

How Principals and Teachers Perceived Their Superintendents' Leadership in Developing and Supporting Effective Learning Environments as Measured by the Superintendent Efficacy Questionnaire

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ABSTRACT

School systems across the nation are being challenged, not only by the public, but also by their own teachers and administrators to better prepare learners for the 21st century. Superintendents, in their role of leading the charge to transform schools into more effective learning environments, need to know how they can assist in the change process. This study explored the efficacy of school superintendents through the perceptions of 413 West Virginia K-12 superintendents, principals, and Nationally Board Certified teachers using the Superintendent Efficacy Questionnaire. This questionnaire was administered to examine whether there are differences in the three group's perception of the importance of six superintendent leadership components and whether there were differences in how teachers and principals perceive superintendents' efficacy in functioning in their leadership role. A Kruskal-Wallis non-parametric test demonstrated significant results. Sample t tests indicated there are no significant differences between teachers' perceptions of their superintendent and their respective principals' perspective of the superintendent. The research conclusions suggested superintendents should assist in the process of supporting the development of effective learning environments by clearly articulating a vision and a mission that establishes direction and priorities for the school system.

Introduction

The improvement of public education has become a centerpiece of America's political agenda. Starting with the National Commission on Excellence in Education's 1984 report, *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* (and more recently with the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001), policy makers have proposed significant reform in the public school system (Paine, 2006). Improvement in public education is a focus of both national and state politics. For example, a state initiative, 21st Century Skills, is driving improvement at West Virginia schools by introducing significant changes in the education system. The West Virginia State Board of Education has established a model framework for the 21st Century Skills. Three major components of the model are: strong core beliefs, system-wide strategies, and a system of continuous improvement (Paine, 2006). These components are commonalities among high-performing school systems and classrooms across the country (Shannon & Bylsma, 2007).

School systems are expected to embark on the development of improved learning environments that assist the learner moving into the 21st century. There is an expectation that the superintendent be responsible for leading this initiative by engaging in specific leadership roles requiring essential skill sets. One key responsibility for superintendents is that of the transformational leader in addition to being a visionary leader. Researchers have described transformational leadership as going beyond individual needs, focusing on a common purpose, addressing intrinsic rewards and higher psychological needs such as self-actualization, and developing commitment with and in the followers (AASA, 1986; Bass, 1985; Bennis & Nanus, 1985; Coleman & La Roque, 1990; Kirby, Paradise, & King, 1992; Leithwood, 1992; Leithwood & Jantzi, 1990; Leithwood, Dart, Jantzi, & Steinbach, 1991; Sergiovanni, 1989; 1990). The visionary leader sets the tone and direction, describes the future, and "wins people over so that they want to do what needs to be done" (Chynoweth, 2008). Recent research has expanded on the roles superintendents are being expected to play and skill sets that are necessary for leaders to work successfully with staff, in order to assist in developing the effective learning environments needed for students to be successful (Siccone, 2011).

Background

In July 1966, Coleman reported in *The Equal Educational Opportunity survey*, that family background was a major determinant of student achievement (Lezotte, n.d.). This report led to the creation of compensatory educational programs that dominated school improvement and fueled the Effective Schools Movement (Lezotte, n.d.), which supported the belief that all children could learn, and that schools controlled the factors necessary to assure student mastery. This prompted an examination of the importance of the superintendent as the school system leader in the implementation of effective programming in each district school.

Many voices and programs were introduced in regards to training or influencing superintendents toward the role of developing effective learning environments in which all students could learn. One voice came from the business community, which had growing input on how a school system should operate. Some business leaders wanted a more businesslike approach to education—schools to turn out better workers. However, other community leaders noted that because some emerging leaders (former business or military leaders) had not practiced

their skills in the schools, had not taught, nor had they served in the capacity of the principal; these individuals often lacked an understanding and knowledge of education as a learning experience. Others were so concerned about accountability and meeting production goals that they forgot about the students. Because of the confusion as to the purpose of education, some of the leadership approaches in vogue at the turn of the 21st century diminished learning opportunities for many students (Ravitch, 2007).

