School Board Presidents and Superintendents' Use of Transformational Leadership to Improve Student Outcomes

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Abstract

With the introduction of accountability to the educational setting, school superintendents and school boards experience a high sense of urgency improve student outcomes (Fullan, Hill, & Crevola, 2006). Transformational leadership has successfully been employed as the means to facilitate the process for educational and cultural change that results in improved outcomes (Fullan, 2007). The purpose of this article is to increase our understanding of the processes, practices, and relationships that enable school board superintendents and principals to work collaboratively together to improve student outcomes. Student outcomes improve as the educational culture of the school change. In addition to the need to build relationships between district CEO's and school boards, initiation, implementation, and incorporation are the key ingredients to transforming the educational culture of schools and consequently improve student outcomes. This article concludes by offering implications for school administrators and school board members.

Tucker noted that transformational leadership seeks to develop an emotional bond with subordinates, which serves as a source for authentic dialogue and a stimulus for productivity. This bond is achieved through empowerment of all stakeholders and by influencing their behavior by appealing to moral values and higher ideals of justice and equality (2004). Moreover, transformational leadership is more than creating a dialogue between leaders and stakeholders; it serves as motivation for all to achieve more for the expected good. In fact, within the context of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2001), school districts are mandated to increase standards of accountability and establish measurable goals to improve individual outcomes in education (Ausbrooks, 2012). Consequently, transformational leadership facilitates the process to impact a culture focused on systemic academic achievement as an expectation rather than an exception.

Similarly, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (2002) also requires all public schools that receive Title I funding to not only administer a statewide-standardized test annually to all students; but also to make Adequate Yearly Progress in test scores, with determined emphasis given to students in minority subpopulations. As district and campus administrators come to a realization of the demands of high stakes accountability, specifically the need to meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) on standardized test scores, educational practitioners are compelled to rethink approaches to teaching and learning (Ausbrooks, 2012) .

In a recently released report that offered a sweeping plan for reforming the state's education system, the Texas Association of School Administrators also calls for multiple measures of student assessment. *"Creating a New Vision for Public Education in Texas"* calls for fundamentally altering the way society thinks of public education's purpose and changing priorities from preparing students for the workforce to preparing them for success in life. A key recommendation is to shift from high-stakes standardized testing to multiple measures of student learning. In this report, it was noted that an unintentional outcome of high-stakes testing and the accountability system is the narrowing of the curriculum and the use of a punitive approach directed toward school districts that failed to meet AYP. For example, the superintendents who developed this report stated:

> The present accountability system has created schools in which the curriculum is narrowed and only academic abilities are valued. Students become expert test takers but cannot retain or apply what they "know" in a context other than the test environment; and creativity, problem solving, and teamwork are stifled. The punitive approach and "referee" model embraced by that system have hindered the success of students and schools. (Texas Association for School Administrator, 2012, p. 4)

According to the Texas Association of School Administrators (TASA, 2012), over three-fourths of the school districts in Texas (i.e., 859) that represent more than 4.3 million students have adopted [a] testing resolution opposing the over-reliance on high-stakes testing. The resolution, however, falls short of addressing those internal systems necessary for measuring organizational effectiveness. Admittedly, changing the organization's culture to one that expands capacity and continually transforms is one of the most difficulty leadership challenges.

According to Peter Senge (2006), learning organizations are organizations where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are

continually enhancing their capabilities to create what they want to create, [intentionally] learning to see the whole together. Using Katz and Kahn's (1966) definition and Hass and Drabek' s (1973) characteristics in his work on the art and practice of the learning organization, Senge argued for a learning organization of personal mastery, shared visions, and team learning.

However, unlike many businesses that are product focused, schools are people-centered organizations. Little is accomplished successfully in schools and districts without the involvement and support of those who have some stake in the organization. How well people work together towards achieving a common goal is inextricably linked to individual school and school district success and predicated on the strength of the relationships constructed within schools and with the various publics served (Kersten & Ballenger, 2012). Furthermore, research has shown that a positive relationship between a school board and superintendent has positive effects on a school district (Hall, 2008). Therefore, the purpose of this article is to increase our understanding of the processes, practices, and relationships that enable school board superintendents and principals to work collaboratively together to improve student outcomes.

