

## **NEW PATHWAYS AND PARTNERSHIPS TO SCHOOL LEADERSHIP**

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### **Abstract**

This paper describes an innovative partnership between the largest school district in the State of Texas, Houston Independent School District, and the Schools of Business and Education at the University of St. Thomas. The program includes a 48-hour master's degree, resulting in a Master's of Business Administration with principal certification. Through this university-school district collaboration, students are taught to apply principles of business including finance and leadership to diverse, inner-city school communities

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### **Introduction and Program Overview**

In June 2011, Dr. Terry Grier, Superintendent of the Houston Independent School District (HISD), the seventh largest school district in the United States, approached the University of St. Thomas (UST) armed with innovative ideas that would serve both HISD and the University. Six months later, a 48-hour Masters of Business Administration (MBA) with a joint Texas principal's certification degree was initiated. Dr. Grier envisioned a principal preparation program that would include courses in marketing, finance, ethics, and entrepreneurship in addition to the Texas "Learner Centered Competencies," which are required for licensure and certification as a principal in the State of Texas. Dr. Greer believes the skill set required of effective, principals in today's schools differs from the skills needed to be successful twenty years ago. The principal preparation program as proposed by Superintendent Grier included courses traditionally found in a School of Business. Such a vision was not new for the greater Houston metropolitan area, in 2008; Rice University launched a principal's program, which included a Masters in Business Administration. The Washington Post 2008 stated, "Education schools, where most principals are trained, emphasize teaching and managing children. But organizers...say an inner-city principal cannot succeed without enough business smarts to manage adults." It is natural that some skepticism exists about the need for preparing principals with a business approach, but it is acknowledged that the capable utilization of finance is critical to the delivery of a strong, systemic school culture that ensures learning for all. This paper describes the partnership and collaboration between the Houston Independent School District and two schools within the University of St. Thomas, the School of Business and the School of Education, to create the Masters of Business Administration (MBA) with principal certification degree, which began to be offered to students in January 2012.

The faculty of the two schools, Business and Education met with the HISD administration to determine the competencies most desired and needed by the quality school Instructional Leader (e.g., Principal). The MBA Program, which included principal certification, was then developed based upon the desired outcomes and competencies

required for a Houston ISD principal. The Program design aligns with the Strategic Direction of the Houston Independent School District.

Under the leadership of the HISD Board of Trustees and Superintendent Grier, a Strategic Direction was developed in 2010 that ensures an effective principal in every school. The blend of the MBA course content and the principal certification requirements bridges the gap in skills development for school leaders working within the district's decentralized leadership framework. This cutting-edge program development provides cohort members with a curriculum aligned to school district policies; authentic transformational leadership knowledge and skills preparation; and a rigorous internship mentored by a high performing, experienced principal, in order to enhance the collective efficacy of the individuals as members of the cohort.

### **Cohort Model**

The cohort model used in the Houston ISD-UST initiative has been studied for the past 30 years. In 2000, Bruce Barnett, Margaret Basom, Diane Yerkes, and Cynthia Norris studied "Cohorts in Educational Leadership Programs: Benefits, Difficulties, and the Potential for Developing School Leaders" and published their results in the *Educational Administration Quarterly*. Their research provided insight into the benefits and the disadvantages of the cohort model. In an earlier study on the cohort model Barnett et al reported that cohorts included the following advantages: cohort members have a sense of belonging, are accepted for their expertise and contributions, and feel important (Zander, 1982). Instructors in that study reported that predictability of course scheduling and program delivery is a distinct benefit. (Hill as reported by Barnett et al, p. 259) According to the instructors interviewed in the investigation, "cohorts can take on a life of their own" (p. 267) and faculty reported, "Groups can become more difficult to manage because they appoint their own leaders and develop cohesion that may work against the desires of the instructor. Cohorts became empowered to the point of challenging what instructors were teaching." (p. 267), While many instructors (i.e, those who used cohorts and those who did not use cohorts) reported negative findings about cohorts, some positive comments emerged in the Barnett et al investigation. The most common positive perceptions about cohort student preparation for leadership roles are that students develop strong collaborative cultures during their program, and that students are able to gain skills and knowledge not found in traditional programs. The cohort experience is designed to emphasize practice, problem solving, and real world experiences (p. 270). The students within the HISD-UST cohort have developed strong bonds and forged relationships that should carry over into their leadership role as school principals.

