

## **Can Today's Superintendents be both Instructional Leaders and Community Leaders?**

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### **Abstract**

This study addresses the question whether today's school superintendent can be both an instructional leader and a community leader? Early documents were investigated to secure an accurate timeline and perspective concerning how the role of a school superintendent has evolved since its earliest development. Findings from twelve contemporary studies were included because of their insight into the issue, as well as four early leadership practices to assist today's superintendents in managing instructional and community matters.

*Keywords:* superintendent, community leadership, instructional leadership, boards of education

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When considering the extent to which school superintendents can be both instructional leaders and community leaders in today's complex society, it is easy to overlook the fact that public schools in the USA were first developed by local communities. In fact, one needs to search no further than the first school law created in 1642 by the General Court of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. It is commonly known that this law gave community selectmen the right to fine any family 100 shillings (5 pounds) that did not provide education for their children. The community's influence was aimed at children acquiring reading skills for the purpose of memorizing religious content and local laws. For these laypersons, this emphasis was a logical way to becoming a contributing member of the community. Any details needed to carry out that law, such as how much to pay the schoolmaster, the length of time in service, and caring for the school's modest structure was also decided during community meetings.

As communities grew larger so did the desire for education to become a legal function of the state. Subsequently, one of the most critical additions was the creation of a state “superintendency” position first implemented in 1812 in Buffalo, New York followed by Louisville, Kentucky. This individual’s duties focused on the inspection of schools, the collection of educational statistics, the appropriation of state funds, and basically any other onsite task deemed important by community leaders. One example of early responsibilities can be found in the *Third Annual Report of the Superintendent of Common Schools in the State of New York* (1824). The document’s introduction makes it very clear that although the 68 pages of written text was filled with ominous statistics such as the number of school districts in the state, and the months each school was in session it “afforded the only accurate means of knowing the wants of the people, and effecting a judicious distribution of funds” (p. 285).

As the state’s superintendent’s function expanded with an increasingly larger number of schools, it became obvious that communities needed additional leadership. Soon after, the majority of the states added the role of “county superintendency.” This role was elected by popular vote for the primary purpose to supervise rural schools and address local community concerns. A comprehensive list of names, previous roles, and titles for each state were prominently listed in the *Journal of Education* entitled, “County Superintendents” (1906). The names of each state’s county superintendent were also identified in papers delivered at yearly state education meetings, and later published in the *Journal of Education* under the title of “Units of School Administration” (1913). It is logical to assume that these listings were used by community members serving on Boards of Educations when soliciting names of individuals to fill vacant administrative positions.

It was not until the mid-1800s that larger school districts added a position often entitled, “school superintendent for common schools” (Cubberley, 1920). This new occupation was not a function of the state legislature, but instead a leadership position developed to address local community and city concerns. In fact, before 1850 only a small number of schools employed a school superintendent. However, by 1890 nearly all cities in the USA had employed an individual to fill this role. This became obvious with the renaming and reorganizing of leadership offices cited in early copies of the *Journal of Education*. At that time, the journal regularly identified the names of individuals in each state’s leadership role. For example, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania the *Office of Superintendent of Common Schools* in 1857 was changed to the *Superintendent of Public Instruction*, and in that same year the Pennsylvania School Department was made a separate and distinct department of the state government (“City Superintendents,” 1899, p. 374). Like today, distinct titles gave credence to one’s leadership status within the community.

### **Striking a Balance**

One of the great differences from the earlier leadership role and today’s administrative position rests in the fact that school boards of the late 1800s tended to be very large with some cities having several hundred laypersons serving on subcommittees (Draper, 1895). There was a general expectation that a city superintendent would leave the business part of the schools to the board members, and he would only oversee the instructional side of the schools. Early tasks for superintendents throughout the late 1800s were often “meager” in authority and frequently dependent on the Boards’ willingness to invite the Superintendent to meetings where budget expenditures were discussed and/or managed (“Boards of Education and Superintendents,” 1917,

p. 237). Subsequently, there was a general agreement in cities such as Kansas City that “There is not a school superintendent in the county who would not gain by a clearer definition of his relations to the community (“Boards of Education and Superintendents,” 1917, p. 242).

