

# The Abell Report

*What we think about, and what we'd like you to think about*

Published as a community service by The Abell Foundation

## ***A Matter of Principals: The Kindergarten to Grade 12 Public School Leaders Maryland Needs, and How To Get Them***

### **ABELL SALUTES: Maryland Public Interest Research Group For Its Stand Against Maryland Pollution: "Unacceptable."**

Mercury pollution is a major problem in Maryland. Mercury released from smokestacks contaminates our waterways where it builds up in fish tissue. When people eat fish contaminated with mercury the substance builds up in their bodies; much like lead, mercury can cause severe neurological and developmental problems in unborn fetuses and young children whose brains are still developing.

Research by the Maryland Public Interest Research Group (MaryPIRG) found that seafood consumption by pregnant women could expose as many as one in four newborns to potentially damaging levels of mercury. Coal-fired power plants and medical waste incinerators are the principal sources of mercury pollution.

In addition to the health risks, mercury pollution threatens business and industry; In terms of raw dollars the economic value of the Chesapeake Bay has been estimated at \$700 billion, and increasing high levels of mercury in bay fish are damaging the fishing and tourism industries.

Mercury is extremely dangerous even at trace levels. Half a teaspoon of mercury is enough to contaminate fish in a large lake to the point where the fish are unsafe to eat.

Fortunately, people are now given greater warning about contamination problems, and emissions from some sources have been reduced—thanks in

*continued on page 8*

### **A report prepared for The Abell Foundation by Frederick M. Hess and Andrew Kelly**

*For the majority of Marylanders, the most visible and influential education leader is the principal of the local school. With the demands of "No Child Left Behind" and other State testing, these leaders are critical and in short supply: the State Department of Education estimates that Maryland will need 125 new principals of the highest caliber by August 2004.*

*In this article, education scholar Frederick M. Hess asserts that the dearth of school leaders is at least partially self-imposed by Maryland's reliance on archaic principal certification requirements. Dr. Hess argues that this approach limits the field by insisting upon traditionally trained and accredited educators despite the fact that there is no evidence proving these criteria lead to more effective principals.*

*In order to cast a wider net, Dr. Hess recommends that Maryland promote and expand its existing alternative principal certification as well as encourage individual school districts to change principal recruiting and training programs.*

**I**n an era of heightened accountability, tight budgets, and rapid technological innovation, schools in Maryland and across the nation have entered a period of unprecedented challenges and opportunity. At such times, effective and forward-thinking leaders take on an outsized importance. Today, it is critical that the principals in Maryland's schools are equal to the challenge of running efficient organizations, focusing on student learning, and hiring and cultivating talented educators. The results of the most recent Maryland State Assessment make clear

the challenges that State schools face. Maryland defines "proficient" as "a realistic and rigorous level of achievement indicating proficiency in meeting the needs of students."<sup>1</sup> On the 2003 State reading assessment, 42 percent of third graders and 40 percent of eighth graders failed to reach "proficiency." On the 2003 math exam, 45 percent of fifth graders and more than 60 percent of eighth graders failed to achieve at the "proficient" level.<sup>2</sup>

Maryland's public schools have significant challenges to overcome, yet there is little evidence that its schools or districts have enough of the leaders required to answer the challenge. Maryland continues to locate, recruit, and develop these administrators in a fashion that will not produce enough of the leaders that its schools need. The current system discourages potentially promising candidates, fails to screen leadership candidates adequately for vital qualifications, does little to teach essential skills, fosters an unserious and ultimately demeaning culture of school leadership preparation, and isolates practicing school leaders from their managerial peers in other fields. The issue is not so much a shortage of principal candidates as it is a parochial and outdated approach to leadership recruitment and training that fails to provide enough candidates with the experience and expertise needed to manage the State's 24 school districts and 1,374 public schools.

