LIKE FREDERICK HESS (SEE “LIFTING THE BARRIER,” PAGE 12), I BELIEVE that the nation’s graduate schools of education have largely failed to develop the kinds of leaders needed in K–12 education. However, I fear that his solution—virtually abandoning licensure—would return the process of appointing principals in public schools to the highly politicized state that once prevailed.

My ideal alternative would be to replace the current licensure system with one based on performance. Instead of taking a prescribed set of university-based courses in school administration to obtain a license, aspiring principals would run schools on a trial basis under close supervision and be subject to a high-quality assessment of their performance. Those who made the grade would receive licenses. Under a performance-based licensing regime, other providers, such as school districts, states, nonprofit organizations, and for-profit companies, could compete against universities for the opportunity to offer training that would help candidates earn their licenses.

Of course, political realities make the world less than ideal, and it may take many years before performance-based licensure becomes a reality, if it ever does. In the meantime, schools desperately need principals who are trained to bring about massive turnarounds in performance. Hess and others argue for deepening the pool of potential candidates by opening school leadership positions to those without a license or teaching experience, but I doubt that will work. People who do not understand teaching and learning—the core business of schools—would require a great deal of training in those areas, followed by years of mentoring, before they would be able to pass the kind of performance assessments I have in mind as the basis of licensure. You can’t coach people in a craft, especially a complex craft like teaching, unless you know the craft; you can’t help teachers be outstanding instructors, which is the central role that school leaders should play, unless you understand teachers and the classroom challenges they face.

Given the unlikelihood of reforming the licensure system anytime soon, in the short term it seems wise to focus mainly on revamping the means by which the nation selects and trains leaders for its schools. Today’s principals and district officials are woefully unprepared for the challenges they face. The era of accountability, speeded along by the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act, is now demanding dramati-
cally better academic performance with little or no increase in the funds available to do the job.

Training on the Cheap
There is an inadequate pool of candidates qualified to take on these new challenges. The pay for principals, calculated on an hourly basis, is low relative to that of teachers, and the stress of the job is beyond bounds in an environment in which the principal bears all the burdens of the new accountability movement but has very little control over most of the things that determine whether students achieve at high levels.

Making matters worse, the pool of candidates for the principalship is entirely self-selected. Today the chief requirement to become a school principal is to earn a degree in school administration, and individual teachers decide whether they want to pursue one of these advanced degrees. People who apply to the programs are seldom evaluated on the likelihood that they will be effective school leaders, a fact that astounds the military personnel and businesspeople I’ve spoken with. In their fields, potential leaders are hand-picked for management training based on their performance and leadership potential. In education, by contrast, few individuals who meet the minimum academic requirements are turned away from school administration programs. In fact, their salary schedules give teachers an incentive to take these courses in order to increase their pay, without their having any intention of becoming a principal. Because the professors who run the administration programs understand this fact, and because the teachers who participate hold full-time jobs, the demands made on the students are typically very light. Moreover, the institutions that offer degrees in educational administration invest hardly anything in the development of their leadership and training courses. The Harvard Business School spends roughly $800,000 to create each course in its M.B.A. program and an additional $1 million to convert that course into the form

The Leadership Curriculum
The National Institute for School Leadership’s curriculum teaches principals how to conceive of themselves as agents of change and how to lead the drive for results. The curriculum is divided into two years, with two courses each year.

Course I: World-Class Schooling: Vision and Goals
UNIT 1: The Educational Challenge: How the globalizing world economy has driven up demand for highly educated people.
UNIT 2: Standards-Based Instructional Systems: How to build on the standards and assessments of your state accountability system.
UNIT 3: The Principal as Strategic Thinker: How to stay focused on the big picture.
UNIT 4: The Principal as School Designer: Schools add but never subtract programs. How to design a coherent school program.

Course II: Focusing on Teaching and Learning
UNIT 5: Foundations of Effective Learning: What the best research has to say to school leaders about teaching, learning, and curriculum in a standards-based environment.
UNITS 6 & 7: Leadership for Excellence in Literacy and Mathematics: How to judge from student work and analysis of test data whether your teachers are teaching what they need to teach—and what to do if they are not.
UNIT 8: Promoting Professional Knowledge: How to benchmark best practices and use scientifically based knowledge to improve school effectiveness. Turning the school into a learning organization.

