

COMMENTARY

Developing Leadership Pipelines in Maine School Districts: Lessons Learned from a School-University Partnership

by Ian M. Mette and Betsy Webb

The School Leadership Task Force, which included Maine educators, university professors, and Maine legislators from the Education and Cultural Affairs Committee, highlights the pressing need to develop a large number of school administrators in the state of Maine in the upcoming years (Task Force 2016). School leadership is second only to classroom instruction with regard to the effect on student learning (Branch, Hanushek, and Rivkin 2013), and leadership that supports a trusting educational environment is often crucial to retaining high-quality teachers (Louis et al. 2010). To develop an informed and prepared pool of administrators, however, collaboration between practitioners and researchers to bridge the theory-practice gap is essential (McGarr, O'Grady, and Guilfoyle 2016). As such, the state needs to increase the connection between leadership preparation programs and districts developing future leaders if Maine is to produce a larger pool of competent and well-trained school leaders in our state. A pressing question for Mainers to consider is, How can school districts and leadership preparation programs develop new strategies to better train aspiring school leaders?

Starting in the fall of 2016, the Bangor School Department (BSD) and the University of Maine (UMaine) Educational Leadership Program entered into an agreement called the Bangor Educational Leadership Academy (BELA) to enable researchers and practitioners to work more collaboratively to bridge the theory-practice gap

that often plagues schools. Working together, we have actively sought to address the problem of practice that has major implications for training and skill development. What is perhaps most novel about our work is the conscious and ongoing effort to communicate about leadership development beliefs and how this is translated into action. We meet several times each semester to ensure professional development and school improvement efforts are interwoven into coursework. Additionally, we identify several guest lecturers from BSD (current practicing administrators) to help ensure instructional alignment between theory and practice. Perhaps most impressive is that, through our collaboration and coursework, several practices and policies within BSD have been evaluated and updated. At the end of each school year, we conduct an evaluation to reflect on the leadership development taking place and identify strategies to further improve leadership development within BELA.

The great challenge we have had to overcome is simply being willing to sit down and discuss how preparation programs might better connect theory to practice, as well as how practitioners might be able to better use practitioner-friendly research to inform best practices. Interestingly, we have discovered that the theory-practice gap is experienced in many other professions. For example, we have learned that climate scientists and engineers experience similar disconnects. Health researchers and health practitioners

failing to find a nexus to their work is another example. Even wildlife biologists and land-use managers can struggle to find a greater understanding of each other and the work they produce. As such, there is a need to continue to focus on how research can affect people in the public sphere.

That said, we have found great value in our conversations on how we can work together to address pressing educational issues in Maine, and we believe further collaborative efforts can only strengthen our public school systems. Specifically, our work offers important interim lessons about educational leadership development in Maine.

First, collaboration between researchers and practitioners to close the theory-practice gap requires dedicated and consistent planning between district and university personnel to ensure an alignment of current professional development efforts within school districts with the curriculum being taught in educational leadership programs. From our own efforts together, this means university personnel listening to practitioners to understand what is happening in practice to better link useful theory that will then drive leadership development.

Second, trust is a crucial component of this work. It takes time and concerted effort to build a trusting relationship where each side, both researchers and practitioners, truly value what the other has to offer. We have discovered that by focusing on deepening our trust as partners and valuing that relationship, we

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can capitalize on leadership development that will improve the capacity of a school district to produce student outcomes. In doing so, we have created a learning laboratory where aspiring leaders can celebrate the strengths of a school district but also target opportunities for improvement.

Third, there is potential to develop this kind of leadership development network on a wider scale by working in regions throughout the state. As proposed by the Maine Department of Education, there are currently efforts to regionalize parts of our state to better support school districts in professional development efforts. We believe that, through our partnership structure and collaborative conversations, we can develop leadership that will support Maine educators in the twenty-first century.

By sitting down and working together, we believe researchers, practitioners, and policymakers can address what some refer to as the loading dock problem (Cash, Borck, and Patt 2003)—where we assume our practices, policies, and research is of importance and interest to others, but we don't communicate with each other nearly enough about how our work is seen as useful to other parties. Through conversations about leadership development programs, we believe that school-university partnerships like the BELA program can reduce the theory-practice gap so often observed in the practice of educational leadership development. Additionally, through regionalized efforts, we believe that smaller school districts can band together to address capacity development issues. By working together, we hope to continue to lead Maine into a brighter future. 🐟

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