Education research began to demonstrate that it is critical for the superintendent to help develop and support effective learning environments to ensure the success of each learner (Johnson, 2008). Today, superintendents, expected to serve in an ever-expanding role, are exposed to criticism for the role they play or should play. Superintendents are often unprepared to perform the primary function of promoting an effective learning environment because of their inexperience and prior training, or because the expectations for superintendents are unclear. In that regard, one might consider the knowledge and experience necessary for the superintendent to accomplish this charge within the school system, and insist on preparation and training in education as a prerequisite for success. In fact, some have suggested that instructional management that improves student performance may be the most important form of leadership facing school leaders today (Cuban, 1985). Preparation programs have begun to change to prepare superintendents for this role. Even private programs have come into play in support of the changing role of the superintendent. For the education community, preparing future leaders as superintendents continues to be a crucial part of the process of developing an effective learning environment for all students (Waters & Marzano, 2007). The research presented examines the question: what is the critical role for the superintendent to play in the development of effective learning environments where all students succeed?

Developing an Effective Learning Environment

The superintendent's role in developing an effective learning environment evolved from three previous roles: (a) the "teacher", who informs newly elected school board members of their responsibilities while helping the community understand district priorities, (b) the "manager", who maximizes the use of available resources and maintains organizational stability through a variety of processes—from managing finances and personnel to planning program development, implementation, and accountability, and (c) the "politician" (Cuban, 1985).

"Schools depend on the effectiveness of school superintendents" (AASA, 1993). Leadership of school districts is no longer a top-down operation. Shared decision-making among teachers, administrators, service employees, community members, and businesses is crucial for creating and sustaining a successful school system. Leadership must be effective at all levels, including in the classrooms (Kowalski, 2010). Developing an effective learning environment requires embracing what has worked in the past in addition to embarking on new actions that will involve all stakeholders in understanding the importance of what it takes to ensure that students learn (Price, 2009). Superintendents must be skilled collaborators and knowledgeable educators who look for assistance within the educational and business community to make schools work.

Superintendents, as the chief executive, must continue to "lead through teaching" (Cunningham, 1985). The thought that directives starting at the top will bring about change is a myth. Top-down leadership does not generate inventiveness and resourcefulness within the

supporting system. In order for change to take place, leaders must be present throughout the entire system (Ogawa & Bossert, 1995). Bennis and Nanus (1985) stated, "Leading involves getting everyone to pursue a shared mission." Superintendents simply cannot rely solely on making good decisions to promote leadership that will result in developing effective learning environments (Cohen & March, 1989).

Edmonds (1979) identified in the *Correlates of Effective Schools* what is needed for schools to be successful. He believed that effective schools (no matter the location or the neighborhood) require that student achievement be a focus of the entire school, not just of principals and teachers.

The superintendent, working in concert with the school principal, establishes a shared vision of what an effective learning environment should resemble for each school. This task also needs to be accomplished with teachers, support staff, and board members in concert with the educational goals of the school and district (Barth, 2006). The educational goals of the district include the shared vision the superintendent has for the future of the district and student learning within the schools. The mission and goals of the district are to be established to maximize resources and personnel toward developing an effective learning environment and to support district staff in reaching the superintendent's shared vision (Shannon, 2007).

The Visionary Leader

The quality of America's schools depends on the effectiveness of school superintendents. The superintendent position requires a bold, creative, and energetic visionary who can adapt to social change and diverse school populations (AASA, 1993). The role of the visionary leader, within the construct of an effective environment for student learning, is integral (Elmore, 2000). Current research studies have found that visionary leaders attracted more followers, especially in times of crisis or change (Halevy, Berson, & Galinsky, 2011). The superintendent plays this visionary role in school improvement and the development of effective schools through his or her partnership with the school principal.

Many challenges need to be addressed from within as well as from outside the school system. The superintendent, as visionary leader, plays a major role in developing an effective learning environment. When a school district embarks on a mission to create an effective learning environment, the superintendent, working with all the stakeholders, must be the agent of change within the system. As the leader, it is paramount that the superintendent's role is one that promotes relationships that foster a sense of trust and cooperation among all of the stakeholders (Barth, 2006).