This lack of immediate authority and open communication was easy to understand given that history clearly identifies the importance of the community as a major driving force behind the expansion of public education. Up until this time, community members were solely responsible for identifying what they wanted to be taught, what resources would be used, who would teach the content and the length of time of the school year. This was especially apparent since formal training aimed at the superintendent’s position had not yet been created, and this limitation continued until a significant body of literature emerged in the early 1900s.

Most respected is the work of Ellwood Cubberley (1868-1941) who defined the role of a superintendent as being the “chief executive of schools” in his article entitled, *The School Superintendent* (1915). His viewpoint gained widespread support, and by 1925 other books and journals on the topic of school administration echoed his definition. As a result, by 1920 the numbers of laymen serving on a school board decreased to a mere nine to fifteen members consisting of parents, and local citizens, and their terms in office were often regulated to serve a briefer time period. The process of which the business manager of the Board of Education and the superintendent both reported to the Board was altered to the one-person leadership model.

Consequently, urban communities seeking to hire a superintendent began paying between \$6,000 to as much as \$12,000 in other major cities. Editorials reflecting the status of the school superintendent were published that specifically urged the community “to emphasize the value and dignity of the office of superintendent of public education and to furnish the conditions that make for effective untrammelled service” (“The Status of the School Superintendent,” 1905, p. 494). Some Boards of Education advocated for the superintendent’s role to have more authority by sometimes comparing it to that of a doctor who supervises medical students for the good of the patient. Others began viewing large school districts as having a basic business model where the superintendent was in charge of running the business. Thoughts such as these were published and republished in newspapers and educational journals. The primary role would be to manage the school’s business and financial interests and to “devise methods of impersonal tests, reports, statistics, and charts so to know the achievement and efficiency of each teacher and school” (“Searching for a Superintendent,” 1916, p. 626).

In addition, cities such as Cleveland Ohio stressed the need for a superintendent to propose on-going plans for the board’s consideration in order to assure a “continuous policy of public education for the purpose of carrying the community forward” (“Searching for a Superintendent,” 1916, p. 627). Hereafter, school districts of all sizes began to favor this one-person executive model that is essentially the same as practiced today.

### **Changing Community Responsibilities**

When identifying the key work performed by school superintendents in the early 1900s, Gay (1907) wrote that these individuals have many qualities in common. From his perspective, most have substantial experience, they exhibit a strong work ethic and they have high expectations of their teacher’s work ethic. There is a tendency to avoid large challenges because they strive for peaceful solutions and they are “slow to confess when either the schools or the teachers are in the wrong” (p. 454). They do not hesitate to work with all socioeconomic groups

within the community, and “they treat the rich and poor, weak and powerful, teacher and parent, with equal courtesy” in a gentleman like manner (p. 454).

Gay (1907) also noted that superintendents differ in the emphasis that they place on certain elements of their work. Specifically, the amount of time devoted to implementing rules and regulations, or allocating time for increased academics and instruction versus the need for a healthy body and training, and spending one’s time on academic programs versus finances. Gay’s analysis ended by conveying that “superintendents differ because they are men, and the Creator breaks his mold every time he makes a man” (p. 454). This early 1900’s perspective reinforced the qualities of leadership that prevailed at that time, and they identify that it is the individual’s good judgment and choice whether to place emphasis on instructional matters or community matters.

By most accounts, this early established formula for educational leadership has been successful throughout the USA. This is most evident in the abundance of educational research that now exists to which school leaders can, for example, investigate a new form of data collection, use new forms of social media to communicate events district-wide or appraise the validity of a specific instructional strategy to assess each school’s academic accomplishments. However, the number of multifaceted decisions for a superintendent and his or her leadership team is totally unlike any of our early leadership practices. Therefore, it is important to question if superintendents can be *both* instructional leaders and community leaders in today’s complex society? To do so the following offers a brief review of current literature to help address this question. It also identifies several suggestions that were used to assist our country’s earliest school superintendents when balancing the business, instructional, and the community responsibilities, that should not be overlooked by today’s highest level of school administrator.