By no means is this problem confined to Maryland. Across the nation, public schooling suffers from a lack of effective

*continued on page 2*

continued from page 1

managers at both the school and district levels.<sup>3</sup> 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.”<sup>4</sup> In turn, in a recent Public Agenda survey, 60 percent of superintendents agreed that they have had to “take what you can get” in hiring a school principal.<sup>5</sup> In Maryland, the shortage of acceptable principal candidates is acute. According to staffing projections in the Maryland Department of Education’s most recent Teacher Staffing Report of the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE), Maryland schools will need 125 new principals by the start of the 2004-2005 school year.<sup>6</sup> The “looming shortage” is so threatening that the MSDE is enticing retired principals out of retirement with the promise of full salaries and retirement benefits. For instance, an experienced principal who earns a full salary of \$80,000 to \$90,000 will cost the schools another \$54,000 in added retirement payments.<sup>7</sup> Thirty-seven retired principals were rehired in this manner for 2002-2003. The problem is not a lack of warm bodies (an estimated 298 administrator candidates were certified by the State’s administrative training programs this past year), but a man-made shortage of individuals with the skills, training, knowledge, and desire to lead modern schools and school systems.

The shortage is man-made in the sense that Maryland is one of 40 states that require would-be principals to acquire a license in school administration in order to apply for a job. MSDE lists the following requirements for attaining licensure as a principal (or Administrator II):

1. a master’s degree from an institution of higher education;
2. 27 months of satisfactory teaching performance;
3. completion of one of the following:
  - a. A department- or interstate contract-approved program in

school administration and supervision, OR

- b. 18 semester hours of graduate coursework in requisite administration and supervision courses (including an internship); and
4. qualifying score on the School Leader Licensure Assessment

The 18 semester hours, 12 of which have to be taken at a single institution, must include courses on school administration, clinical or instructional supervision, curriculum design, group dynamics, and school law. The School Leader Licensure Assessment, far from being an effective quality control mechanism, is a problematic exam designed to make sure that applicants hold professionally sanctioned values and attitudes.

As extensive as these provisions are now, State officials want to make them even more restrictive. A senior State licensure official reports that the department is currently discussing a change to the State code that would require administrator candidates to have a master’s in education. At present, any master’s degree will fulfill the requirement as long as it is paired with the requisite 18 credit hours in education administration. In short, the Department deems graduate coursework in other fields irrelevant to school leadership. As the same official put it, “We have a lot of people entering the field with juris doctorates, and they’re no more qualified to run a school than the man in the moon.” 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. This is exactly the opposite of what should be done; Maryland’s focus should not be on constricting the flow of effective leaders even further, but on opening up the leadership channels to talented individuals with a variety of backgrounds.

### A More Flexible Approach

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 was looking for a new CEO. Observers were aghast when the board of directors recruited Lou Gerstner, CEO of RJR Nabisco and a veteran of the food and tobacco industries. Critics insisted that his lack of experience running a technology concern would leave him at a “a huge disadvantage,” 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.”<sup>8</sup> 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 Doug 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? Sure. Were the concerns about Gerstner’s lack of experience valid? Absolutely. 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.”<sup>9</sup>

Closer to home, figuratively and geographically, is the experience of Robert S. Silberman, CEO of Strayer University, which is headquartered in Arlington, VA, and has campuses in suburban Baltimore. In 2001, Silberman was hired by Strayer despite his having no formal experience in education. Silberman had, however, served as assistant secretary of the Navy and Army for manpower and as president of CalEnergy Company—and regarded that training as ideal for his new position managing a large and complex organization like Strayer. Despite his lack of traditional educational leadership experience, in his first two years as CEO, Silberman oversaw a large-scale expansion of Strayer’s operations. Since 2000, the company has added campuses in four new states and posted a five-year year-over-year rate of 17 percent.<sup>10</sup> Gerstner and Silberman aren’t even unusual examples; businesses often turn to leaders from outside their industries.