As a means to the end—reaching the vision through implementation of the mission, strategic planning is crucial to enhancing learning and teaching in an educational organization. Anticipating future trends is crucial to superintendents who want to stay current with the latest research on educational reform. Synthesizing information contributes to the superintendent's decision-making process. Establishing priorities within the strategic planning process empowers individuals and groups to participate in the goals of the organization. Again, once the vision and mission are created, priorities established, the educational community must be involved to plan and organize the work. This type of strategic planning process enables superintendents to frame

and solve problems in alignment with the organization's shared vision and helps lead all staff toward improving instructional environments (AASA, 1993).

Superintendent Efficacy: Teacher, Principal and Superintendent Perceptions

To understand the leadership efficacy of today's superintendent, a recent study was conducted to examine the perceptions of principals and teachers in regards to superintendent behaviors and actions. The focus was on how teachers and principals perceived their superintendents as leaders charged with building an effective learning environment. Many teachers believe that teachers are too far removed from the decision-making process and yet are asked to implement teaching strategies that they do not fully support (Rallis, Tedder, Lachman, & Elmore, 2006). Many teachers also believe that administrators do not fully understand the classroom and that the teachers know how to best meet the needs of the students (Breux & Whitaker, 2006). There is a conflict between what superintendents and administrators think works and what teachers believe they know works. How to bridge the gap is the genesis of the research that was conducted on perceived superintendent's leadership behaviors.

For assessing the leadership quality of K-12 school superintendents, a variety of criteria exist (Doh, 2003). However, any assessment used needs to consider various perspectives that impact the overall perceptions of the superintendent's efficacy: (a) the superintendent's self-perception of his or her efficacy, (b) the principals' perceptions of their superintendents' efficacy, and (c) the teachers' perceptions of their superintendents' efficacy. The Devono study (2010) assessed the leadership behaviors of the superintendent and explored the role of the superintendent in developing effective learning environments based on the perceptions of superintendents, teachers, and principals.

The responsibilities of the superintendent lie within the political realm of the school board, the social realm of the community, and the pedagogical realm of teaching and learning. The position of the superintendent is complicated by the interaction of the three realms in undertakings related to curriculum mandates, community needs based on social and business concerns, and the issue of how to staff and pay for the basic necessities that have become expectations of the public school in America (Devono, 2010). The purpose of the Devono study was to examine how superintendents, principals and teachers perceived the superintendent behaving in the role of the chief executive.

Methodology

Research Questions

1. Research Question #1 (RQ1): How do superintendents', principals', and teachers' perceptions differ with respect to the relative importance of multiple roles required of effective superintendents? The null hypothesis (H_0) and alternative hypothesis (H_a) for RQ1 are as follows:

H₀: There is not a statistically significant difference in the perceptions of superintendents', principals', and teachers' perceptions with respect to the relative importance of multiple roles required of effective superintendents.

H_a: There is a statistically significant difference in the perceptions of superintendents', principals', and teachers' perceptions with respect to the relative importance of multiple roles required of effective superintendents.

2. Research Question #2 (RQ2): Is there a statistically significant difference when comparing teachers' perceptions of their superintendent with the perceptions of their respective supervising principal?

H₀: There is no statistically significant difference when comparing teachers' perceptions of their superintendent with the perceptions of their respective supervising principal.

H_a: There is a statistically significant difference when comparing teachers' perceptions of their superintendent with the perceptions of their respective supervising principal.

Participants

The sample for the study consisted of superintendents, teachers, and principals from the state of West Virginia. Fifty-four of the 55 superintendents represented the county public school districts in the state were asked to participate in this survey study that measured the participants' perception of superintendent efficacy.

At the time of the study, 360 teachers in the state of West Virginia had achieved National Board Certification. This group of teachers was selected because of the rigors to attain National Board and to determine their perception of staff development to effect change within the classroom. "National Board Certified Teachers raise student achievement and are committed to improving their schools" (Aguerrebere, 2008).

The third group of participants who participated in the study consisted of approximately 700 principals in West Virginia's public schools at the elementary, middle, and high school levels. The survey assessed principals' views on their superintendents' ability to affect change within the school and classroom.

Sampling Procedures

The following cross tabulations inform the general make-up of respondents' group membership. They are not, however, intended to inform a priori group comparisons.

Two hundred and seventy-one (66%) of the respondents were female and 142 (34%) were male. The largest group of respondents was principals (59%), followed by teachers (31%) and superintendents (10%). Superintendents had the largest response rate (79.6%). Nationally Certified Teachers' response rate (35%) was quite similar to that of principals (34.8%).

