

Specific Issues Facing the Profession of Educational Leadership in Florida – Themes to Consider for the 2016-2017 Academic Year

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Introduction

There are very real and specific issues facing our profession here and now, and their urgency requires that we confront, question, and act upon them. I will outline them here, and hopefully this will contribute to your awareness and stimulate you to join us in tackling them.

FAPEL and Florida Education

It is my deep belief that FAPEL provides the forum for us to be informed, enter into a dialogue, and develop solutions to the challenges facing our profession. Our purpose must be *not only* to enhance our own professional development as professors of educational leadership, but to engage Florida's school leaders and policy makers and help them to follow paths that will lead to the common goal of developing a democratic and socially just society through education. We know that, next to classroom teachers, the leaders in our schools have the greatest impact in terms of achieving this goal. So it becomes our responsibility to always focus on improving our profession and our product: school leaders who are prepared to improve our children, their communities, and therefore our society.

The Salient Issues

Based on my experience over the last six years as an officer in FAPEL and my involvement with the FDOE and policy makers today, here are what I consider the most pressing issues for our profession in Florida tied to our purpose as an organization:

- **Policy:** Influencing policy and legislation governing our profession, programs and the role of school leaders.
- **Curriculum:** Confronting the changing professional emphases (e.g. the new emphasis on Instructional Leadership) school leader preparation.
- **Program Design:** Meeting the demands caused by the profit (or FTE) generating “free market” model versus the demand for maximizing the educational quality of educational leadership programs through reduced, selective, and partnership programs.

- **School Leadership Theory and Practice:** Engaging ourselves in professional learning to improve our practice and stay relevant and connected to those that we serve.

FAPEL's goal should be to expose and tackle these problems, but this requires the attention, understanding, and action of our members. To that end, let me describe what is critical about each one, and how FAPEL will address them, in the sections that follow.

Policy

As you are aware, when two years ago it became evident that the FDOE, through the legislature was going to change policy, the FAPEL Board tried to react in the most proactive fashion possible to create new policy. The idea was for us to move from rule that was used to govern our programs, which had been fashioned from the legislation governing teacher education programs, and pass new legislation more relevant to educational leadership. Despite meeting with FDOE and the legislative staff that crafted the bill last year, we wound up with a law that simply codified for educational leadership programs what was already in teacher education programs. Sadly, despite our efforts, uninformed language was placed in the law. For example, a requirement for programs to remediate graduates should the districts not be satisfied with their performance (as teachers? as administrators?). Another example would be the requirement that we track the performance of our graduates – without taking into account that our graduates may not necessarily be acting as school leaders after they graduate from our programs.

When we questioned this during Deputy Commissioner Brian Dassler's presentation at our Spring FAPEL Meeting in Tallahassee, he explained that the place where we could have an impact on the actual application of this legislation is through rule making. ***Therefore, please be advised that the rule-making process has begun.*** FDOE has held two virtual meetings, with representatives from universities, consultants, and school districts, to provide input on the rules that the FDOE is developing to govern Level 1 Educational Leadership and Level 2 School Leadership programs in terms of program approval and program renewal. These include the accountability measures and provisions, containing the definitions of terms like “partnership” and “high quality program” that will be used for FDOE's oversight.

FAPEL's Response: As soon as we have a draft of the rule we will distribute them to you. Various members of FAPEL sat on this committee, but it was simply an advisory committee. *We need the membership to raise their voices if there are rules that we agree are inconsistent with our mission or with what should be appropriate measures for the program approval processes.* Please, feel free to contact me at dreyes@fau.edu if you have any concerns or questions about this.

Curriculum

Instructional leadership has become a central component and emphasis in the educational leadership curriculum of this decade. As the only educational leadership professor who was represented in this year's FDOE Commissioner's Leadership Academy (CLA), it became clear to me that the FDOE is also very focused on instructional leadership as the dominant activity of school leaders. The CLA, using professional development from Washington University's Center for Educational Leadership (CEL), is centered on teaching principals how to use classroom observations/visits/walkthroughs to become better instructional leaders. Learning and practice took place in the CLA by using methodologies of targeted observations tied to standards/look-fors and engaging in supposedly non-evaluative forms of reflecting, wondering, coaching, and mentoring with the teachers observed.

This emphasis was not only coming out of the CLA. Last summer, a committee composed of FAPEL members and consultants was tasked with creating "Instructional Leadership Performance Task Assessments". The committee developed the description of and rubrics for three field-based experiences that were drawn directly from a set of instructional leadership skills identified by the FDOE. After the work last summer, these proposed task assessments were presented at the FAPEL Fall Meeting 2015 in Orlando. Now in their implementation stage, they are being further refined and the FDOE is recommending that these be incorporated into our programs wherever possible.

FAPEL's Response: As mentioned, FAPEL featured these "Instructional Leadership Performance Tasks" during our fall meeting. We will continue to report out on their development and implementation. However, the bigger picture is that we are faced with looking at our own programs to see whether or not we are in step with this

emphasis or even necessarily agree with this becoming the dominant role of the school leader.