The dominant paradigm in K-12 educational leadership is that of “instructional leadership,” the belief that principals in effective schools lead by focusing on core issues of instruction and that, consequently, only former teachers can be effective school leaders. The idea of “instructional leadership” serves as an important reminder that leaders must focus on more than managing bus schedules and textbooks, and it makes clear that good schools and school systems are marked by a focus on quality teaching and learning, but it has proved too limiting. The problem is not with instructional leadership per se, but that it has been construed too narrowly in recent years. Over the past two decades the mantra of “instructional leadership” has turned into an albatross that has romanticized the leadership abilities of former teachers, caused sensible management practices to take a back seat to overhyped pedagogical and curricular innovations, and obscured the suitability of different leadership capabilities called for in different circumstances. One recent study of principalship pointed out that public schools need leadership in seven distinct areas: instructional, cultural, managerial, human resources, strategic, external development, and micropolitical.<sup>11</sup> Clearly instructional and cultural leadership are important, but focusing on only these qualities can overlook more critical skills.

In some locales, recruiting nontraditional K-12 school or district leaders is becoming more common. In recent years, urban school districts from New York City to Seattle have hired candidates from outside the field of education to lead their schools. In 2002, California took strong steps to loosen the rules governing who may apply to lead schools. Nonetheless, the overwhelming majority of superintendents, school district officials, and school principals in the nation 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.

In Maryland, there is a nontraditional route intended, in theory, to open the door

▲

***The issue is not so much a shortage of principal candidates as it is a parochial and outdated approach to leadership recruitment and training that fails to provide enough candidates with the experience and expertise needed to manage the State’s 24 school districts and 1,374 public schools.***

▼

to unusual candidates, —including the K-12 equivalents of Gerstner or Silberman, —but it is hardly ever used. In fact, it is not even listed on the State certification website as a viable option for potential principals. Under Maryland’s alternative certification program, individuals are required to have a baccalaureate degree and a level of “professional experience” that has been verified by the local superintendent, and they must be selected by the local board of education in order to apply for the certificate. If an alternative candidate’s application to the State is approved, he or she is then paired with a mentor for a specified period of time, and the certificate can be renewed on a yearly basis.<sup>12</sup> The alternative licensure program was originally designed to alleviate shortages in smaller districts that could not attract traditionally qualified administrators, but has lately been used by larger districts to hire promising non-traditional school leaders. Individuals who are certified in this manner are eligible for a standard license if their school shows marked improvement for five years on the State assessment and if the candidate successfully completes a master’s degree. The requirement that a demonstrably effective leader divert his or her energy to pursuing a master’s degree is a distraction, and this

kind of stopgap alternative entry system stops far short of what we propose.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the system is little-used and frowned upon by the State licensure bureaucracy. In fact, a senior official in the State Office of Certification reports that fewer than ten administrators currently working in a Maryland public school have been hired through the alternative route. The official explained that the details of the program were left off the certification website because it is “not a program that [we] want to advertise” and is regarded by the MSDE as “lower[ing] the bar” for new hires. With the advent of the new State assessment, the Office of Certification is discussing changes to the provision that allow an alternatively certified principal to attain full licensure.

### **Changing Demands**

In today’s reform environment, school leaders must be able to leverage technology, devise performance-based evaluation systems, recruit top-notch staff, apply data and research in making decisions, and motivate their teachers and students to meet state- and federally mandated goals. Past performance of traditional school administrators does not make it clear 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 the K–12 schooling field face many of these same challenges in their work, there is no reason why talented individuals with relevant leadership experiences should not also be considered for positions as school principals and district administrators.

It is time for Maryland to adopt a simpler, more straightforward standard for hiring principals. Essentially we suggest that districts 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

riper for this flexible approach than are classroom teaching positions. 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. 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 as a whole that needs to hold the full complement of skills.

Loosening the rules that govern 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 pressing. Given these new demands, it is urgent 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 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.<sup>13</sup> What uniquely equips a high school coach rather than, for example, 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 the lie to the notion, popular among experts on educational leadership, that principals must be “instructional leaders.”

