

# **THE SUPERINTENDENCY: THOSE WHO SUCCEED AND THOSE WHO DO NOT**

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## **Abstract**

This study addresses the issue of why some superintendents succeed while others do not. A comparison of responses from both long-term successful superintendents and selected school board members of districts who have experienced a high degree of turnover at the superintendent level was conducted. Both sets of data identified common themes of communication, integrity, and financial expertise as those areas which a superintendent must possess in order to be successful.

## **THE SUPERINTENDENCY: THOSE WHO SUCCEED AND THOSE WHO DO NOT**

It was a cold winter night in January. The temperature was falling, and there was a chance of freezing drizzle as Sarah Nickerson prepared for the monthly school board meeting. She was not happy at the prospect of a long, strenuous meeting; but she knew that the board needed to make a tough decision regarding the future of the current superintendent. Even though it meant an evening of intense conflict, she still planned to enter a motion of non-renewal for the superintendent. Sarah felt this was her only choice and the best decision for the school and the community.

Seventeen miles away, Jim Burton also was preparing for the local school board meeting. He had assured his family that he would be home early because the board agenda was not long and, as usual, would be dispatched in a relatively short period of time. Tonight, the big decision was to renew the school superintendent's contract. That act should take no longer than twenty minutes. After twenty-five years, the renewal action had become somewhat perfunctory. The superintendent had been, and would continue to be, the type of individual the school and community desired. As far as Jim was concerned, the superintendent would remain until retirement, and the district was lucky to have a superintendent of such caliber.

One of the two scenarios above is played out annually for many superintendents across the country. The superintendent today is not an authority figure with the unilateral control of yesterday (Mirga, 1985). The increasing pressure of outside factors ranging from increasing state and federal mandates to a loss of respect and confidence in leaders and institutions have significantly impacted the tenure of the superintendent (Gousha, 1981; McCarthy, 1990; Shepard, 1986). In fact, the average five-year tenure of superintendents (Monteith, 1989) is decreasing for a variety of reasons (McCarthy, 1990). Urban superintendents often have shorter tenures than the national average (Cuban, 1986).

It is clear that superintendents today must be effective leaders with both the time and opportunity to achieve established district goals (Edmonds, 1979; Leithwood & Montgomery, 1986; Manasse, 1985). Those who have been successful are those who managed conflict, fulfilled the district's mission, supported the democratic process, and believed that schools could make a difference (Cuban, 1985; Iannaccone, 1982). In a survey, school board members identified three crucial attributes of superintendents. These were integrity, leadership and an understanding of finance (Yock, et al., 1990). Studies in districts with high rates of superintendent turnover supported these findings (Chance & Capps, 1990; Grady and Bryant, 1991). Constant turnover and upheaval creates a disequilibrium that impedes the success of any organization (Getzels & Guba, 1957). The real challenge seems to be the ability to be productive and effective as a leader (Shepard, 1986; Wildman, 1987).

## **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

The literature provided a basis for this research study. The average tenure for superintendents is less than five years, yet there are those who manage to effectively handle the human, organizational, and managerial conflict of the position. There are superintendents who have survived much longer than the five-year average and do so very productively. Conversely, there are superintendents who are unable to stay in a position for more than one to three years.

It was these two extremes that this study sought to explore. Succinctly stated, what is it that some superintendents do that enables them to be successful for many years in one district, and what is it that other superintendents do that never allows them to remain in a district for any lengthy period of time? Why do some superintendents succeed when others do not?

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study sought to determine why some superintendents are able to remain in a district for many years providing it with a degree of stability while other districts experience an inordinate amount of superintendent turnover. It was determined that two questions really existed, which meant that two different samples were necessary.

The first question focused on superintendents who had more than double the national tenure of five years. It was decided that twelve years in the same district as superintendent would be the criterion. After determining the number of years necessary to be included in the study, individuals were identified from state department of education records. The list of superintendents was further shortened when, through personal contacts with the educational community, superintendents were identified as being effective and possessing leadership skills. The number was further reduced to 24 superintendents (N=24) by utilizing a stratified random sample process which selected six superintendents in each of four geographical quadrants of the state.