Course III: Developing Capacity and Commitment
UNIT 9: The Principal as Instructional Leader: How and why the principal’s job is changing. The strategies of successful instructional leaders.
UNIT 10: The Principal as Team Builder: The case for a team approach. Characteristics of high-performing teams.
UNIT 11: Creating a Culture That Is Ethical, Results-Oriented, and Professional: What to do when they watch what you do rather than what you say. What it takes to build a culture that gets the job done.

Course IV: Driving for Results
UNIT 12: The Principal as Driver of Change: Analyzing root causes of problems. Setting targets, making plans, monitoring progress, correcting course. Moving from small wins to big gains.
UNIT 13: Managing for Results: How to collect data in the categories mandated by the No Child Left Behind Act and analyze it so as to deliver your curriculum, making the best use of available resources.
UNIT 14: Conducting Standards-Based Reform Projects: Applying everything you have learned to an important problem your school or district faces.
needed for Internet-based delivery. Not all business schools or military training institutions invest on quite that scale, but all assume that investments on a scale larger than anything made in public education are absolutely necessary.

As opposed to the highly integrated curriculum that is common in the nation’s business schools, programs in educational administration typically comprise an assortment of courses that do not add up to a coherent curriculum. Graduates we surveyed said that the courses they valued most were those that consisted mainly of war stories told by former school administrators, because they at least had the ring of authenticity. Only rarely do university curricula for training school administrators reflect the goals and strategies of the nearby school districts in which the trainees are most likely to serve. Most important, these prospective school administrators are rarely given a plausible answer to the $64,000 question: How do I lead my school to an unprecedented improvement in student performance?

The Rise of the Corporate University

Education today faces a situation similar to the one faced by American business in the 1980s. At the time, enormous American firms, household names like Xerox and Ford, found themselves fighting for their lives against challengers from overseas that were making higher quality products and selling them for less.

Firms that met this challenge knew that they would have to redesign their operations if they were to survive. But then the top executives realized something very important. Their plans required enormous changes in values, attitudes, and behavior throughout these global firms. Those changes could be accomplished only if the strategies at the heart of the plan were understood by managers at every level of the company. Suddenly, a function—management training—that had been buried in some obscure branch of the Human Resources division had become the key to corporate survival.

So it was pulled up into the executive office and christened as the corporate university, the aim of which was to communicate the corporate strategy to all the line managers in the firm and to provide them with the skills needed to carry it out. The faculty consisted mainly of the top executives in the firm. Jack Welch claimed to have never missed class as a professor in General Electric’s corporate university. David Kearns, the CEO who engineered Xerox’s return from the brink of bankruptcy, trained the managers who reported directly to him in the new Xerox disciplines. In turn, they did the same with their employees, until the training had cascaded down the entire line.

These firms didn’t turn to the nation’s business schools because they felt that these schools had never been particularly responsive to their needs. When all this happened, of course, the business schools got quite nervous. Thus were born the modern executive-education programs offered by university-based business schools, for senior executives who typically already hold an M.B.A. Students are selected by their employers as members of teams. The firms pay a premium price to the university (as much as $90,000 per person for a two-year non-residential program) to have those executives gain the skills needed to be on the cutting edge of business change. The program’s faculty comprises business school professors and the top executives in the firm. A major component of the curriculum is “action projects” defined by the firm. Teams apply what they are learning to real-world problems their firms are facing.

Executive Education for Principals

When the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the New Schools Venture Fund, and the Broad Foundation asked my organization, the National Center on Education and the Economy, to design a new entity to train school principals, we decided to model it on the executive-education programs designed by corporations and business schools, while also drawing on the military’s national war college system of identifying and training military leaders. The resulting approach, described in a sidebar on page 22, is of course only one way of going at it, but it reflects what we learned from a period of studying the best of the training that businesses and the military offer. The curriculum we have developed is designed to be adapted by a range of users. Universities could put together their own leadership teams and use our curriculum to train district leader-ship teams themselves, providing more local support than we ever could. Or a state or university could create its own program based on similar principles.