Recruiting leaders from other fields would yield a range of benefits — among which are the benefits to school adminis-

trators themselves. Presently, educational leaders enjoy little respect. Unlike high-ranking military personnel and members of urban mayoral administrations, who 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 action would force school systems to pay a fair rate for managerial talent and create new opportunities for administrators to command the kind of professional 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 enjoy 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 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 of the necessity of 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. 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 districts will nonetheless be barred from hiring the best candidate because he or she is not licensed.

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 come from the classroom or elsewhere.<sup>14</sup>

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, by contrast, work in a highly visible context — within a large public organization where their performance is increasingly monitored by state officials, local activists, business people, journalistic news outlets, and others. Maryland has no evidence that its licensure requirements produce more effective principals; indeed, it is not clear that MSDE has ever examined that question.

The problem with requiring school managers to earn a license is that the work of a school principal is typically shaped by that person's immediate context. Job requirements evolve over time and differ from one milieu to the next. These qualities are common in all types of leadership. 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 to become a professor, additional credentials are not necessary to become a dean or president. In fact, because fundraising and running a multi-million-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:

**1. Only former teachers can lead, especially at the principal level.** Not only is there the problem, mentioned above, that instructional leadership is

continued from page 4

oversold, but there is also a problematic belief that only a former teacher can provide it. This belief rests, in turn, on two articles of faith: that only former teachers can monitor classroom personnel or can mentor teachers. Both claims are of dubious merit.

The first part of this—that only former teachers can monitor teaching—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 the era of accountability, the minimal value of a principal observing from the back of a teacher’s classroom three times a year has diminished, while the value of understanding and applying data is at a premium. In addition, an effective principal can use master teachers to evaluate and support their peers, as an increasing number of schools are doing.

The claim that only former teachers can mentor is equally problematic. In schools or systems where no one else is available to work with teachers on curricular or instructional issues, administrators must play this role. Such situations are quite rare, however. More typically, principals 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 only on her personal knowledge. In recent years, a number of nonteachers have performed competently as district 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 teachers learn as classroom practitioners may sometimes hinder their performance as managers. Though experts in educational leadership argue that principals (especially those in troubled venues) must be proactive risk-takers who engage in “creative insubordination,”<sup>15</sup> research has found that “teach-

ers tend to be reluctant risk takers.”<sup>16</sup> 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.”<sup>17</sup> 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. This is not to suggest that teachers are unsuited for school leadership or that we ought to prefer noneducators for these roles, but merely that teaching experience may at times hinder effective leadership.

**2. Licensure provides 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.

The 2004 *U.S. News & World Report* rankings of graduate programs help to illustrate the point. Maryland’s flagship institution for preparing educational leaders is the University of Maryland, College Park, offering an acclaimed program that was recently ranked twelfth nationally in *U.S. News & World Report*. The admissions criteria of the Education Policy and Leadership program require that applicants to the master’s program need only one of three Graduate Record Examination (GRE) scores (verbal, quantitative, or analytic writing) at the 40th percentile or higher. For instance, this would mean that an applicant would qualify for admission if his or her highest score were a 440 on the verbal section. The University’s College of Education received an overall rank-

ing of 21st in the 2004 *U.S. News* rankings, boasting mean GRE scores of 552 (verbal) and 615 (quantitative) and an acceptance rate of 41.7 percent for its doctoral programs. In contrast, the University of Maryland’s Robert H. Smith School of Business, ranked 42nd in the country in the 2004 rankings, reports an average GMAT score of 656 and an acceptance rate of 23 percent.<sup>18</sup> The State’s other leading trainers of school administrators include Loyola College, Frostburg State, McDaniel College, and Bowie State, none of which is particularly selective about who enters their administrator training programs.