The second question focused on superintendents who had tenures of less than the national average. Records of the state department provided information as to the school districts meeting this criteria. Forty-one schools were identified as having three or more superintendents during a five year period. Because of the level of turnover, it was decided that instead of trying to locate the superintendents, that district school board members would be contacted. Although several of the superintendents were serving in similar positions in other districts, board members were easier to locate and provided a view which could be contrasted with the superintendents of the first sample. Of the 41 identified school districts, board members from 25 (61%) agreed to be interviewed.

Telephone interviews were conducted with the identified superintendents and school board members. The interviews were tape recorded, transcribed, and analyzed three times over a period of two months in order to build intra-rater reliability. The interviews

covered three primary areas: board related data and the identification of critical problems and leadership/managerial style.

The results obtained from the two groups were then analyzed to determine areas of agreement and commonality. Those areas of commonality represented mutual aspects of concern relative to leadership skills and attributes such as communication, ethics, accessibility, and the ability to manage school finance. The responses provide an important view of the superintendency as a profession with implications for higher education and state regulators.

The context of the central question of this study--why do some superintendents succeed while others do not--is textured by factors outside the individual. Data collected reflected perspectives of superintendents in one sample and perspectives of board members in the other sample. While not an ideally parallel research study, the themes from both sets of data bore such striking similarities as to provide sufficient evidence for generalization and conclusions. Additionally, the data provided somewhat richer context in describing the complexities of leadership within social, political, and educational systems. A leader, after all, operates within a community, within a system. The components of the system as well as factors which impact the system cannot be discounted in the final analysis, as this study will point to in its concluding remarks.

## **RESULTS**

### **Board Related Data**

The long-term superintendents' school boards were noticeably different from the districts with excessive superintendent turnover. Long-term superintendents had much more stable boards than did those who experienced a rapid turnover rate. Table 1 below provides graphic information as to board stability. The typical long-term superintendent had board members with an average tenure of 19.4 years. The average range was ten to 44 years. In fact, two superintendents indicated their "newest" board members had served for ten and twelve years. The long-term superintendents had an average of only 12.4 board members during their averaged tenure of 18 years.

The districts which had experienced excessive superintendent turmoil paint a different picture as can be seen from Table 1. The average tenure of board members from these districts was 6.7 years and the average range was two to 22 years. A majority of the board members had worked with two or three superintendents although two members indicated they had worked with six superintendents.

## Table I

### Board Tenure Rates for Superintendents

	Long-term Superintendent	Short-term Superintendent
Board members' shortest tenure	10 years	2 years
Board members' longest tenure	44 years	22 years
Average	19.4 years	6.7 years

The occupational backgrounds of board members for the districts with long-term superintendents as well as those districts with excessive turnover were similar. The single largest occupation for both groups was ranching and farming. Other occupations were varied and ranged from skilled workers to professionals such as doctors and lawyers. As to reasons why people decided to run for the school board the responses often reflected the difficulties or the absence of such difficulties with the chief executive officer. In those districts with a long-term superintendent, there were few contested elections. One long-term superintendent indicated there had not been a board race in 28 years. The long-term superintendents indicated that most ran for the board because they were interested in children or because "they care about the school." One superintendent asserted that people ran for the board "for all the right reasons."

In these districts with excessive turnover, many of the board members indicated they ran because they believed the school district was in trouble and needed a new approach to resolving district problems. Slightly more than thirty percent of the board members stated they possessed an insight and/or ability that could assist the school district stabilize and this was why they chose to run for office. Some did indicate they ran only because they were asked to do so while others decided to run in order to keep someone else from being elected to the board. Both studies identified influence groups as being those connected to athletics and those who seem to be against everything which might change the school or improve it.

### Reasons for Success

The long-term superintendents were asked to discuss their leadership style and the reasons they believed they had been successful. Almost all of the respondents identified "open communication" as a key element in their success. They also identified stable boards with board members who let them run the schools as contributing to their longevity. Hand in hand with longevity of board members was the importance of keeping board members informed.

One superintendent asserted that his success was based on the fact that he was "here every day" and because he had "stayed away from coffee shops." Another stated the

community knew him and "they know what to expect." Several others indicated that effective public relations was important in being successful.

