

The Ed.D. and Scholarly Practitioners

A national consortium sees the combination of applied research and practical theory as a tool worthy of the superintendency

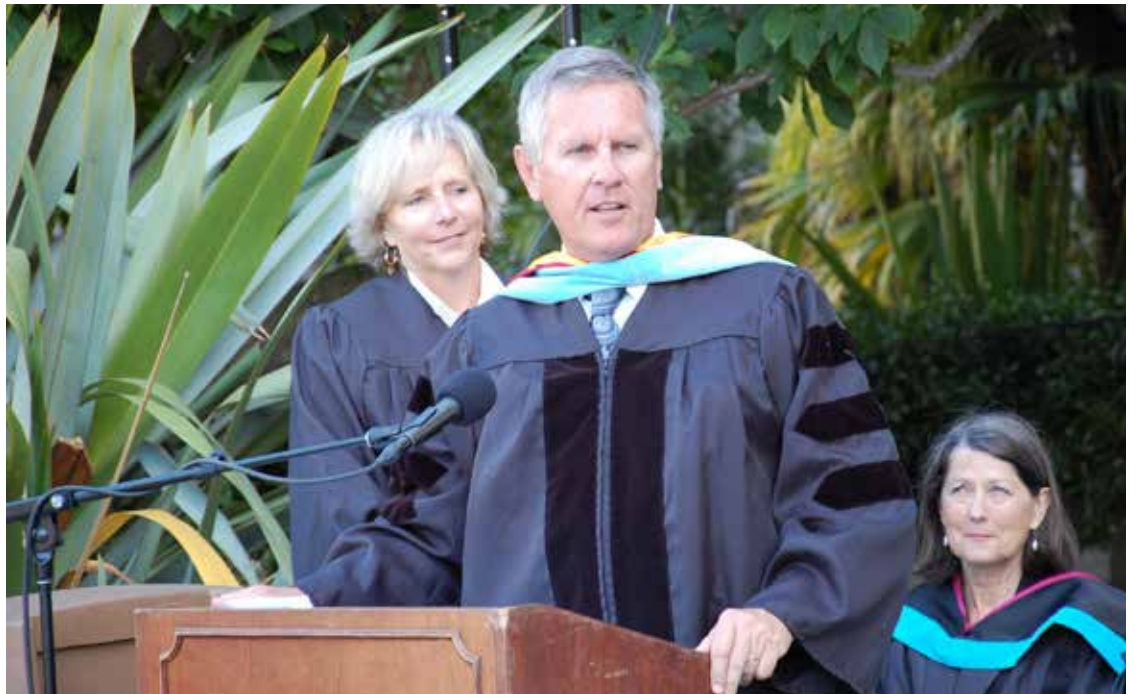
BY JILL A. PERRY

Put the job descriptions of an assistant professor of educational administration and a superintendent next to one another and what do you find in common? Not much.

The two career paths require distinct skills and knowledge, yet schools of education have followed a one-size-fits-all approach for both professional pursuits, much to the frustration of school leaders aspiring for greater opportunities.

Consider the scorching cynicism by an experienced K-12 administrator in this online comment appearing not long ago in *Education Week*: “I am a district assistant

Assistant Professor	Superintendent
Be a productive scholar	Be an effective leader
Maintain a research program	Operate a school district
Obtain external grants	Oversee instructional, financial and all other operations
Be an effective teacher and mentor	Advise and recommend action to school board
Serve the profession locally and nationally	



David Cash, superintendent in Santa Barbara, Calif., found practical value in the dissertation he completed for his Ed.D. at University of Southern California.

superintendent. My school board has told me that my contract will not be renewed and I will not get promoted to superintendent if I do not enroll in a doctorate program now. [The faculty of doctoral programs] would rather debate Habermas and Dewey, but can they relate it to real schools and NCLB? Not if their life depended on it!

“I need better skills for my job. We are all struggling because the training people like me have received is either too simplistic or too theoretical. I will have to pay \$60,000 for a degree that will be taught by people who know nothing about kids, their parents, testing and classroom management. I want a degree that tells people (especially my board) that I know a thing or two about how to make research on teaching applicable in our school district.”

Our Objective

Sound familiar? Educators in K-12 systems nationally face the dilemma of having to get a doctorate that is no more than a title and credential offering little in the way of enhanced abilities for addressing the real problems they face in actual schools.

Research preparation and traditional dis-

sertations are theoretical exercises that leave practitioners struggling to apply learning to their contexts. In the end, the burdensome expense is a means to an end rather than a transformational leadership experience.

When the Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (<http://CPEDinitiative.org>) came together in 2007, the consortium had 20 schools (it now has 86). It sought to better differentiate between the expectations and outcomes for both types of doctoral candidates. In particular, the CPED consortium aimed to improve the Ed.D. by asking this: What knowledge, skills and dispositions should professionals working in education possess and be able to use? The role of applied research and practical theory immediately found a central role in Ed.D. program redesigns.