**3. Licensure promotes professionalism.** Today, due in large part to licensure, educational administration is a subspecialty 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.<sup>19</sup>

The result is training that does not expose educators to the body of thought that conventionally trained executives deem essential. Surveying some of the titles that are required reading for administrator candidates in their preparation programs helps to illustrate the problem. For instance, the reading lists of the required courses for certification in the University of Maryland’s Education Policy and Leadership program include books like *Justice and Caring: The Search for Common Ground in Education*, *Education and the Soul: Toward a Spiritual Curriculum*, *Caring Enough to Lead*, and *The Soul of Education: Helping Students Find Connection, Compassion, and Character at School*. These volumes never explain why conventional management texts and training are inappropriate for schooling.

## The Costs of the Status Quo

Licensure makes it more costly to seek a management position in education,

continued on page 6

making other professions relatively more attractive. If the hurdles screened out only incompetent or ill-suited candidates, that would be one thing. However, there is no evidence and little reason to believe that a 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 it might signify a commitment to learning.

For instance, the State's flagship administrative preparation program, the one at the University of Maryland, College Park (UMCP), requires candidates for a principal certificate to complete either its entire 39-credit M.Ed. program or an 18-credit program if they have already earned a master's degree. Given that fall-2003 tuition at UMCP was \$349 a credit hour,<sup>20</sup> tuition alone will cost candidates upwards of \$5,800 if they already have their master's degree, and more than \$13,000 if they do not. Of course, not all of this money is paid by candidates; each year, hundreds of thousands of dollars are carved out of school district spending and used to subsidize professional development, though it is unclear how administrative coursework serves to enhance teacher performance.

Meanwhile, though proponents of licensure argue that school management positions are so challenging that only former teachers are willing to tackle them, this is simply not the case. Recent years have witnessed the creation of several programs that train aspiring nontraditional principals and school district officials. In 2003, New Leaders for New Schools received 1,012 applicants for 70 fellowship slots in its cohort of principals-in-training; the Broad Foundation's Urban Superintendents Academy had more than 650 inquiries and more than 160 applications for 20 slots; and the year-long KIPP (Knowledge is Power Program) School Leadership Program had more than 250 applicants and accepted 11 fellows.<sup>21</sup>

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 eager to work in education.

### **Tried but Not True**

Present reform efforts fall into opposing camps. One is represented by the efforts of the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) to define “standards” for educational administration and to stiffen the requirements for licensure.<sup>22</sup> The idea is to improve the training of potential principals—a worthy goal, but one whose effect has been to further narrow the field of candidates in undesirable ways. The ISLLC standards have been incorporated into policy by more than two dozen states, and the Educational Testing Service (ETS) has developed the complementary School Leaders Licensure Assessment (SLLA). Maryland has incorporated the standards and uses the SLLA to test leadership 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.”<sup>23</sup> 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 a review of the ISLLC School Leaders Licensure Assessment, which Maryland now uses to assess the competence of candidates for principalships.<sup>24</sup> While the exam's designers claim that it is “grounded in research,”<sup>25</sup> the exam does not assess legal, budgetary, management, research, curricular, or pedagogical knowledge, and

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”<sup>26</sup>—or at least, where it should be according to Murphy and his allies.

Of the four sample situations and 25 sample questions in the online preparation materials, not one asks a candidate to exhibit an understanding of scholarly research, legal statutes, 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. ETS's public test preparation 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.”<sup>27</sup>

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 lead antitrust lawyer, who is now serving as chancellor of the New York City schools. There is nothing wrong, per se, with pursuing high-profile nontraditional leaders. Such hires have imported a number of promising executives into the schools and challenged shopworn assumptions. However, searches for nontraditional leaders too often devolve into a quixotic quest for “white knights.”

Most current nontraditional superintendents were hired not on the basis of a reasoned assessment of their strengths and skills but because they were consid-

---

continued from page 6

ered 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 administrators working in tandem. The problem with today’s efforts is that they are not part of larger initiatives to recruit thoughtfully out of an expanded candidate pool, to build and support teams, and to rethink management. Instead, they are too often one-shot prayers in which the district places its hopes that charisma and personal credibility can jumpstart moribund institutions.

### Meeting the Leadership Challenge

Maryland legislators and officials ought to adopt two complementary approaches to answer the leadership challenge: one of pursuing policy change and a second of encouraging constructive change by districts and preparation programs.

