Training Leaders to Transform Education

Harvard Graduate School of Education (HGSE) has created a new doctor of education leadership (Ed.L.D.) program, a three-year, practice-oriented degree aimed at preparing a small cohort of leaders who can effect major changes in K-12 education. Dean Kathleen McCartney said the program aims to teach its students “how to create change, how to be entrepreneurial, how to create a strategy and really stick with it.” Her very vocabulary underscored how the new course of study differs from the traditional research- and dissertation-focused Ed.D. But the Ed.L.D. graduates’ goal, McCartney emphasized, is consistent with HGSE’s purposes as adapted to challenging circumstances in primary and secondary education: “Everything these leaders do should have a laser-like focus on learning.”

“Sometimes people think education is an intractable problem,” she said, citing the scale of the issues, the flood of unanalyzed data about students’ performance, and the apparently inadequate American level of learning revealed on tests administered around the world—not to mention the daunting gaps in performance between and within U.S. districts.

The Ed.L.D. attacks that challenge in two ways. The unusual curriculum—based in part on current HGSE-led executive-education programs for superintendents, principals, and other K-12 leaders—suggests the rationale for the school’s first new degree in 74 years. First, it aims to equip graduates with expertise not only in teaching and learning, but also in organizational management and leadership, and command of policy and politics. By linking HGSE faculty members with Business School (HBS) and Kennedy School (HKS) colleagues, and scholars with practitioners, the Ed.L.D. program recognizes that superintendents, state education policymakers, nonprofit advocates of school reform, and even private investors are all involved in enhancing education—and that each sector’s leaders need to master multiple skills and disciplines. (Curriculum development was supported by the Gates, Hewlett, and Noyce foundations; see www.gse.harvard.edu/academics/doctorate/edld.)

Second, after two years of work on campus, each student will enter a field placement, at venues ranging from large urban school districts to nonprofit organizations such as the New Teacher Project, the New Schools Venture Fund, and Teach For America (TFA). During that on-site, final year, the doctoral candidates will lead an education-reform project, prepare a “capstone” product, and gain hands-on experience building and leading a team—and evaluating its members’ performance as their own is assessed. McCartney noted that the new degree solves “a human-capital issue” by opening a path for those seeking education careers but not a research doctorate and unsure about navigating from an M.B.A. or J.D. into their preferred field.

“As we’ve engaged in this work over the past 20 years,” said Wendy Kopp, TFA founder and CEO, “we’ve seen that it is absolutely possible for kids in low-income communities to excel academically”—at the classroom level, school-wide, and even through entire school systems, demonstrating the “possibility of school-system-wide change.” At each of those levels, she said, “Ultimately, it turns out, it’s all about talent and leadership,” in classrooms, the principal’s office, and the superintendency. There is now widespread recogni-
about the conditions that promote high-
level learning and performance in educa-
tional institutions,” within classrooms and
in systems as a whole. But the work of
public schools is “highly compartmentali-
zation, disorganized, and incoherent,” re-
acting historical forces that have shaped
education. In response, Elmore said, school
systems and education leaders need to de-
fine coherent strategies for improvement,
specify the elements of each strategy, and
detail the actions required to implement
them—and figure out how to explain all
these changes to the public.

At the same time, previous HGSE col-
aborations have opened the way to apply
those findings to effect change in large
school systems. The Public Education
Leadership Project, an HGSE-HBS ven-
ture, developed a case-based executive-
education curriculum for superintendents
and principals from large urban school
systems. (Alumni include former Chicago
superintendent Arne Duncan ’86, now U.S. Secretary of Education.) Week-long
campus sessions and field consultations
by faculty members introduced training in
strategic alignment, executing a strategy,
managing human capital, and designing
systems for resource allocation and ac-
countability measures.

Since 2006, the Wallace Foundation (see
below) has supported a separate Executive
Leadership Program for Educators (ExEL),
to provide training on campus and in the
field for teams of school-district leaders
and the leaders of their state education
departments (two states each year). The
joint approach aimed to combine state-
level policy with practice and application
in operating districts and schools. ExEL’s
faculty ranks include HGSE, HBS, and
HKS members.

Now, the content and techniques of the
executive-education programs are being
extended into a regular degree course of
study. Beyond superintendents and chief
academic officers, Elmore envisions enroll-
ing people who will create entrepreneur-
tial training organizations (nonprofit and
for profit); organizations that will support

chart schools; people interested in fund-
ing innovation; and pioneers in data and
other services—hence the breadth of the
partners for students’ third-year place-
ments.

Co-director Harry Spence brings that
hands-on perspective directly into the
design of the Ed.L.D. From 1991 to 1995,
he was receiver for Chelsea, Massachu-
setts, where restructuring the school sys-
em was a principal priority. Thereafter,
he was deputy chancellor for operations
of the New York City board of education,
and then commissioner of the Massachu-
setts department of social services.

School systems are “easily pulled in
a thousand directions,” Spence said: like
the leaders of other public institutions,
education executives spend 80 percent of
their time on politics and administration,
and only 20 percent on improving prac-
tice and the services delivered. Reversing
that ratio, in his view, is the key to “genu-
ine transformation” of education, and the
Ed.L.D. promises “an intense focus on
improving practice.” That means helping
leaders find ways to rise above the details
of budgets, legislation, or placating city
councils and parent-teacher organizations
so they can focus on enhancing teachers’
learning and their classroom effectiveness
and marshaling resources properly. That
is the only way, he said, to boost lagging
student achievement overall, and to address
effectively issues of race and identity that
lie at the heart of urban systems’ achieve-
ment gaps.