Transformational Leadership

School transformation, as reflected in the roles of the school board and of superintendent, is a significant aspect of reform (Starratt, 2001). Due to societal changes and cultural implications on the academic environment, educational leadership of the school board and superintendent cannot be static but rather reforming and transforming. The educational leader has the responsibility to model the relevance of learning pursuits to participants in the learning environment. The perspective from which the educational leader performs will excel or impede student's readiness for the future. Accordingly, it becomes the task of the educational leaders to question and critically examine leadership practices if school transformation is realized (Starratt, 2001).

In recent years a shift in the perception of educational leadership has occurred. Bentz (2002) illustrated that in this shift "from working the land, to working at machines, to working in front of computer, has become more word centered and less thing centered" (p. 11). Kincheloe and Steinberg (1999) suggested that a move is taking place, "a post-formal way of thinking" (p. 55). Anderson (1996) advocated that the field of educational leadership "could support an emerging critical restructuring movement" (p. 962). No longer can the matter of educational leadership be conducted as business as usual; a better way, an alternative course of action must be investigated. Anderson supported a direction that affords a "better understanding [of] cultural politics and shifting our commitment to currently silenced groups in schools" (p. 962). In addition, Kowalski (1995) noted that superintendents realize the ill balance between their levels of authority and responsibilities and that of the powerful school board and community politics.

Additionally, the superintendent's duties have expanded to areas of specialization and accountability, including student learning outcomes. There has been a shift from school management to transformation leadership (Hoyle, Bjork, Collier, & Glass, 2005). Transformation leadership, as originally conceptualized by Burns (1978) and further developed by Bennis and Nanus (1985), Kanter (1983), and Rosener (1990), called school leadership to a higher form of leadership which included site based decision making (Hoyle, et al., 2005). As decision making included stakeholder participation and the empowerment of staff and teachers,

school leadership began to transform, impacting student learning and effective teaching (Gorton, Alston, & Snowden, 2007; Hoyle, et al., 2005).

Gorton et al. (2007) noted that transformational leadership includes three elements: a collaborative, shared decision-making approach, an emphasis on professionalism and empowerment, and an understanding of change. Hoyle, et al. (2005) acknowledged that the advantages of transformation leadership as motivational, inspirational, and the affirmation of the core values of the culture of the educational institution. Site-based decision making, as required by the Texas Legislature passing Texas Education Code Chapter 11 in 2010, provides increased transparency and the opportunity for stakeholder voice in the transformation of the education (Hickey, 2012). Transformational leadership is more than creating a dialogue between leaders and stakeholders; it serves as motivation for all to achieve more for the expected good. Transformational leadership embraces Jenlink's (2001) quest for new discovery and insight into educational leadership.

Hoyle et al. (2005) concluded transformation leadership is relationship oriented and helps individuals grow and improve. The employment of transformational leadership opens a path for superintendents and school boards to achieve and educational cultural change resulting in academic progress. The roles of the superintendent and the school board are clearly critical to change in practice (Fullan, 2007). Educational change, though complex, can be achieved. In this study, we will employ transformational leadership on the School Board Presidents and Superintendents' relationship to improve student outcomes.

Relationship Perspective

School leaders have long recognized the importance of relationships. Theorists such as Fullan (2004) and Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, and Wahlstrom (2004) highlighted the importance of a school leader's ability to work effectively with a broad spectrum of individuals. Others such as Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2005) identified relationship building as one of the key responsibilities of administrators and demonstrate how these leaders could succeed merely by being good managers who interacted reasonably well with others. Today, management alone is insufficient. Standards-based reform for large scale improvement of instructional practice and student performance often results in increased accountability for superintendents and principals (Elmore, 2000). School boards and superintendents are held much more accountable by local and state constituents than they used to be for improving student performance even though they are dependent on others for their success. School leaders alone cannot improve schools or increase student achievement. Thus, some of the leadership functions and activities must be distributed among multiple leaders who can assume many different roles in the organization according to their areas of expertise (Kersten & Ballenger, 2012). A few of those leaders include teacher leaders, school board members and presidents, assistant principals and central office administrators (Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2001). Just as important, school board presidents and superintendents must support each other and maintain productive relationships to work together to address shared goals.