Three hundred and eighty-nine participants (94%) held a master's degree at the time of the study. All principals and superintendents who participated in the study held a master's or doctoral degree; most teachers who responded held a master's degree. Strictly by role, principals (N = 245 or 59%) comprised the largest group of respondents.

Each potential participant was assigned a pseudo-random identifier number to help ensure anonymity and an email was sent to all individuals requesting participation in the study. Teacher participants were asked to complete an online survey using *SurveyMonkey* (SurveyMonkey.com, 1999) that assessed their views of superintendent efficacy.

Each superintendent was asked by email to submit survey responses anonymously via *SurveyMonkey*. Each survey had a code affixed to protect the anonymity of each participant. The local county school district was excluded from the study because the researcher serves as Superintendent of Schools in that county.

A list of approximately 700 principals was requested from the West Virginia Department of Education. Each principal was asked through email to participate by completing the online *survey*. Each principal was assigned a number, which designated his or her programmatic assignment: high school, middle school, or elementary school. Local principals did not participate in this study. Since the researcher professionally knew all of the superintendents within the state, the invitation to take the survey carefully explained to respondents how their anonymity was to be assured through *SurveyMonkey*.

Instrumentation

The combination of the researcher's personal knowledge of the superintendent's responsibilities in addition to the scholarship relative to the knowledge of the historical, political, and organizational roles of the superintendence, guided the composition and selection of questions for the *Superintendent Efficacy Questionnaire*. The questions developed were designed to measure superintendent efficacy and perceptions with respect to leadership components from a research-based theory of leader behavior framework (Bass & Bass, 2008). The survey may serve as a tool to clarify strengths and limitations of leadership theory, thereby helping to connect theory and practice of leadership principles in K-12 schools.

The review of the literature affirmed that the leadership style and primary roles of the superintendent should address curriculum and teaching and what needs to be done to create an effective learning environment. The components of the *Superintendent Efficacy Questionnaire* were designed to measure the superintendent's perception about how he or she impacted the learning environment within the classroom.

The *Superintendent Efficacy Questionnaire* is comprised of six assessment sections and a narrative option. However, for purposes specific to this article, only four sections are reviewed. Respondents indicated their level of agreement with the survey statements on a Likert-type scale (Likert, 1961). The areas measured addressed the following competencies:

1. The superintendent's ability to assess staff development needs and the impact of professional development on teaching and learning in the classroom. Within this subscale, participants responded to statements regarding their superintendent's:
 - a. Awareness of teachers', administrators', and staff development needs.
 - b. Ability to adequately assess teachers', administrators', and staff development needs. They also indicated their level of agreement with a statement declaring that staff development results in improved teaching and learning within the classroom.

2. The superintendent's ability to plainly articulate a clear vision and mission that establishes priorities for the county school system. This subscale asked the participant to rank his or her level of belief that:
 - a. The district has a mission statement.
 - b. The superintendent clearly articulates the mission statement to school district personnel, students, and the community served.
 - c. The mission statement sets a direction for the school system and helps to clarify priorities.

3. The superintendent's knowledge of curriculum and teaching. This subscale addressed the superintendent's demonstration of his or her knowledge of curriculum and how curriculum and teaching is practiced in the classroom, as well as whether the superintendent guides curriculum and teaching to enhance learning in the classroom. Finally, this subscale asked participants about their perception of the superintendent's impact on curriculum and teaching within the school district.

4. The superintendent's demonstration of a leadership style that builds consensus within the schools and local community. This subscale asked the participant to rank his or her level of belief that:
 - a. The superintendent has an effective leadership style.
 - b. The superintendent's leadership style builds consensus among teachers, administrators, and the community.
 - c. The superintendent's leadership style matches well with the needs of the school district.

Instrumentation Reliability

Cronbach's alpha coefficient for internal consistency reliability was calculated for the *Superintendent Efficacy scale* and subscales. Calculation for overall reliability of the survey yielded a Cronbach alpha of 0.972, indicating that respondents consistently responded to the survey questions.