It is time to remove from State policy the dated codes that dissuade promising candidates from contributing to school improvement. The rickety alternative certification program should be radically expanded as part of an effort to recruit a diverse array of talented managers and leaders. Rather than a marginal option intended to alleviate short-term staffing crises, alternative certification should be used as an avenue to aggressively pursue fresh talent. Particular attention should be paid to attracting personnel from inside or outside of education who have a proven track record of implementing accountability, leveraging technology, fostering a strong performance culture, and building effective teams. A logical first step would be to advertise the routes to principal certification that are available; as noted earlier, the alternative licensure program is not even included on the MSDE certification office’s website, nor is information on the

mainstream principal license easy to find.

More fundamentally, because school management is not unlike running many other types of organizations of comparable size, it makes sense to strip away the current licensure requirements required for principals. It ought to be enough that these candidates have a college degree, pass a rigorous background check, and have the requisite experience and skills deemed appropriate by those doing the hiring.

The requirement that candidates complete an education school program in education leadership should be eliminated and replaced by a provision that identifies key abilities and knowledge, but leaves the door open to qualified individuals from a variety of backgrounds.

The requirement that leadership candidates take the SLLA exam ought to be scrapped, as should the requirement that they complete leadership preparation programs. In place of existing credit requirements, it may make sense to have candidates demonstrate mastery of the content in crucial areas such as budgeting, school law, special education, and accountability or other relevant experience. A narrowly tailored test that ensured candidates knew the fundamentals of these subjects would be both useful and appropriate. Such a course would break the hammerlock of mediocre training programs, create new providers to work with districts to provide more focused and convenient training programs, and would end the fiction that the experiences of seasoned professionals are irrelevant when considering their preparation for school leadership.

It would be useful to task the MSDE with creating a clearinghouse that could help quality candidates and interested school districts find one another. Currently, the fact that hiring is done district-by-district and on the strength of personal ties makes it exceedingly difficult for even interested candidates and willing districts to find one another. While hiring decisions should remain under the purview of local school districts, Statewide efforts to recruit, identify, and catalogue quality candidates and to make this information readily available to districts could have a significant impact at little or no additional cost.

Districts ought to be encouraged to make use of the available policy tools to improve their leadership teams. State officials should inform districts and potential candidates about the possibilities that exist, should direct some grant support to districts that move proactively, and should welcome groups like New Leaders for New Schools that are helping to provide and train nontraditional leaders.

Finally, the State should encourage education leadership preparation programs to reach out to nontraditional candidates and partner with business schools and school districts to forge offerings that are more relevant and better attuned to the needs of today’s school leaders.

In the years immediately after World War II, business administration was a minor profession, and business schools were institutions of modest repute, viewed as intellectually suspect step-cousins to universities’ economics departments. As management became more crucial to the postwar economy, business schools were pushed to become increasingly selective and to focus 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 phenomenon transpired without formal licensing; neither American business schools nor America are any worse off because Bill Gates and Michael Dell never obtained an M.B.A. Maryland’s schools are ripe for a similar revolution.

---

Frederick M. Hess (rhess@aei.org) is a resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute and executive editor of *Education Next*. His newest book, *Common Sense School Reform*, will be published by Palgrave in early 2004. This essay is adapted from “A License to Lead? A New Leadership Agenda for America’s Schools” (Progressive Policy Institute, 2003).