Additionally, as a consequence of broad-based involvement needed to achieve organizational goals, an important element of school leader's success rests on his or her ability to build and sustain relationships with a wide array of multiple leaders, especially school board

presidents. Central to this effort is creating a school environment in which people work well together to change their approach to teaching and learning. This shift in thinking can be a huge challenge for school leaders, especially within the context of No Child Left Behind. We believe that making this shift calls for transformational leadership by both the school board president and the superintendent.

Transformational Leadership: The Process

The end result of transformational leadership is a process whereby stakeholders are motivated to succeed and achieve and bring forth the best in students and the educational institution. One wonders how this transformation is achieved. At the very heart of transformational leadership is the commitment of the leader make a change or produce transformation in the educational institution, moving from the mind-set of independence to interdependence and integration (Elbot & Fulton, 2008).

Fullan (2007) identified three phases for transformation or change: initiation, implementation, and incorporation. The initiation process includes the factors that "leads up and includes a decision to adopt or proceed with a change" (p.65). Transformational leadership seeks opportunities for change in order to grow the academic culture and improve student success. Quite often initiation is in response to legislative action at the state or national level. Examples of these are the No Child Left Behind at the national level and the implementation of the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR) testing in Texas (Hoyle, 2012). The unified commitment of the superintendent and the school board to these mandates impact the school culture and set the stage for student outcomes. Fullan (2001) asserted that the test of leadership is whether it rallies the commitment of stakeholders to investing their energies into action. Committed leadership communicates a shared vision in which stakeholders understand, accept, and commit themselves to actualization of the vision (Fullan, 2007). This decision-making process leads to strategic planning, which fosters participation (Fullan et al., 2006).

Engaging stakeholders is central to the implementation phase of transformation (Fullan, 2007). The time has come to put the changes into practice. It is imperative that the superintendent and the school board develop a foundation of trust from which stakeholders can experience empowerment through decision making. Duffy (2003) viewed "trust as the foundation for respect. Respect is considered to be the corner stone of professional influence. Influence is considered to be the essence of leadership" (p. 21). Conversely, Duffy observed that if there is no trust, then there is not respect and subsequently, no influence. Duffy maintained that through relationships, results emerge to the level that gains the confidence of others, especially school constituents and stakeholders. Authentic trust, noted Brewster and Railsback (2003), has the following elements of trustworthiness: reliability, competence, honest, and openness. Leadership builds upon the foundation of trust to engage in communication and collaboration. Knowledge of changes and participation in planning are the intentional marks of communication of information. The building of knowledge and skills has a transformative effect during the implementation phase, which promotes continuous quality improvement (Fullan et al., 2006).

While communication and collaboration are needed for implementation, they are critical to the continuation stage of transformation. The question that faces the superintendent and school

board is whether the changes should be continued, especially when local funding is require for sustainability (Fullan, 2007). Continuation is a critical phase in the transformation process. If continuation of changes is viewed harshly and negatively, then reforms die at the hands of those who retreat to an independent mind-set (Duffy, 2003). However, there exists the opportunity for the board and the superintendent to work as a team. This collaborative relationship provides insights, support, and authentic decisions that otherwise may remain undiscovered (Nielsen & Newton, 1997). Giving voice to all participants in the school board-superintendent relationship allows the uncovering of ideas and suggestions that have been buried at the hands of alienation or criticism (Duffy, 2003).

Furthermore, Hoyle (2002) staunchly fostered the notion that the leadership of the superintendent is the fulcrum upon which the success of the school rests. The superintendent and the school board persist in vision, growth, progress, and achievement. This leadership embraces teamwork and consensus building. Consensus is defined as "the process of crafting an agreement all team members will support" (Richards, 1997, p. 113). Consensus is a powerful process for pulling team members into common thinking and consequently, addresses the continuation of reforms. Transformational leadership builds community rather than competition. The end result is that stakeholders come to believe that they can make a difference in their school and in the academic outcomes of their students (Fullan et al., 2006).