Wilmore (2008) emphatically states that a school district leader is “one who has the knowledge and ability to promote the success of all students by facilitating the development, articulation, and implementation of a school or district vision of learning that is supported by the school community” (p. 11). She speaks about having a vision as the necessary attribute for all superintendents. Wilmore elaborates to say that superintendents must develop a district vision, articulate the district vision, implement the district vision, and act as a good steward of the district vision. These four actions are necessary for on-going success. First, a district vision should serve as the main focus or benchmark by which all decision making should be measured. If a clear district vision is not apparent or understood by the community, the superintendent may end up managing the district rather than moving the district forward. The authors of this article agree with Wilmore that “once the district vision has been developed, the next step is to articulate it effectively both inside the district and outside in the greater school community” (p. 17). Since communication is a key component, the superintendent is not only an instructional leader but also a community leader. Second, when implementing the district vision, superintendents “should be responsible for being the facilitators of ensuring that each research-based process gets done efficiently and effectively” (p. 18). Third, while the author links the word steward with a religious connotation, reflective assessment is one way of being a good steward of the vision. Finally, the author recognizes that promoting community involvement in the district vision may be challenging at times. Wilmore concludes that “superintendents, and all educators, must continue to be good stewards of the vision and articulate the vision effectively even when times are tough” (p. 20).

Curtis Brewer (2011) prepared an article identifying school leaders as political strategists reviewing William Boyd’s contributions to the understanding of the political nature of school

leadership. This study addressed the politics of leadership within the historical context of the 1970s, 1980s, and into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Brewer highlights the 1980s stating that “Boyd paid close attention to what educational leaders did, and argued strongly what they ought to be doing during this time period” (p. 456). Based upon his findings, Boyd stated that leaders, both principals, and superintendents should be adapting and developing new practices within the school and at the same time should be developing relationships outside of the school to build public confidence. This emphasis on public confidence is especially important when contemplating whether today’s principal and superintendent can be both an instructional leader and a community leader.

Pascopella’s (2011) study entitled, “Look, Listen, Learn – Advice for New Superintendents About to Start Their Jobs” used scenarios to highlight effective practices for superintendents. He used Richmond Virginia Public Schools, Durham (N.C.) Public Schools, Aurora Colorado Public Schools, and St. Paul, Miss, Public Schools as settings for his scenarios. In Richmond, the superintendent advised new superintendents to become savvy communicators within the school and community. Transparency was the personal legacy for the superintendent in Durham, emphasizing that one must balance your time to serve the community. In Aurora, Colorado, the superintendent reached out to the community and conducted a 90-day listening tour with stakeholders developing goals and objectives. The superintendent’s advice included developing a strategic plan that is easily understood and then review the data monthly so that it remains a “living and breathing enterprise” (p. 68). Finally, in St. Paul the superintendent advised new superintendents that your core values should be aligned to a quality education for all students. As a result, the passage of a \$30 million six-year referendum, which included programs and services for schools and students, came about after fostering effective community relations. Based on the scenarios and their outcomes Pascopella’s findings demonstrate ways that a superintendent can be both an instructional leader and community leader, and in each scenario, he stressed the need for administrators to engage the community throughout the planning process.

Petersen (2002) performed a correlation and regression analysis illustrating a statistically significant relationship between superintendent vision and the factors of organizational mission, program and personnel evaluation, principal decision-making, and school board /community involvement. His findings indicated that involvement of professional educators and members of the community in formulating educational programs significantly affects the success of the district leader. To do so, the study’s questionnaire sample consisted of 55 school principals and 35 school board members. The results showed that the district’s organizational mission and school/board/community influence were significantly related to superintendent vision. Petersen concluded that the “superintendent’s articulated vision significantly influenced the organizational factors that were involved in the promotion of the instruction, and the importance of involving the community and the school board in the planning and formulating district goals cannot be overlooked” (pp. 165-166).

Jenkins (2007) completed a qualitative study to learn how one rural superintendent perceived community values, and the effect it had on his decision-making. He selected rural Oklahoma, where one superintendent retired after having worked in the same district for over forty years. The study focused on community values and how these values affected the decision-making process of the rural school superintendent. Whether it is ethical or moral, the values of this rural superintendent clearly indicate that he was an instructional leader and a community leader. The big idea presented in this study reinforces that “while rural school superintendents

should not look to the community for guidance on every decision, they would be wise to consider community values when making an ethical decision" (p. 32).