Andrew Kelly (akelly@aei.org) is a research assistant at the American Enterprise Institute and a graduate of Dartmouth College.

continued on page 8

continued from page 7

- <sup>1</sup> <http://msp.msde.state.md.us/state.asp?K=99AAAA>.
- <sup>2</sup> 2003 Maryland State Assessment Data available at <http://msp.msde.state.md.us/state.asp>. Retrieved 10/9/03.
- <sup>3</sup> The National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) estimates that more than 40% of K-8 principals will retire during the first decade of the 21st century.
- <sup>4</sup> Del Stover, 2002, "Looking for Leaders," *American School Board Journal*, 189(12): 38-40, p. 38. Houston, Executive Director of the American Association of School Administrators, has also wryly observed, "There are really just four problems with the current leadership system: the job is impossible, the expectations are inappropriate, the training is inadequate, and the pipeline is inverted." Paul Houston, 2001, "Superintendents for the 21st Century: It's Not Just a Job, It's a Calling," *Phi Delta Kappan*, 82(6): 428-433.
- <sup>5</sup> Public Agenda. 2001. "Trying to Stay Ahead of the Game: Superintendents and Principals Talk about School Leadership." Washington, D.C.: Public Agenda.
- <sup>6</sup> Maryland State Department of Education (2003), *Maryland Teacher Staffing Report 2003-2005*. Baltimore: Maryland State Department of Education. Retrieved from <http://www.msde.state.md.us/paab/pdf/Staffing2002-04.pdf> on September 15, 2003.
- <sup>7</sup> Stephanie Desmon (2003), "13 Principals Plan to Retire, then be Rehired by County: State Law Allows Schools to Keep Veteran Educators on Staff to Ease Shortages." *Baltimore Sun*, May 16, 2002. 3B.
- <sup>8</sup> Doug Garr. 1999. *IBM Redux: Lou Gerstner & the Business Turnaround of the Decade*. New York: HarperBusiness, p. 24.
- <sup>9</sup> Garr, p. 25.
- <sup>10</sup> Martha McNeill Hamilton. (2003) "Like Its Students, Strayer is Advancing." *Washington Post*, September 15, 2003. E1.
- <sup>11</sup> Bradley Portin (2003), "Making Sense of Leading Schools: A Study of the School Principalship." Seattle: Center on Reinventing Public Education, September.
- <sup>12</sup> The Alternative Principal Certification specification is Document 13A.12.04.05 in Maryland's COMAR system. It can be retrieved at <https://constmail.gov.state.md.us/comar/13a/13a.12.04.05.htm>.
- <sup>13</sup> As the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, a pillar of the education establishment, has conceded, "The data on leaders of educational change . . . indicate that the characteristics of these individuals mirror those of leaders who have changed other organizations." Southwest Educational Development Laboratory. 1992. "Characteristics of Leaders of Change." Sylvia Mendez-Morse, p. 2 of 13. [www.sedl.org/change/leadership/character.html](http://www.sedl.org/change/leadership/character.html). Retrieved 7/29/02.
- <sup>14</sup> Public Agenda. 2001. *Trying to Stay Ahead of the Game: Superintendents and Principals Talk about School Leadership*. Washington, D.C.: Public Agenda.
- <sup>15</sup> Robert L. Crowson, 1989, "Managerial ethics in educational administration: The rational choice approach," *Urban Education*, 23(4), 412-435, p. 412.
- <sup>16</sup> Southwest Educational Development Laboratory. 1992. "Characteristics of Leaders of Change." Sylvia Mendez-Morse, P. 12 of 13. [www.sedl.org/change/leadership/character.html](http://www.sedl.org/change/leadership/character.html). Retrieved 7/29/02.
- <sup>17</sup> Public Agenda. 2003. *Stand By Me: What Teachers Really Think about Unions, Merit Pay and Other Professional Matters*. Washington, D.C.: Public Agenda.
- <sup>18</sup> U.S. News & World Report (2003), *America's Best Graduate Schools: 2004 Edition*.
- <sup>19</sup> Thomas Sergiovanni, *Leadership for the Schoolhouse* (1996), San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, p. xiv.
- <sup>20</sup> Cost-per-credit hour was calculated for in-state graduate students based on the table listed at [http://www.inform.umd.edu/CampusInfo/Departments/bursar/t\\_ftgrd0001.html](http://www.inform.umd.edu/CampusInfo/Departments/bursar/t_ftgrd0001.html). Ten credit hours cost an in-state student \$3490.00, or \$349 per credit hour.
- <sup>21</sup> Figures provided courtesy of the Broad Foundation, KIPP, and New Leaders for New Schools.
- <sup>22</sup> The groups included the American Association of School Administrators, National Association of Secondary School Principals, and the National Association of Elementary School Principals
- <sup>23</sup> Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium. 1996. "Standards for School Leaders." Washington, D.C.: Council of Chief State School Officers. [www.ccsso.org](http://www.ccsso.org).
- <sup>24</sup> First administered in 1998, the test has since been adopted by Kentucky, Maryland, Mississippi, Missouri, North Carolina, and Arkansas, and is currently under review in Pennsylvania, Tennessee, and Virginia.
- <sup>25</sup> At <http://www.ccsso.org/isllc.html>.
- <sup>26</sup> Kate Beem, 2002, "Testing superintendents," *School Administrator* (Web Edition), February.
- <sup>27</sup> Educational Testing Service, *The School Leadership Series Tests at a Glance*. Preparation materials available on-line at <ftp://ftp.ets.org/pub/tandl/SLSTAAG.pdf>, pg 14.

