



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: May 2, 2005

LEARNING TO LEAD?

Two new AEI studies analyze the programs and texts used to prepare principals

Studies are embargoed until 12:01 a.m., May 6, 2005

America's principals are being asked to do more than ever before, yet they are not being taught the skills and knowledge essential for twenty-first century school leadership.

This is the conclusion of Frederick M. Hess, director of education policy studies at the American Enterprise Institute, and his research associate, Andrew P. Kelly, in two new rigorous and in-depth research studies. The two studies—"Learning to Lead?" and "Textbook Leadership"—are being published by the Harvard University Program in Education Policy and Governance.

In "Learning to Lead?" the authors analyzed a national sample of thirty-one preparation programs to assess what is being taught to future principals in American schools of education. They reviewed more than 200 course syllabi covering almost 2,500 total course weeks, and found a critical lack of emphasis on results-oriented management or accountability. Hess and Kelly found that preparation programs pay little attention to teaching how to use accountability as a management tool, make use of research, hire quality teachers, identify talented or ineffective employees, and reward or fire personnel based on performance.

Just two percent of all instruction was devoted to the use of accountability as a management tool. The authors found that while fifteen percent of the classes addressed personnel management in some fashion, barely three percent of the total instruction addressed hiring, identifying, and rewarding effective teachers or identifying and firing ineffective ones.

In "Textbook Leadership," Hess and Kelly systematically analyzed eleven of the most commonly assigned texts in training programs for principals. They found that the books failed to focus on accountability, efficiency, and making critical personnel decisions. Less than one page per 1,000 of frequently assigned texts offered clear guidelines on how to use accountability as a management tool.

Not one text provided a single positive reference to the possible benefits of removing an ineffective teacher. As Hess points out, "This is cause for concern in an era where policymakers are obliging principals to close achievement gaps and to help ensure that all students have highly qualified teachers."

Hess and Kelly also found that in the required readings, aspiring principals were exposed to only a narrow range of thought and rarely encountered serious discussion of productivity, efficiency, or "tough-minded" management. The writings of professors of education administration were well represented, but notably absent were books from leading thinkers in the broader world of public or private management. "Education leadership lies at the intersection of two vibrant and powerful bodies of learning and thought—education and management,"

Hess said. “Yet these programs are leaving some of today’s most widely discussed management thinkers—like Jim Collins, Tom Peters, and Clay Christensen—entirely off their reading lists.”

Hess and Kelly found that, contrary to some conservative fears, there was little evidence of a “progressive” agenda in the chosen texts—with just twelve percent of course weeks devoted to norms and values. They did find, however, that instruction devoted to values was left-leaning for more than 60 percent of the courses, and right-leaning for less than one percent of the classes.

The lack of attention to serious thinking on management or topics like research, accountability, or termination suggests a failure to teach the array of skills needed to lead effective schools. “We need to change the way we are thinking about training our school leaders,” Hess said. “Principals need to be given the kinds of tools that will enable them to successfully manage 21st century schools—that means making meaningful reforms to current preparation programs for principals.”

The two studies, “Learning to Lead?” and “Textbook Leadership,” will be posted in their entirety, beginning May 6, 2005, at the website of the Harvard University Program in Education Policy and Governance: <http://www.ksg.harvard.edu/pepg>.

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