According to Polka and Litchka (2008), it is critical that an educational leader is provided with the necessary leadership skills, opportunities, resources, and support to better understand themselves and the dimensions of educational leadership in the twenty-first century (p. 168). From the author's standpoint, it is equally important that those same leaders can demonstrate commitment, control, creativity, and a caring attitude. The investigators/authors stressed the point that colleges and universities not only effectively and adequately prepare leaders for the twenty-first century; but, they must be instructed on how to deal with change particularly when it occurs within the community.

Spanneut and Ford (2008) revealed that superintendents must communicate their beliefs about what is important educationally concerning the roles they expect their principals to fulfill. The article presented a brief overview of a "guiding hand" approach to reinforce why a principal's instructional leadership is necessary for school success. Through this venue, a superintendent and principal can foster effective practices of instructional leadership. The investigators convey that effective superintendents "reinforce that principals must operate their schools efficiently, help the individual to invest in their own knowledge, and communicate this message to school district constituents – especially boards of education, district employees, students, and parents" (pp. 32-33). The investigators concluded that while some educators may not agree that it is not the superintendent's responsibility to "guide" the principal, one must not lose sight that for some principals having a superintendent monitor their progress can help the individual flourish, thus allowing them to be more effective instructional and community leaders.

The study by Bredeson and Kose (2007) presented a rather bleak scenario stating that "while superintendents are interested in curriculum, the daily realities of their work often subvert even the most committed professional" (p. 1). This study examined how the work of the school superintendent was affected over a ten-year period. The mixed-methods data revealed that superintendents are currently responding to new external demands for accountability through various curriculum and instruction priorities. There is a need for budget increases to support these priorities. They must give increased attention to data analysis, and they must make it a priority to hire skilled assistants to support their work. This reference validated the fact that superintendents want to be instructional leaders and accountability in the community is paramount. Persuasively answering the question of instructional leadership vs. community leadership, one must prioritize what really is important.

Lortie (2009) informed the reader that "superintendents and principals, particularly in compact suburban districts, are highly visible and highly accessible figures" (p. 47). The accountability issue runs from the top to the bottom of the governance and managerial structure; board members who govern schools live in the community and, as elected officials, are sensitive to the concerns of their neighbors. From the investigator's stance, both superintendents and principals must balance their priorities and perform the duties of instructional and community leaders. The decisions they make are not only reported by local newspapers, television channels, and radio stations but are regulated by state laws requiring transparency (Lortie, p. 47).

Langlois (2004) conducted research in Canada that focused on the importance of superintendents responding ethically, even in the most complex problem situations. "Questions can arise in the administrator's mind when he or she is confronted with complex situations or dilemmas, restrictions on behavior, matters involving the giving or withholding of consent or when the values being questionable" (p. 78). This statement supports the notion that a

superintendent should be a community leader. Validation and support from the political authority take place within the political hierarchy in Quebec. Values are discussed and transparency is stressed in the article; moreover, “values will be put forward and will also serve as a means for legitimizing the decisions by superintendents” (p. 85). In Canada, after the superintendent makes a decision, and if that decision is retained, he will then ask for complete support from the commissioner. While this process is not usual for superintendents in states such as New York, “their exercise of free will and commitment to personal authenticity and professional responsibility towards their school communities reveals a professional ethics with builds upon itself” (p. 89).

According to McClellan, Ivory, and Dominguez (2008), “changes in society have transformed the nature of the work of public school superintendents in the United States” (p. 346). The investigators identified three areas that influence the superintendent’s performance and address how they learn from their local stakeholders. The first change is the fact that “superintendents described their leadership in terms of working with and through others” (McClellan et al., p. 346). Secondly, organizational communication for today’s superintendents is more than communicating his or her perceptions and wishes to others; it is more relational, in which a variety of actors communicate their perspectives to one another. The third area related to superintendents and their influence incorporates a type of inter-professional leadership that leads logically to relational mentoring (McClellan et al.). This process involves instructional as well as community leadership. The participants in the study indicated that today’s role requires many hours of collaborating with parent associations, civic organizations, special interest groups, community business groups, and government entities. The concluding thoughts of this study indicated “that educational leadership today depends on relationships with actors who provide a variety of perspectives” (p. 357).