Data Analysis

The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) was used for data analyses. Descriptive statistics were used to describe the sample's demographics. Descriptive analyses for

the study made use of participants': (a) programmatic level—elementary, middle, high, district (implicit for superintendent role); (b) sex—female, male; and (c) education level—bachelors, masters, doctoral.

Research Question 1 (paraphrased: whether there existed a significant difference in how superintendents, teachers, and principals perceive the relative importance of the components that comprise leadership efficacy among superintendents) was analyzed using the Kruskal-Wallis non-parametric test to compare rankings. This test is the non-parametric corollary to the more conventionally used Analysis of Variance, which is dependent upon the assumptions that all the populations being compared are normally distributed and that the population variances are equal. The Kruskal-Wallis non-parametric test does not restrict the populations under comparison to those that have normal distributions and equal variances (Bluman, 2007). The independent variable, role, had three levels: superintendent, principal, and teacher. The dependent variable was the participants' scores on the *Superintendent Efficacy Questionnaire*. The level of significance was set a priori at the conventional $\alpha = 0.05$. The test determined whether there existed a significant difference in how superintendents, teachers, and principals perceive the relative importance of the components that comprise leadership efficacy among superintendents.

Research Question 2 (paraphrased: compare teachers' and principals' perceptions of their superintendents) was analyzed using a related samples *t*-test to compare teachers' and principals' perceptions of their superintendents. The dependent variable was the participants' scores on the *Superintendent Efficacy Questionnaire*; the independent variable was role, with two levels—teacher and principal. Since multiple teachers corresponded to each principal, the mean average of teachers' ratings for their respective superintendent was used as a single score.

To ensure anonymity of responses, a random group identifier was assigned to each county: A-Z was used, followed by AA, BB, CC, and DD. The data was then sorted by county and ordered by number sequenced by school to determine that those teachers and principals responding were from the same school assignment. All the superintendents' responses were removed. A total of 23 principal-to-teacher matches in the same school location were found. The null hypotheses were tested at the 0.05 level.

Results

Superintendents' perception of the most important role for developing an effective learning environment was demonstrated by their top two rankings of the leadership components—to articulate a mission and consensus building. Ranking first by superintendents was vision and mission articulation, from which purpose and goals for the school system are established. This initiative articulates the priorities and needs to the staff as identified by the superintendent—the CEO of the organization (Rallis et al., 2006). Superintendents perceived articulating a mission to be more important than building consensus with the school district staff. Without articulating the mission and cooperatively working with the school board, superintendents perceived that it would be difficult to accomplish goals.

Principals expected the superintendent to articulate the district mission to ensure that each school was moving in a similar direction. The superintendents' and principals' perceptions of effectiveness were closely aligned. Principals have more of an opportunity to collaborate and work directly with the superintendent and are considered to be a part of the administrative team. Superintendents usually meet, at least monthly, with principals, providing direction and

expressing expectations (articulation of mission) of what the superintendent hopes is accomplished. This may be a reason the superintendent and principal responses were more closely aligned and why systemic change targeting continuous improvement manifests certain key elements with strong leadership being foremost (Armstrong 2003).

Consensus building is the leadership component that superintendents ranked second in importance. Superintendents understand that building consensus is important because if they do not have the support of the staff, it is unlikely change will occur in the classroom (Dufour, Eaker, & Dufour, 2008). "If subordinates or people in general know that they genuinely have easy access to their leader, they tend to view the leader in a more positive, trustworthy light" (Phillips, 1992).

Additionally, the survey results indicated that principals and teachers identified curriculum knowledge and consensus building as important. These two items, with one ranking of separation when comparing principals' and teachers' rankings, were similar. It is important for principals and teachers to have a good working relationship through consensus building. When curricula initiatives were presented at the school level, these programs needed the support of the instructional staff that will be implementing these ideas. The superintendent allocates staff and presents educational opportunities to teachers to foster a creative learning environment. With infrastructure in place it becomes the responsibility of the building administrator to supervise teaching and learning (Johnson, 1996).

Narrative statements from the study indicated that if a superintendent wanted "buy in" from staff as educational initiatives were introduced, teachers needed to be included in the decision-making process. One way for superintendents to build consensus with teachers and principals is to include teachers and principals in the decision-making process through professional learning communities. Empowering professionals through such efforts enhances the opportunity for principals and teachers to be directly involved at both the county and school level (DuFour, 2008).