The aim of our National Institute for School Leadership’s curriculum is to create turnaround artists, leaders who can drive student performance up dramatically, not simply keep a school going. The curriculum is a hybrid of knowledge from business schools and the military on the subject of leading and managing complex organizations and of what the best educators here and abroad know about instructional leadership. It is focused on how to organize a school to get results in a standards-based environment. Our idea was to make a substantial investment in a curriculum that could be spread across a large number of users, just as business and the military do. With the aid of several foundations, we budgeted $5 million for the development of a blended face-to-face and web-based curriculum.
The key principles of the National Institute’s program are:

- Make an investment in finding out whether the people who are applying for training have the basic aptitudes required to be school managers. Put them in situations in which their leadership abilities are likely to show. Find out if their supervisors think they have what it takes to be a leader. The people we talked with in both business and the military wondered why public education would invest so much in training people for jobs for which they have no aptitude.

- Invest heavily in curriculum. Every sector in which leaders and managers are widely admired invests incomparably more than public education does. But mere investment is not enough; the curriculum must be powerful and coherent. Even the best graduate schools of education appear to be content to let professors construct a curriculum based on their individual interests. This is not good enough.

- Make sure, whenever possible, that the training meshes with the strategies that the participant’s employer is using to drive up performance in her district. Training will be most useful when it is reinforced at every turn by the employer. This is the fundamental principle of the corporate university, the new executive development programs, and the military war colleges. The district is every bit as much the customer as the individual participant.

- Preaching general principles will not work. Create cases that are engaging, authentic, and designed to get the main points across. Use simulations to elicit participants’ ideas about what to do in specific kinds of situations and evaluate their approaches, coaching them to a higher level of competence. Use action projects to get them to apply what they are learning to important problems in their district.

- Think very carefully about what instructional leadership means. Everyone says that should be the heart of the principal’s job, but few we talked with could articulate what the phrase means to them. By instructional leadership, we mean the principal’s capacity to: 1) offer a vision for instruction that will inspire the faculty; 2) analyze student performance data and make sound judgments as to which areas of the curriculum need attention; 3) make good judgments about the quality of the teaching in a classroom based on analysis of student work; 4) recognize the elements of sound standards-based classroom organization and practice; 5) provide strong coaching to teachers on all of the foregoing; 6) evaluate whether instructional systems in the school are properly aligned; and 7) determine the quality and fitness of instructional materials.

The National Institute’s curriculum is designed to be delivered over two years, first by our staff to leadership teams from the school districts with which we work and then by the leadership team to its principals. The instruction is delivered during three weeks in the summer and in two additional three-day sessions each year, one in the fall and the other in the spring. About 20 percent of the instruction is delivered via the Internet; the rest is delivered face-to-face. In this way, we can use the web to convey the thoughts of leading experts and to use some of the best and most engaging instructional methods, while at the same time using the flexibility afforded by the face-to-face instruction to incorporate material that is specific to the district that employs the principals being trained.

The same curriculum could easily be used to train aspiring principals if it were augmented with a properly designed internship. Indeed, we think that candidates for the principalship would be very unlikely to pass the kind of performance-based licensing requirements that we have in mind without such training. But because we have limited resources and think that the most urgent need is to retrain currently serving principals to do a far better job of raising the performance of students in their schools, the National Center on Education and the Economy chose to start with that group. And because we think it is a waste of time to train school executives in school districts that do not have a reasonable strategy for raising student performance and are still operating in the old way, we decided to partner with school districts and states that have a clear, viable strategy for raising student performance and are looking for ways to train principals to implement that strategy.

Changing the way school principals are trained will not in itself solve the crisis in school leadership. The pay and authority of principals must be increased substantially to attract and retain talented leaders and ensure that they have the tools they need to be successful. But changing the way principals are selected, trained, and (perhaps, one day) licensed would make a crucial difference in the nation’s capacity to raise student performance dramatically.

—Marc Tucker is president and founder of the National Center on Education and the Economy and coeditor, with Judy Codding, of The Principal Challenge: Leading and Managing Schools in an Era of Accountability.