Portis and Garcia’s (2007) investigation reinforces that a superintendent should act as a change leader. The authors, with funding from the Stupski Foundation, examined five attributes for building a high-performing, equity-based school district: “a values-driven culture, clear instructional focus, leadership for success, accountability for results, and organizational and environmental capacity” (p. 9). These five attributes can be directly related to instructional leaders and community leadership. First, one of the most critical factors superintendents must process in leading reform is an aptitude for and the ability to manage change. “The superintendent’s understanding of the complexity of the change process is paramount as is his or her ability to create strategies to involve district staff, the board, the union and the community” (p. 4). If community members do not understand the need for the reform, “the effects of the change, and the time needed to implement the change, the reform efforts may waver or even fail, which will jeopardize the district’s mission and the superintendent’ job” (p. 4). The findings based upon the interviews of current superintendents conclude that change is inevitable, and superintendents can and should have the ability to be both instructional and community leaders.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

From the investigations cited in this study, it is interesting to note that most of the literature indicates both quantitatively and qualitatively that superintendents can be instructional leaders and community leaders, and it appears desirable to oversee and maintain both roles within one office. The review also supports that equal weight is given to both areas when

individuals are seeking either advanced licenses or degrees or professional development opportunities. Given this outcome, the following identifies one final scholarly position that emerged from the earliest time. It is included here because it may offer today's superintendent and school leader insight into in his or her contemporary role of both instructional leader and community leader.

The message communicated by Hatch (1901), in his article entitled "The Superintendent," gave one of the earliest insights into how assist superintendents can be both an instructional and a community leader despite much adversity and challenge. Most importantly it took into account the size of the school district which is a major factor when considering the myriad of responsibilities that superintendents have today. Concerning the instructional duties of the position, Hatch stressed the need for every teacher to feel the superintendent's presence even though it was not possible to get to know the strengths and practices of individual teachers, especially in large cities. He wrote that the superintendent of every city, whether large or small, "must influence in a greater or less degree each teacher in it, if not directly at least indirectly" (p. 183). This impact was possible by focusing on the conditions from which the teachers worked. These included giving attention to finding suitable sites for schools, proper lighting, ventilation, heating, preventing overcrowding, and obtaining suitable teacher resources referred to as "material appliances" (p. 183). These important factors are not unlike the concerns that teachers have today, and the importance of overseeing each school setting to create an inviting environment for learning is still very relevant.

Secondly, the superintendent must project a strong attitude and be insistent on only hiring trained teachers. Hatch's (1901) rationale was not based on the immediate needs of the student as discussed so often today, but because of a poorly trained teacher or one that is incompetent, greatly affects the efficiency of the school. As Hatch noted, once such teachers become part of the school "it is a herculean task to dislodge them" and most importantly, a better educated and professionally trained teacher "makes the work of every teacher who follows him easier and more successful" (p. 183). Insisting that principals only seek teachers having advanced degrees in the area that they are expected to teach strengthens the learning productivity of today's schools.

Hatch's (1901) third suggestion for superintendents focused on the need to know what is "going on in the educational world" to better judge the value of resources proposed before him. He suggested that the superintendent "consult freely with his principals, special teachers, grade teacher and give due weight to the opinions" of each group when deciding what resources to be purchased (p. 183). This suggestion sounds logical enough given the costs of new costly technology programs seemingly warranted today. However, Hatch warns that the wrong assumption of authority by a superintendent can result in teachers having to work with tools that "they would not have if they had a voice in their selection" (p. 183). This early consideration might also decrease some of the criticisms that superintendents receive today concerning wasteful spending.

The fourth and perhaps most critical suggestions focused on the superintendent's role when a teacher's behavior or competence is called into question by parents and/or the school board. Hatch (1901) goes on to say that it is the superintendent's attitude that will most strengthen or weaken a teacher's position, by giving too much "ear and countenance to criticism based on superficial or erroneous information" (p. 183). In these cases, Hatch conveys the need for the superintendent to ask the complaining parents to suspend their judgement until he can thoroughly investigate the accusations, at which time if the teacher is found guilty "he should be



guarded in his condemnation" (p. 183). The strength of Hatch's suggestion is to remind the superintendent how easy it is to be ingratiated by parents by giving a quick response to the situation. Hatch's point that "parents have their rights, pupils have theirs, and teachers have theirs, and it is the duty of the superintendent to set forth clearly when occasions arise; the relations that should exist between all" (p. 184). This reasoning might well be heeded by today's superintendents when balancing the wishes of community constituents.

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