While both the Cameron School of Business and the School of Education, hold accreditation from the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS), the Cameron School of Business (CSB) has also achieved accreditation from the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB). The School of Education's Educational Leadership Program has likewise achieved accreditation from the Teacher Educator Accreditation Council (TEAC). It has been important that both schools (Business and Education) maintain the high standards for assessment required by each accreditation entity while also meeting the specialized needs that Superintendent Grier wanted for future leaders of the HISD campuses. The Cameron School of Business determined that nine courses, including marketing, ethics, statistics, financial accounting, economics, organizational behavior, entrepreneurial principles, and strategic management would comprise the MBA degree. The School of Education selected certification courses that directly related to the desired learning experience for the transformational principal, including the principal, instructional leadership, school law, supervision, and internships. Early in the planning process both schools came together with members of the HISD leadership team to discuss the

content and the organization of the course of study for the new degree program. Faculty members from both schools expressed a desire to integrate content from business and education schools so that students would be able to directly apply their new knowledge to campus management. At the joint meeting in September, the Cameron School of Business faculty reviewed the representative principal certification exam that the students are required to pass upon completing the program of study. At that point, the Steering Committee began the arduous task of setting goals and aligning curriculum to ensure that the students would be prepared to successfully pass the principal certification exam. Quarterly meetings were held with the Planning Team to evaluate and address any problems or concerns throughout the program’s development and implementation.

**Steering Committee**

The Steering Committee consisted of three HISD principals, the senior manager of Leadership Development from HISD, the manager of University Partnerships, two associate deans from the Cameron School of Business, the dean of the School of Education, and the director of the Leadership Program in the School of Education. Using a variety of protocols for collaboration, the Steering Committee was able to articulate five goals for the MBA Program. All of the goals and objectives tightly aligned with the nine competencies assessed for principal certification:

- 1) The MBA graduates will be professional communicators;
- 2) They will be effective collaborators, sensitive to diversity and social justice concerns;
- 3) They will be ethical decision makers;
- 4) They will be critical thinkers, with a global mindset;
- 5) They will be knowledgeable about instructional business issues and processes.

Each goal has at least two objectives that were targeted in the 15 courses of the program. Once the Steering Committee reached consensus about the goals and objectives and their alignment with each course in the program, CSB faculty task analyzed each goal by identifying topics covered, prerequisites, and math concepts. Faculty used the chart found in Figure 1. Three months were spent aligning assessments with goals and objectives, and while the Steering Committee worked on curriculum, HISD was in the process of selecting the first fifteen students for the program. The Steering Committee was committed to developing a strong cohort of participants who would be devoted to developing a cohesive learning community capable of providing psychological support and encouraging collaboration throughout the program. Several inaugural events were planned to develop strong relationships and a sense of community with university staff, school district leaders, and members of the Steering Committee. The obvious benefits of a rich cohort experience would serve as a foundation on which to build collaborative school cultures and purposeful school communities.

Figure 1. Aligning Outcomes and Assessment

	<i>Communication</i>		<i>Collaboration, social justice, and diversity concerns</i>	<i>Ethical decision making</i>	<i>Critical thinkers with global mindset</i>
	<i>Oral</i>	<i>Written</i>			
<i>Addressed? Y/N</i>					
<i>How is it assessed?</i>					
<i>Evaluated in this class for grading? Y/N</i>					
<i>How is it evaluated?</i>					
<i>Feedback provided? Y/N</i>					
<i>How is feedback provided?</i>					

## **Applicant Selection and Profile**

HISD announced the new MBA program shortly after receiving approval from its Board of Trustees in September 2011. Teachers who had a 3.0 grade point average from their bachelor's degree and were considered to be highly effective were encouraged to apply. Initially 95 teachers applied and were required to take an online leadership assessment. The applicants who met the scoring target on the leadership assessment were then asked to write a paper on how to turn around a hypothetical under-performing school. HISD leadership personnel scored the essay projects and then interviewed successful applicants. Fifteen were selected from the initial 95 applicants, and one additional student was added after the first semester. Fourteen of the 16 participants are teachers in HISD; two are former teachers who currently work in Human Resources, one is a leadership recruiter and one is a teacher recruiter. Eight of the 16 students are Hispanic, five are Caucasian, two are African American, and one is Chinese American. Four of the participants teach in high school, three in middle school, and seven work in the elementary setting as teachers or specialists. There are six males and ten females. All participants are people who have demonstrated, through writing and personal interviews, a strong motivation for contributing to increased student achievement, high expectations for every child, and efficacy needed to make a difference in the lives of teachers and children.

## **Goals of the MBA Program**

September 2011, the Steering Committee identified the five goals of the new joint MBA-Principal Certification Program keeping in mind the nine competencies that are tested on the Texas Principal Certification Exam. The first goal, *professional communicators*, addressed two objectives related to oral and written skills. Almost every course in the new program assessed professional oral and written skills.

The second goal, related to the importance of the graduates being *effective collaborators, sensitive to diversity and social justice concerns*. The three objectives under this goal target skills of utilizing appropriate group techniques for team tasks, developing effective community relations skills that inform multiple stakeholders, and demonstrating effective leadership skills in an educational context. These objectives were assessed through case study scenarios in which students reacted to problem-based situations and defended their solutions to the problem.