The superintendent, teacher, and principal perception comparisons, in regards to the relative importance of leadership components, were established (Devono, 2010). The study and the survey data produced a statistically significant result for one leadership component: the superintendent's ability to clearly articulate a vision and a mission that established direction and priorities for the system. The results of the research suggested that leadership does play a part in the importance of the superintendent's ability to articulate a clear vision and mission (Devono, 2010).

It should also be noted that a second leadership component was marginally close to being statistically significant: The superintendents' ability to assess staff development needs and the impact of professional development on teaching and learning in the classroom. Thus having a clear sense of direction and being able to influence those who are going to carry out the vision and mission of the school is important in creating effective learning environments. The superintendent must also establish priorities that clearly define a path. The superintendent should envision a school that provides children with the educational tools to seize opportunities to be successful in a global arena (AASA, 1993).

Discussion

School reform is arduous. Though a few superintendents and a few schools have been successful with school reform, many more find it difficult to bring about the changes needed. A strong superintendent can support change by examining the districts needs, proposing solutions, and supporting and inspiring teachers and principals who are committed to implementing changes to improve school (Johnson, 1996). However, the main roles suggested for the superintendent from experience and educational research focuses on the need for a visionary leader (Chynoweth, 2008).

As instructional staffs throughout the country are retooling, superintendents will need to be aware of what teachers and administrators believe most influence change in the classroom. This study shed light on one superintendent leadership component, as perceived by teachers and principals as the most important. It can help educators understand the superintendent's ability to influence change in the classroom through, articulating a vision and mission, staff development administration, collaborating with the school board, demonstrating knowledge of curriculum and teaching, and working with principals and teachers to bring about change.

Conclusion

This research study explored school superintendent efficacy through the perceptions of superintendents, teachers, and principals. Utilizing survey research methods, the study addressed whether differences exist in the three group's perception of the relative importance of six superintendent leadership components and whether there were differences in how teachers and their respective principals perceive their superintendents' overall efficacy with respect to the leadership components. The sample for the study consisted of superintendents, principals, and Nationally Board Certified teachers from across the state of West Virginia. Limitations of the study included the use of an instrument that had not been validated, and the fact that self-reporting is subject to influence by confounding factors. The research aimed to illuminate the strengths and limitations of leadership theory by examining the strengths and limitations of the survey instrument that was developed around that theory.

The research suggested that the superintendent must play several roles to successfully bring about change and must rely on the stakeholders within the school building to effectively impact the learning environment and education within the classroom. Superintendents cannot create an effective learning environment alone or develop one model that works well in all contexts. When the superintendent establishes a relationship with the administrators in the schools, leadership autonomy is often encouraged among principals. As the superintendent encourages the administrators to assume a more proactive leadership responsibility, he or she is also encouraging the principal to embrace the established goals of the board and superintendent and in the process; effective learning environments are improved for students (Waters & Marzano, 2007).

Helping superintendents to effectively manage the leadership role requires preparation and training that incorporates an historical role review, current research, staff and community input, all coupled with real-world experiences. The new "role" of the superintendent is not a skill set that is addressed in formal schooling, but is embedded in a superintendent's routine

negotiating of the demands of different groups within the community while meeting the needs of students and school reform demands. Bjork and Kowalski (2005) identified this practice as the “art of the possible.” In order for the superintendent to play out his primary role of visionary leader and to facilitate effective learning environments, efforts must be made to prepare and equip future leaders with the skills necessary for success.

The superintendent is a teacher who balances political concerns and creates a management style that encourages participation by all stakeholders (Kowalski, 2010). This leader must know the mission and goals of the organization and constantly teach them to the members of the organization. An indication of a successful leader is when each teacher or administrator embraces the organization’s goals and implements those goals and objectives within their own workspaces (Cunningham, 1985). If the primary purpose is to educate children in the most effective learning environment, then the role of the superintendent must be one of a leader who sets the tone and direction of a shared vision delivered from someone who has listened to and articulates the desires and beliefs of principals and teachers from within the school system under his or her charge. The collaborative effort of superintendents, principals and teachers can lead to developing effective learning environments for all students, especially when, as perceived by principals and teachers, superintendent’s play the role of the visionary leader effectively.

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