The Scholarly Practitioner

David Cash, superintendent of the Santa Barbara, Calif., Unified School District and a graduate of the University of Southern California's Ed.D. program, found his scholarly skills of value early on. About the time Cash started in Santa Barbara, the federal Office for Civil Rights filed complaints regarding the disproportionate number of disciplinary actions applied to students of color in the district.

After examining the data, he concluded that Latino males were six times more likely than

white males to be suspended. “The data was easy to find, easy to understand,” he says. “What was more difficult was working with staff and the education community to arrive at solutions that would both meet the requirements of the OCR and change the culture of the district.”

Gathering additional data from the community, Cash examined how best to implement a more restorative approach to student-teacher and student-student interactions. In a short time, expulsions for students of minority descent dropped from 50-75 per year to fewer than 15.

The superintendent, now in his fourth year in Santa Barbara, attributes this successful turn to his doctoral preparation that blended research and practice and was taught by what he considered outstanding researchers and superintendents who “provided [me] with the experiences necessary to identify and solve problems of practice.”

A colleague of mine, Gordon Kirk from the University of Edinburgh, once asked why the distinction between education’s two doctorates was so complicated, putting it this way. “Clearly, the Ph.D. is to understand the world and the Ed.D. is to change the world.” So simple yet so powerful of a statement that begs the question, how can doctoral preparation help practitioners change the world?

According to the Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate, the answer comes in the form of the “scholarly practitioner.” These are practicing education leaders who have been trained to:

- ▶ blend practical wisdom with professional skills and knowledge to name, frame and solve problems of practice;
- ▶ use practical research and applied theories as tools for socially just and equitable change; and
- ▶ resolve problems of practice by collaborating with key stakeholders and disseminating solutions in multiple ways.

Such knowledge and skills broaden the scope of a practitioner’s toolbox. Anecdotal or experiential knowledge complements theoretical knowledge and applied research skills that are needed to understand problems and the potential impact of solutions.

Continuous Conversations

Cash began his transformation to a scholarly practitioner during his doctoral program at USC. His dissertation in practice, completed in 2008,

examined the processes and strategies used by superintendents to provide “defined autonomy” for school principals. His adviser, Rudy Castruita, spent nearly 20 years in the superintendency and is past president of the California County Superintendents Educational Services Association.

Cash’s research has changed his own practice as a school system leader, now including what he calls a “continuous conversation” with his principals two to three times a week. More recently, with the implementation of the Common Core State Standards, he has employed scholarly practitioner skills to develop a teacher-driven reform model for implementing the standards. One result: Cadres of teacher leaders in Santa Barbara work within and across districts to design, implement and evaluate the Common Core initiative.

Cash is a model scholarly practitioner whose job as superintendent of a 15,500-student district creates opportunities to use his practical knowledge, alongside what he learned in his doctoral program, to make better decisions that have positive impact on thousands of students.

Transforming the Field

In 2007, the Task Force Report on the Professional Doctorate, created by the Council of Graduate Schools, noted that a professional doctoral degree should represent preparation for the potential transformation of a field of practice. Transformational skills, the Carnegie Project contends, come in research and inquiry preparation that is specifically designed for practitioner use. Such skills and knowledge provide the practitioner with the ability to decipher, debate and design research to address the multitude of problems they face.

Inquiry in practice preparation is the process of posing significant questions about complex problems in the way education takes place and using research, theories and professional wisdom to design innovative solutions. At the center of this process is the ability to use data to understand and evaluate the effects of an action. As such, inquiry in practice requires the scholarly practitioner to gather, organize, judge and analyze situations, literature and data with a critical lens.

Such skills go beyond the dissertation process into daily practice as scholarly practitioners transform the field through inquiry in practice.

Nancy Kline knows well the role that research and inquiry have played in her ability to transform practice. She entered her doctoral studies



at Lynn University while serving as superintendent in Martin County, Fla., from 2008 to 2012. She chose an Ed.D. to learn to construct and apply knowledge to make a positive difference in the lives of children, and families, schools in her district of 19,000 students.

Through a deep investigation of absenteeism, Kline identified both the roots of this chronic issue as well as potential solutions for increasing attendance. For her dissertation in practice, she developed an attendance program that included changes to policy and procedures. She gathered data to evaluate the impact of her program and learned that average daily attendance increased while chronic



Nancy Kline

absenteeism decreased. These developments induced gains in student achievement as Martin County improved its graduation rates and overall state ranking.

Kline's work did not stop with the completion of her dissertation in January 2014, however. She says she has "utilized my knowledge and experience to create a patented program titled Bring It 180." As an assistant professor now at Lynn University, she has worked with other school districts to spread

her program and study its effects on chronic absenteeism. Greater understanding of practical research has solidified her identity as a scholarly practitioner.

From 'Ph.D. Lite' to a Practitioners' Ed.D.

BY MICHAEL CHIRICHELLO AND MARK WASICKO

The job of the superintendency is demanding enough without piling doctoral study onto the heap.

Our challenge at Northern Kentucky University was to design a program that adds tangible value to the superintendent's work while holding the doctoral student to measurable outcomes that could be seen by school board members, educators and students.