Similar case study scenarios were used for the third goal, which was related to being *ethical decision makers*. Students were taught to recognize the ethical issues implicit in "instructional business" situations and to develop a variety of ethical alternatives. To understand the implications of selected ethical perspectives was important to enhance their understanding and analysis of the problem-based situations.

The fourth goal, *critical thinking with a global mindset*, targeted three objectives; analyzing problems in-depth, evaluating data thoroughly, and presenting feasible solutions for problems. Assessments include scenarios from education as well as everyday life.

The fifth goal, targeted eight objectives, all related to the graduates being *knowledgeable about instructional business issues and processes*. The eight objectives demonstrated competency in the three domains of the Texas Principal Certification Exam, (i.e., school community leadership, instructional leadership, and administrative leadership) as well as knowledge in accounting, economics, finance, management, and marketing. Thirty credit hours of business courses and 18 credit hours of educational leadership courses focused all five goals and 19 objectives with the outcome of earning a Master's of Business Administration and preparation for successful completion of the Texas Principal Certification Exam.

### **Timeline of Implementation**

When members of HISD leadership, including Superintendent Dr. Terry Grier, met with UST leadership June 2011, the idea of creating a new degree plan was something written on a paper napkin. By December 2011, faculty from both schools and the Steering Committee hosted an orientation for the first MBA cohort and classes began in January 2012. Between July and December faculty designed the program, sequenced the courses, requested and received approval from the university Graduate Council and Southern Association of Colleges and Schools for the proposed new program of study. The program goals were determined and outcomes were aligned with assessments. Instructors were identified for the first courses, and the program orientation was held for the selected students. Dr. Grier's vision became a reality when classes began January 14, 2012.

### **Student Perceptions**

In an effort to ensure that the MBA with Principal's certification met the needs of the students and HISD, a six-question survey was administered to all students at the beginning of their second semester while they were enrolled in three graduate courses. The questions asked were as follows: why they chose the MBA Program, what were their expectations prior to the first class, what was their most pleasant surprise, what had they learned about themselves, what did they think should be changed, and what had they already used from the coursework. Most students answered that they were interested in the MBA Program because of the business aspect and because they want to become school leaders. Although the district paid for the tuition, fewer than half of the students chose that option as grounds for choosing the program.

Survey results indicated that many students expected more integration of business and education course content in response to the question about their prior expectations. One student stated, "I expected that there would be rigor and it's there". Students expressed that they were stretched with the statistics class and were not surprised by their own success. Other students indicated that they were surprised at how supportive the UST professors were and yet how much work the professors expected. Overall the comments were very positive about what they have used from their coursework. Students indicated that they have learned and used information about the importance of marketing, the demands of leadership, and strategic planning. When asked about what they thought should be improved, most comments were related to better communication, for future cohorts to have some training in statistics before beginning the program, and the need for more team-building exercises. The survey comments were shared with the Steering Committee in the Fall 2012 meeting where instructors discussed the need to ensure cogent integration of business and education courses.

### **Summary**

The innovative partnership with Houston Independent School District and two schools of the University of St. Thomas has been completed. The fall 2012 meeting of the Steering Committee addressed several critical elements for the two-semester internship that served as a capstone to the MBA program. The purpose of the UST MBA Internship was to apply academic learning towards powerful and practical field experience that hone essential leader competencies. Clearly defined leader standards identified by the Texas Principal Standards and by the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) have framed the internship experience. The internship included a three-tiered support structure of campus, university, and district personnel; training around district-specific programs and initiatives; development and monitoring of a systems-based approach to problem solving; case-study analysis; and reflection. Rigorous evaluation of each intern's performance of core leader responsibilities was based on clearly defined performance criteria and an individualized learning plan

connected to school needs, student achievement, and intern areas for growth.

The Steering Committee has been involved with nearly every detail in planning the MBA, from determining which courses to include to establishing the schedule for when courses are taught. Other ways that the Steering Committee has been integral to the development of the program is that two members from the HISD Leadership Development Department, along with the university director of leadership, met with each individual MBA student prior to beginning the internship courses to develop the individualized learning plan. Consideration was given to the placement of each intern, although most of them remained on the campus where they taught. Additionally, one member of the Steering Committee, a current high school principal, taught the School Law course for the cohort. Students were required to attend the School Law Conference held June in Austin, Texas, as part of their coursework. Creating a different path for preparing aspiring leaders to successfully lead urban schools required a true partnership between the University and the school district. Crucial to the success of the joint program has been the ability to analyze and reflect upon educational practices and to accept what current practitioners have to offer as best practice.

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