***This report: "A Matter of Principals: The Kindergarten to Grade 12 Public School Leaders Maryland Needs, and How To Get Them" is available in newsletter format on The Abell Foundation's website at [www.abell.org](http://www.abell.org)***

## **ABELL SALUTES:** *Continued from page 1*

great measure to the work of MaryPirg,

Standards for listing water bodies as contaminated with mercury are not consistent from state to state. Some states let the public know about contamination when any amount is found; others, rarely, if at all. Prior to 2001, Maryland had one of the weakest thresholds in the country for notifying the public about potential risks from eating mercury-contaminated fish. The State did not issue advisories unless contamination reached 1.0 part per million (ppm). In neighboring Delaware, by contrast, advisories are issued when contamination is measured at 0.12 ppm.

In 2001, MaryPIRG analyzed data from federal databases and found that if all pregnant women followed Food and Drug Administration fish consumption advice, more than one million women per year would have dangerous levels of blood mercury contamination for at least 30 days of their pregnancies.

Acting responsively, later that same year the Maryland Department of the Environment lowered its threshold for warning the public about contaminated fish to 0.5 ppm.—and every lake, river and stream in the State was found to have fish contaminated with mercury above that level. MDE issued consumption advisories for small and largemouth bass in every river and stream and bluegill in every lake.

Emissions from one major source of mercury – medical waste incinerators – have been greatly diminished. In 1999, MDE was considering new standards for pollution emissions from medical waste incinerators. In November of that year, MaryPIRG released a study documenting the problems of medical waste incineration. The report urged MDE to expand the standards to include all incinerators rather than exempting some incinerators. When MDE issued the final rule, all medical waste incinerators were included.

As the new rules went into effect, many hospitals chose to shut down their outdated incinerators altogether. Only 10 of the 41 medical waste incinerators in Maryland prior to the new rules are still operating; hospitals that used to burn their own waste now contract for this service with modern facilities. These facilities have the best available pollution reduction technology, and negotiating the contracts provided an economic incentive to reduce the amount of waste that gets incinerated.

MaryPIRG has also worked with individual hospitals to reduce the amount of waste they send to incinerators. National research has shown that as much as 90 percent of the waste that hospitals traditionally incinerate can safely be diverted to disposal methods that do not produce toxic pollution. After studying their waste stream, hospital administrators decided to close their incinerator and institute a waste reduction program that is now a model for the State.

There is still much work to be done. MaryPIRG is recommending that many hospitals minimize their incineration and change their purchasing policies to favor less toxic products. While the rate of mercury emissions from incinerators has decreased, the amount of waste that gets incinerated still produces an unacceptable amount of mercury and other toxic pollutants.

The Abell Foundation salutes MaryPIRG and its leadership under director Brad Heavner for making known the organization's stand against the amount of pollution created by medical waste incinerators: "Unacceptable."