A recent study by Paul Manna, sponsored by the Wallace Foundation, is titled *Developing Excellent School Principals to Advance Teaching and Learning: Considerations for State Policy*. We distributed this study in pdf form to the membership and presented it during the Spring Meeting in Tallahassee. While this study informs all the issues that I am outlining here, perhaps the most important question raised concerns the issue that principals "are bearing more and more weight as old responsibilities persist and as new ones become layered on top of them" (Manna, 2015, p. 11).

Manna (2015) calls for policy makers - and I would argue for us as a profession - to see how policy initiatives alter the tasks that principals are responsible for on a daily basis and discover if they result in multiple and conflicting demands on the principals. The initial data are indicating that the policies are creating a role that is not tenable. In front of district leaders and state leaders, FAPEL Board members have brought this to the attention of those creating and executing policy that governs the job expectations of school leaders. It becomes our members' responsibility, through research and advocacy, to determine if these expectations are commensurate with the functions of the school principal and, if so, to incorporate into our programs the learning needed to meet these expectations. However, we also need to influence what Manna (2015) calls "a strategy of addition by subtraction" (p. 11), meaning that as districts and states demand new priorities for principals, they should also find ways to remove lower priority responsibilities in which principals are engaged.

Program Design

Educational Leadership programs, and especially those in Florida, are faced with two conflicting demands. Due to the neoliberal approach that competing institutions in the educational marketplace will lead to consumer preference for programs of higher quality, and thereby improve the offerings, traditional brick and mortar institutions are engaged in heavy local recruitment in the districts they serve (to garner the most FTE or tuition possible for their program) while diving deep into on-line programs to compete with those regional and national on-line programs approved by the FDOE and marketing to Florida educators. The outcome of this approach is clear. Consumers are

opting for programs that are cheaper and easier to complete. The Wallace Report (2016) titled *Improving University Principal Preparation Programs: Five Themes from the Field* found that district leaders are dissatisfied with program quality, strong university-district partnerships are needed for quality programs but not frequent, the curriculum does not always reflect the job of a principal in the context that they serve, some university policies and practices hinder program reform, and states do not affect policies that lead to improved quality. The fundamental issue here is clear: is our purpose as educational leadership programs to engage in a competition for students to increase our numbers and revenue or is it to develop programs that will put out the most effective administrators possible. If partnership, highly competitive selection of students, and increased field-based learning are three of the essential elements needed for programs, what does this mean for program enrollment numbers, affordability and market competition, and our role in policing our own profession?

FAPEL's Response: There are tough issues to be considered here, which include the very design of our programs and our ability to deal with the two opposing desires for increasing student enrollment or increasing the quality of both students and program. FAPEL has worked with the FDOE in creating higher standards for educational leadership program approval, developing a Florida Educational Leadership Exam (FELE) that is rigorous, and providing feedback to policy makers and the FDOE concerning this very issue. To that end, this Fall Meeting FAPEL is making room to further examine what our designs should really look like by inviting the Wallace Foundation to present on the four school leadership grants that are currently being funded in Florida.

School Leadership Theory and Practice

Perhaps the most important thing for us to do as a profession is to maintain a strong voice in our state and be relevant, both as an organization and as individual researchers and teachers of educational leadership. To that end, we need to be engaged in professional learning on the teaching of our discipline, as well as be engaged in research and reporting on what school leadership's needs and directions are and should be to provide the democratic and socially just ends we seek. This is best achieved by sharing what we do and engaging each other in the professional dialogues and discussions that will lead to a stronger profession in Florida.

Beyond that, we need to make sure that FAPEL is connected to the practicing school leaders we produce and support. Our credibility depends on the credence that is given to us by the school leaders we work with, and our ability to network with them and have them give us the input we need to enrich our own learning and our programs.

FAPEL's Response: In terms of our professional learning, FAPEL is dedicated to providing the space to share and learn from each other. The break-out sessions that we have included and will continue to include during our Fall meetings serve that purpose. As a reminder, please, see the call for submissions for this fall's October 3, 2016 meeting. We are also reviving the program aimed at mentoring and helping those doctoral students in school leadership programs who want to be exposed to the issues that we face here in Florida. It is FAPEL's hope that this year our graduate student members will join the Past President's Graduate Program and participate with us in our meetings.

To connect with the school leader profession, FAPEL has associated itself with the Florida Association of School Administrators (FASA) in order to help bridge the area of theory to practice. For the last two years FASA has offered and given scholarships to graduate students to attend their summer conference. These opportunities have included transportation costs, free registration, free hotel stays, and special sessions designed for the aspiring assistant principal. Also, FAPEL has been in discussion with the Florida Assistant Principal Association (FAPA) on providing a state-wide mentoring program for FAPEL program students who want an experience and exposure to those beyond the district that they serve.

Conclusion

Here in Florida we are at an important juncture in determining how we can: (a) influence policy that governs our profession to a path that will positively impact public education in Florida; (b) develop a common understanding of what our programs should look like and what their objectives should be; and (c) stay connected to the field. FAPEL's role in this has been consistent and directed, but we need the individual members to be as participatory as possible for us to actually make the difference that is crucial to the future of education in Florida. I welcome any feedback on this article at dreyes@fau.edu.