Texas School Boards

The school community has as its ultimate decision making body the school board. The Texas Education Code (TEC) in Section 11.151 (a) states that the board of trustees in a school district, "as a body corporate have the exclusive power and duty to govern and oversee the management of the public schools of the district" (Texas Education Agency, 2010, p. 43). This code serves as the law that specifies the daily operation of the Texas schools to the school board and school personnel (Funkhouser, 2000). A challenge of school board members and superintendents is to respect the roles of each and function within the legal boundaries that define their relationship. Each possess a level of power, their authority work effective when it is exercised according to the TEC in Section 11.151 (a) and Section 11.201 (a) (2010).

At times the oversight of management by the school board, which includes the board's responsibility to adopt an educational vision with goals, adopt policies, develop plans and regulations, and implement operations, resulted in conflict. As reflected in the House Resource Organization, Bill Analysis, Tex. H.B. 2 563, 80th Legislature, the passage of the bill was to "clarify the precise roles of and relationships between district school boards and superintendents" (Adams, Bullard, & Graves, 2012, p. 30).

The Texas Legislature has taken intense interest in reforming the educational system, including roles of the board and superintendent. Since the late 1980s, the legislature shifted authority and responsibility back to the school district, often referred to as local control (Funkkhouser, 2000). In 1995 the legislature completed a reworking of the Texas Education Code, the first effort for educational overhaul since 1949. This revision of the code downsized the TEA and gave local districts and superintendents more independence. The TEA delineated in the TEC Subchapter D, Sections 11.151 through TEC 11.168 (Texas Education Agency, 2010). The rule clearly distinguishes the line of authority between the school board and the

superintendent. As ruled in the *Toyah Independent School District vs. Pecos-Barstow Independent School District* (1971), a school board trustee has power as a trustee only when participating in a legally called board meeting (Texas Education Agency, 2010). Therefore, though well meaning, school board member and superintendent are to function within the boundaries for which this law states.

The litmus test for educational leadership is considered to be whether relationships among stakeholders and leaders are sufficiently strong to address challenges in a manner that result in improvement (Donaldson, 2001). Furthermore, Richards (1997) contended that the relationship between the school board and superintendent is the most "critical factor that determines progress and the rate of success" (p. 85). Donaldson (2001) stated that this relationship is characterized by trust, openness, and affirmation. Michael Fullan (2001) asserted that relationships only exist if they make a difference. Respectful, working relationships are the only partnerships likely to produce the sustainable results (Duffy, 2003; Fulbright, & Goodman, 1999). This leadership by relationship must be operated in a web of connections that thrives on genuineness, authenticity, and care (Fullan, 2001).

The Superintendent and Learning Outcomes

The *Texas School Law Bulletin* (Texas Education Agency, 2010) delineated the duties and responsibilities of the superintendent of schools. "The superintendent is the educational leader and the chief executive officer of the school district" (Texas Education Agency, 2010, p. 51). One of the priority duties is to "provide leadership for the attainment of student performance in the district" (Texas Education Agency, 2010, p. 51). Such job expectations only reflect the public demand for improved student accountability outcomes.

One duty of the superintendent is to "promote academic rigor in teaching and learning among staff and students to raise student performance on state and national exams, and promote the demonstration of critical thinking and ethical behavior among students" (Hoyle, et al., 2005, p. 23). The superintendent can no longer tell the school board that the campuses are doing great. State and national accountability reports require that superintendent to have the academic and communication skills to explain how well students are performing on accountability tests and the problem-solving abilities to provide a plan for improved student outcomes.

It is generally accepted that the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB, 2002) is the powerful driving force for test-based accountability and high performing schools. Bulach, Lunenburg, and Potter (2008) characterize a high performing school as a positive culture where student achievement high, absenteeism and student discipline is low, and teacher morale is high. It becomes clear as to who must demonstrate high-stakes, high performing student testing results; it is the school superintendent. A new era of collaboration, empowerment, and vision calls for the educator who champion the cause for an education environment of change that will victoriously engage the challenge of increased student outcomes and accountability (Holland, 2005).