Northern Kentucky University is one of 86 institutions participating in the Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate to reframe, reclaim and redesign the practitioner's Ed.D. NKU's program is co-designed with leading superintendents. It incorporates innovative design features that move the Ed.D. from a "Ph.D.-Lite" researcher's degree to a practitioner's degree infused with real-life puzzles of practice and measurable results for school districts.

In our program, faculty members and enrolled superintendents are considered "learning associates" responsible for co-developing session content and delivery for each in-person meeting and leading discussions online.

Personal Development

Our approach develops the knowledge, skills and *dispositions* of the learning associates — that is, the human elements that affect the capacity of leaders and their organizations to grow and adapt. Our mantra — the person you are is the leader you are — is intentionally reinforced by developing the personhood of the superintendents who are pursuing the Ed.D.

Superintendents are hired for their knowledge and skills but are sometimes not renewed based on their dispositions. Therefore it is essential we help them grow their dispositions by providing authentic feedback as superintendents develop personal leadership growth plans. One program graduate, Randy Poe, superintendent in Boone County, Ky., developed a training module that chronicles a multiyear process to integrate dispositional hiring practices. It is housed on the Kentucky Association of School Administrators website (<http://connect.kasa.org/leadershipresources/hiringfordispositions1>).

The program uses neither tradi-

tional grading nor courses. Instead, successful completion of the program is demonstrated through 36 job-embedded leadership competencies that have measurable impact on the superintendents' school districts. Examples of competencies include (1) influencing greater connections between schools/districts and community agencies and (2) developing a quantitative and qualitative line of inquiry that leads to more real-world learning experiences and enables the program to adapt to the superintendents' needs.

We require each school board to commit time and financial resources to support its superintendent in the program. This helps ensure the board's commitment. We send an initial invitational letter to the board president suggests granting time and financial support.

Distinctive Characteristics

The program has several distinctive facets. One is a mandatory international study experience, so each superintendent explores how governmental, political, cultural and

Preparing district leaders to employ the skills of inquiry in practice as tools for improvement is the work of the Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate. The consortium promotes, across faculty in 86 schools of education, sharing and learning how to improve doctoral-level professional preparation in education.

Stewarding the Profession

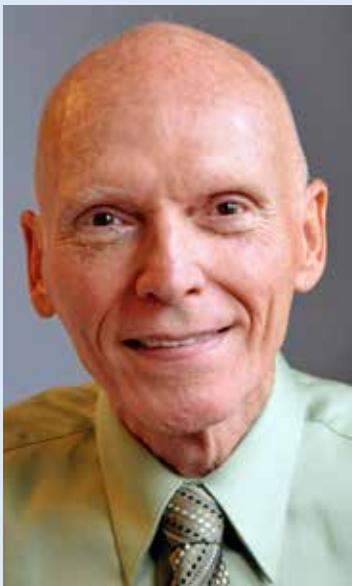
In preparing this piece, I asked several superintendents why the distinction of the Ed.D. as a practitioner degree matters, especially to superintendents who already hold a doctorate. The response overwhelmingly centered on stewarding the profession.



Jill Perry

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Stewardship, one superintendent says, means identifying “trends, professional obstacles and the critical changes in leadership that enable the success of aspiring and newly appointed superintendents.” Changes in preparation are necessary, and advocating for distinguishing practitioner preparation is essential. That is, if the goal is to change the world, then practitioners need doctoral programs that make them change makers. ■



Michael Chirichello

social systems affect high-performing school systems and studies the broad concepts of leadership in a global context. Our first cohort investigated the education system of Finland by visiting schools in Helsinki and surrounding cities; our second cohort studied schools in Ontario, Canada.

Another feature promotes compe-

tencies associated with successful community change strategies. The superintendents evaluate specific community needs and identify a challenge to address. For example, two superintendents championed a statewide initiative to connect students with business and industry. The result is that business and education leaders can collaborate on a coveted Work-Ready Certification, providing a safe online recruiting, mentoring and networking connection between students and employers.

A third distinctive aspect is the capstone, a dissertation in practice. In our program, it's not a tiresome, scholarly tome. We seek student dissertations that are action- and research-based, collaborative, multifaceted and multimedia in nature. They focus on school district research projects that also are scholarly and of high quality.

Our first superintendent cohort created a collaborative online learning community featuring an interactive series of superintendent effectiveness modules (<http://connect.kasa.org/leadershipresources/nkuexec>). Each module serves as a resource, including video clips and scholarly annotated bibliographies.

The Proof

Graduates of our four-year-old program are seeing major progress in their districts — better student learning outcomes, improved culture and more effective staff recruitment. Three of the last five Kentucky state superintendents of the year also are graduates. Some have moved on to lead positions in the state department of education and statewide professional organizations.

The best evidence of success is hearing it from a graduate. Noting she was stretched “well beyond my comfort zone,” Dorothy B. Perkins, chief executive officer of the Central Kentucky Educational Cooperative in Fayette County, Ky., credits the doctoral program for sharpening her problem-solving skills and reigniting her passion for her profession.

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