, the eight exemplary programs evaluated for the report attracted high numbers of women (72 percent vs. 46 percent) as well as racial and ethnic minorities (36 percent vs. 11 percent). In addition, a larger proportion of program participants reported working in an urban school (72 percent vs. 18 percent).

The report offers several implications for policymakers. First, exemplary principal training programs grow out of careful planning and targeting of key resources. The report highlights state and local district policies that support top-quality training and help transform practice. The programs in this study benefited as well from the careful recruitment and selection of dynamic candidates who taught how to support instruction that is closely aligned with state and professional standards for student learning, teaching, and leadership. Finally, the exemplary programs organized their work around clear models of effective leadership.

Pre-service programs evaluated for the report were sponsored by four universities: Bank Street College in New York City; Delta State University in Cleveland, Miss.; the University of Connecticut; and the University of San Diego. The in-service programs were sponsored by the Hartford (Conn.) Public Schools; Jefferson County (Ky.) Public Schools; Region 1 in New York City, and the San Diego Unified School District.

In addition to Darling-Hammond and Meyerson, report co-authors include Michelle LaPointe of the Education Development Center; Margaret Orr of Bank Street College; and Carol Cohen of The Finance Project.

Copies of the report’s executive summary, *Preparing School Leaders for a Changing World: Lessons from Exemplary Leadership Development Programs*, are available from the Knowledge Center at www.wallacefoundation.org or from SELI at <http://seli.stanford.edu>, along with a full list of report authors.

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