

School Leaders as Educators

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Abstract

Leadership remains at the core of debate and research in determining what makes a successful school/district leader. Much of the research focuses on “internal states” (p. 8), values, beliefs, knowledge or skills rather than observed practice (Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Harris, & Hopkins, 2006, pp. 67–70). Narrowing the scope toward leadership practice, while exploring key ideas and best practices in comparing leadership studies and literature from both civilian and Army leadership development programs, offers a bridge between the two professions. The importance of the study is to address a gap in both practice and literature surrounding how the Army prepares, educates, trains, and stabilizes those leaders selected to run Army schools.

Professional military education (PME) serves to equip graduates with a foundational understanding of core tactical, technical, and operational competencies. Observing graduates performance in the field demonstrates congruence between course outcomes and requirements necessary to perform within an occupational skill or area of concentration at grade. The critical component in correlating education along practice rests upon Army school leaders familiar with educational administration and leadership.

Introduction

Instructional improvement demands that school leadership at the principal or superintendent level (e.g., school brigade commander and branch proponent commander) understand the education system and can guide performance along learning strategies (Guthrie & Schuerman, 2011, pp. 60–61). Considering the school leader as an educator, Joseph Murphy (2002) states that leaders “will need to be more broadly educated in general and much more knowledgeable about the core technology of education in particular” (p. 187). Gen. Martin E. Dempsey summed it well in the foreword of *The U.S. Army Learning Concept for 2015*,

where he stated, “We live in a much more competitive security environment. This means that we have to learn faster and better than our future adversaries” (U.S. Department of the Army [DA], 2011, p. i).

Understanding the Army leadership requirements model, along with how the Army develops leaders, facilitates this paper by allowing the reader to become aware of gaps in leadership requirements associated with implementing Army school change (DA, 2013, pp. 3–9, 2015, chap. 1, p. 3). For it is not in how the Army develops leaders, it is to what purpose the Army develops leaders, which exposes gaps in competencies and behaviors. Exploring these gaps, while knowing how to affect change, is dependent upon knowing precisely what one is faced with and understanding the consequential outcomes associated with educational change (McCauley, Ruderman, & Van Velsor, 2010, pp. 18–26).

Progressing beyond traditional leadership models constrained by institutionalized thinking continues to shape the Army’s attempted efforts in transforming Army education. Winston Churchill offered, “The longer you can look back, the farther you can look forward” (International Churchill Society, n.d., “Looking Backward,” para. 2).

The Army’s leadership development model and policy constructed specifically for developing successful Army schools has long been a neglected practice. The Army continues standing upon an organizational leadership model designed to ensure that those in charge execute missions in accordance with doctrine, orders, and training (DA, 2015, chap. 1, p. 1). For example, the successful district and school leadership preparation element distinguishes itself by offering a critical component to drive and influence institutional change, which requires educational leaders who perform functions congruent with both leadership and management roles (Carter, Glass, & Hord, 1993, pp. 71–83).

Exploring the Learning Environment

Over the course of several years, Army leadership has struggled to implement a new Army learning model, *The U.S. Army Learning Concept for 2015*. Answers to the Army’s struggle may be discovered within associated K-12 studies demonstrating successful education reform and district strategies. Studies further suggest that mak-

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ing informed decisions entails educational leaders acquiring appropriate knowledge and skills through education and experience.

In their report on successful school leadership, Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Harris, and Hopkins (2006) explain that, “what leaders do depends on what they think and feel” (p. 8). This helps explain why branch schools and Army centers of excellence are constructed and run like hierarchical military organizations and not as learning organizations (Webster-Wright, 2009, pp. 2–3). Additionally, this supports an apparent gap in the Army’s leader development process for those selected to supervise centers of excellence and run branch proponent/schools. Considering components associated with what successful school leadership looks like and what it takes to lead successful school change should drive senior leaders to incorporate integral parts of successful school models.

Through partnerships with colleagues situated at other centers of excellence throughout the Army, the Army University staff, and local learning community, we continue to share a vision aimed at improving our products and processes leading to enhanced student performance. In order to accomplish these goals, those supervising the centers of excellence and operating the branch/proponent schools must learn to rely upon their educational leaders. Those educational leaders must expertly navigate Army leaders through the Army training and education budgeting and resourcing policy and systems. Furthermore, a relationship of collective trust (Forsyth, Adams, & Hoy, 2011, p. 13) jointly places transformational leadership and educational experts in a better position to maintain the operational needs of the schools, meet the demands directed by Army policy, and improve accountability requirements. Department of the Army Regulation 600-20, *Army Command Policy*, stipulates that “commanders are responsible for everything that their command does or fails to do” (DA, 2014, p. 6). Yet there remains an absence of deliberate preparation, education, and selection resulting in a fractured purpose of the Army leadership development model.


Conclusion

The Army should take a measured approach to better prepare, educate, and select centers of excellence and branch/proponent leaders. For example, programs should be focused on building specific skills that could help better prepare Army leaders selected to supervise centers of excellence or operate branch/proponent schools and to navigate the hurdles involving educational leadership skills and competencies (Fullan, 2011, p. 91; Kowalski, 2013, p. 22).

The clue to the struggle may be found within the Army’s own prescribed formula for command and supported in its own policy and programs. Thus, it might be appropriate to again state: For it is not in how the Army develops leaders, it is

to what purpose the Army develops leaders, which provides a common place to explore new knowledge. Standing on a new frontier shaped by my previous experiences and knowledge gained through an incredible graduate program led by exemplar faculty, I better understand what Fullan (2011) described as the “most effective leaders use practice as their fertile learning ground” (p. xii). The results of these efforts will be fulfilled when the stakeholders embrace the value of a training and evaluation program that ultimately improves student performance.

The Army should seek a more agile, adaptive approach in its command and key billet policies and processes, and, at a minimum, stabilize those who supervise centers of excellence and operate branch/proponent schools beyond the typical one- or two-year term. There is a need to build a stronger leader preparation course that exceeds the current one-week senior officer orientation program. Finally, the Army should establish a superintendent-like certification process, require a degree in education, and seek those who have demonstrated success serving in Army schools and centers, such as the U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command. Adopting the *Be, Know, Do* model will better support the achievement of an effective Army educational leadership development program (DA, 2015, chap. 3, pp. 2–4).

Comparing civilian school leadership capacity in terms of education, preparation, training, selection, and sustainability may provide a valuable framework with which to link shared experiences to bridge obstacles constraining professional practice. People know or understand what to do, yet fail to apply it broadly simply because change in organizational practice requires both will and skill (Levin & Fullan, 2008, p. 8). 

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