These tough challenges cannot be over-
come by “education rhetoric,” Spence
acknowledged. By forming deep part-
nerships with the organizations where
Ed.L.D. candidates will spend their third
year, he said, HGSE could itself benefit
from a “tremendous virtuous circle be-
tween the academy and practice” that will
inform faculty members’ own knowledge
and their ability to teach future leaders.

Moreover, making education schools’
curriculums pertinent to the real problems
of improving teaching and learning has
been its own intractable problem. For the
past decade, the Wallace Foundation has
focused its education philanthropy (to the
tune of $300 million) “exclusively around
the notion that to make school reform
work for kids, we need to spend much
more time and attention on leadership,”
said foundation president M. Christine
DeVita. Leadership training and effective-
ness, she said, are “under-recognized and
under-leveraged aspects of school life.”

The job of contemporary school prin-
cipals has changed dramatically, DeVita
said—but their preparation has not.
Their most critical tasks are “leading or-
ganizational change, creating cultures of
learning for the adults in the building,
and leading instructional improvement
for the children”—and “none of those so-
phisticated organizational changes and
management issues are things they’ve
been prepared for.” Principals, the key
actors in effecting school-level improve-
ments, are thrown into their jobs without
mentors (or whatever mentoring they get
is passive and episodic), and subjected
to inadequate or irrelevant performance
assessments. Where these factors are al-
tered, Wallace’s programs show, schools
can improve.

School reform, DeVita said, is above all
“a systems problem” and so requires sys-
tems thinking, “which is exactly what
good leaders do in all sectors, and exactly
what we’re asking education leaders to do,
too.” But among education schools, “There
isn’t anybody out there doing it in a way
that’s worthy of the challenge—and that’s
what’s so exciting about this program.”
The kind of preparation and thinking she
envisions for education leaders is “what’s
taken for granted at Harvard Business
School and Harvard Kennedy School,”
which is why the Wallace Foundation
originally underwrote ExEL. With such
an approach now in place at HGSE, too,
DeVita said, the foundation has followed
up by making a $10-million grant for fel-
lows for the entering Ed.L.D. candi-
dates.

Arthur Levine—past president of
Teachers College at Columbia University,
now president of the Woodrow Wilson
National Fellowship Foundation—has
been a harsh critic of prevailing practices.
He characterized leadership programs
as the weakest of education schools’ of-
ferings, with low admissions standards;
curriculums that “lack coherence and connections to the work that’s actually done in the field”; clinical programs devoted to mere shadowing of practitioners, whether they are successful or not; “watered-down” dissertations with little connection to practice; and other failings.

Those deficiencies are particularly disturbing, Levine said, “given the enormous changes that need to happen” in response to changed demographics, the growth in student populations, new skills required for students to compete economically, and the rapid evolution of technology. “We need administrators who aren’t simply managers of [existing] schools,” he said, “but who can create new schools.”

In that light, he said, the Ed.L.D. venture could be “a very useful model” for the entire country. He cited the multi-disciplinary curriculum as “unique and critical to the kinds of leadership training required today.” He also pointed to the substantive third-year placement “in organizations known for their accomplishments” in school reform, and with “incomparable” attention to the quality and rigor of the experience. Throughout the program’s design, he discerned a focus on real problems, he said, an approach that “makes so much more sense” than generating more “watered-down dissertations.”

The first cohort of 25 students is being recruited this fall, to enroll in 2010. They will do so tuition-free, and with stipends for living expenses, thanks to the gift for fellowships from the Wallace Foundation, among others. (McCartney cited a $1-million fellowship fund given by former Harvard Overseer Paul Buttenwieser and his wife, Catherine.)

Elmore and Spence imagine that the applicants will have at least several years of experience working in the “education sector,” broadly defined, who have demonstrated leadership in effecting some significant change or reform, and who come from diverse backgrounds and interests. Spence recalled students pursuing narrower professional degrees for whom the Ed.L.D. “suddenly answers their questions” about how to “genuinely prepare for the task of transforming large educational organizations, as much as humanly possible.”

A final check on the program’s design and aspirations is its executive director, lecturer on education Elizabeth City—herself a former teacher, principal, instructional coach, and doctoral student at HGSE. Now she is an evangelist with a mission: to build from 25 Ed.L.D.s per year, to extend to the partner organizations where they will intern and the entities they ultimately lead, and ultimately to affect other education schools. City drew on her own background and on the Ed.L.D. intellectual framework to outline everything “transformative system-level leaders need to know” to reform education today, from learning about the origin of teacher unions and the evolution of de facto segregation in urban school districts (“These things didn’t just pop up”) to effective teamwork to comprehensive performance assessments.

Until now, City said, it has been up to prospective leaders to accumulate these needed skills on their own. With the Ed.L.D., she said, “We’re trying to do the integrative work, rather than saying to the students, ‘Here, you put it together.’” They need all the help they can get, she said, given the urgent mission of “transforming American education.”

FAS’s Progress—and Prognosis

Faculty of arts and sciences (FAS) dean Michael D. Smith invited professors and staff members to an “FAS Financial Update and Other FY ’09 Accomplishments” briefing on September 15. His early-semester presentation in effect previewed his retrospective annual report and prospective letter on the year ahead before they are formally published this autumn (check www.harvardmagazine.com for updates). Against the backdrop of the sharp decline in the value of the endowment (see “$11 Billion Less,” page 50), Smith conveyed several pieces of encouraging news, based on FAS’s success in reducing its rate of spending during recent months, while keeping attention focused on the work still needed to stabilize the faculty’s finances in the years ahead. (A video recording of the briefing can be found at http://planning.fas.harvard.edu.)

He highlighted FAS’s “core” operations: the College, the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, and the faculty itself (which account for about three-fourths of FAS revenues and expenses), excluding separate “tubs” such as the Harvard College Library, the School of Engineering and Applied Sciences, athletics, the museums,