The School Board and Learning Outcomes

While the general public is aware of the traditional roles of school boards: setting budgets, establishing school boundaries, and setting school policy; many are not aware of the impact school boards have on student achievement. According to Dervarics and O'Brien (2011), school boards in high-achieving districts exhibit characteristics that are distinctly different from school boards in low-achieving districts. Specifically, boards in high achieving districts are more collaborative in nature, intentionally communicating with stakeholders while engaging in goal setting and monitoring student progress. Additionally, collaborative boards have crafted a working relationship with superintendents, teachers, and administrators based on mutual respect, collegiality, and a joint commitment to student success. Moreover, boards are becoming more data savvy, identifying student needs and justifying decisions to drive continuous improvement based on data (Dervarics & O'Brien).

Likewise, effective school boards have strong shared beliefs and values about what is possible for students and their ability to learn, and of the system and its ability to teach all children at high levels (Rice et al., 2001). While poverty and lack of parental involvement are familiar concerns; when focused on student achievement, these factors are accepted as challenges to overcome rather than corporate excuses.

By contrast, in low-achieving districts, board members frequently yield to external considerations as they seek to explain the lack of student success. In these districts, board members often focus on superficial factors that prevent student learning, such as poverty, lack of parental support, societal factors, or lack of motivation (Rice et al., 2001).

Finally, effective school boards lead as a united team with the superintendent, each from their respective roles, with strong collaboration and mutual trust. Snipes, Doolittle, and Herlihy (2002), citing Goodman, Bulbright, and Zimmerman (1997) conclude that those with a strong board/superintendent relationship had greater student achievement as measured by dropout rates, the percentage of students going to college, and aptitude test scores. Their review of characteristics of quality governance included several that were directly related to school boards and their relationships: A trusting and collaborative relationship between the board and superintendent; creation by the board of conditions and organizational structures that allowed the superintendent to function as the chief executive officer and instructional leader of the district; and, effective communication between the board chair and superintendent and among board members.

Implications for Professional Practice

This article provides valuable conclusions that are helpful and useful in achieving meaningful and positive student outcomes within the organization and culture of the public school. It is self-evident that public school boards and school superintendents play a critical role in the academic progress and success of the youth and children who walk the halls of our schools. The task of preparing them for a fast paced, complex, and an uncertain future requires transformational leadership that allows for student and stakeholder growth and progress. To impact the educational quality of our children's schools, the team building relationship between a

school board and the school superintendent must embrace proactive leadership, genuine collaboration, honest and open communication, and unwavering trust (Thompson, 2007).

Perhaps as never before, the need for practitioner-based transforming leadership of public school boards and school administration is the prescription that will remedy failing schools and strengthen healthy schools. Noteworthy are the characteristics of transformational leadership such as relationship building, team building, empowerment, vision casting, and engaging that serve as a framework for change and improvement. A focus on leadership styles, relationship skills, and teamwork strategies are paramount to student outcomes. Succinctly, the transformation leader is a change agent with the ability to influence other to achieve an inspiriting vision for the students. Furthermore, school board and superintendent must examine their practice through a lens that examines behavioral and organizational interactions, recognizing the pressures imposed upon them, such as the school and student accountability systems. Practice that sustains positive change in knowledge and attitudes should become an essential part of the working relationship of any decision making organization structure.

When relationship differences arise, silos may be built that restrain or impede the effectiveness of an organization. Adams et al. (2012) acknowledge the increasing number of complaints concerning the relationship between school boards and administration that have resulted in the passage of House Bill 2563 in the 80th Texas Legislation. Relationships live and flourish when solution oriented practices and sound policies, focusing on the avoidance of blaming and accusation, are in place and implemented. As stakeholders, individuals in school governance and administration must rise to the tremendous task of overseeing schools of education that function within the context of community interests, accountability, and student success.

A productive working relationship that fosters the creation of student-centered schools is essential. Student learning accelerates when the educational atmosphere fosters meaningful learning defined by student exploration and discovery of knowledge, resulting in the application of the learning. With these implications for practice, the school board and school administration must commit themselves to affect change that will shape a culture of learning and positive outcomes. As this occurs, meaningful academic success will emerge.

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