The long-term superintendents also discussed the importance of hiring good people and then letting them do their job. If there was one issue that the long-term superintendents identified as crucial to their success, in addition to communication, it was a thorough knowledge of school finance. Other issues were school consolidation, declining student populations and facilities.

Permeating the interviews of the long-term superintendents was their belief in leadership. None identified specific theoretical base although the themes of flexibility, accessibility, and integrity were prevalent in all the discussions. The importance of trust was mentioned several times and a constant inference was that one must be trusted and also must trust others.

Interestingly, the very issues identified by the long-term superintendents as keys to success were also identified in those districts where there has been excessive administrative turnover.

## **Reasons for Failure**

Board members as indicated in the methodology section were interviewed in those districts which has experienced excessive superintendent turnover. The critical issues which caused problems between the boards and the superintendents were essentially identical to the reasons for success identified by long-term superintendents. The primary reason for superintendent turnover was finance with communication issues a strong secondary reason. The other issue listed related to the concept of immorality.

Financial issues which related to mismanagement and malfeasance represented over half of the responses. Financial mismanagement was a term which meant the superintendent simply did not have the expertise to do the job. For example, a superintendent failed to report all of the district encumbrances and when they were discovered the district surplus had to be used to pay the bills. Another example was when a superintendent in his glee to win athletic events hired seven coaches when only two were needed thus reducing the district cash reserve from \$200,000 to approximately \$4,000 in one year. The board was forced to implement a reduction in force program in order to avoid bankruptcy.

Financial malfeasance related to the financial honesty of the superintendent. As one board chair indicated, "Experience just gave the superintendent the know-how to legally steal." The litany of problems ranged from theft to lying about finances to the board. Other examples included paying encumbrances to nonexistent businesses for nonexistent products, as well as providing a raise to the superintendent, himself, without prior board approval. A board interviewee perhaps summed it up when he asserted, "Some have lost sight of why they're in education."

Communication issues represented another area of concern which contributed to the high level of superintendent turnover. One board member indicated that the "superintendent wouldn't tell anyone what was going on.... He was very set in his ways and wouldn't take suggestions or advice." Another member indicated at his school the superintendent only discussed what he wanted to others to know. Several interviewees complained their superintendents would not admit to making mistakes. In fact, in one district the board member stated people only attended the board meetings so they could stay informed since the superintendent made no effort to keep the community informed. In districts with excessive turnover it is obvious that the short-term superintendent simply failed to communicate effectively with either board or community members.

The issue of ethical or immoral behavior was a concern in some of the districts with excessive turnover. Issues relating to these matters inevitably led to terminations or to resignations of the superintendents in question. The list of identified incidents ranged from having an affair with a principal to impregnating a high school senior. Many of the superintendents involved in such activities left the school district and took a position in another school district. A summary of the critical issues for short-term superintendents with a percentage of response is provided below (Table II).

**Table II**

**Incident of Causes for Short-term Superintendent Turnovers**

CATEGORY	BOARD PRESIDENT RESPONSES
Communication	37.2%
Financial Mismanagement	30.5%
Financial Malfeasance	25.4%
Immorality	5.0%
Other	1.5%
Total	99.6%

The issue of leadership was found in all of the identified areas which caused excessive superintendent turnover. Issues related to trust, communication, and flexibility were identified as reasons for excessive turnover. Imbedded in these reasons was the more general, school management one of school finance.

**CONCLUSION**

So the important question must be, "What does this indicate about those who succeed and those who don't?" The data provide some important insight into the character of the superintendency. Clearly, those who enjoy a long tenure and are viewed by both their peers and the board as successful strive to communicate fully with the community as well as the board. These successful long-term superintendents seek to develop a high degree of stability within the school district. They hire good people and then let them do

their job. They understand the role of the local school board and insist that administrators be allowed to do their jobs while keeping the board apprised of all activities. The long-term superintendent attends fully to the job and is more democratic than autocratic.

On the other hand, based on school board member responses, it was evident that the superintendent who did not succeed failed to practice open communication with stakeholders or the board. This individual often displayed an inability to manage school finances and, in some cases, utilized limited district resources in a fraudulent manner. They did not strive for an understanding with the board and often were more autocratic than democratic. The result is that the local school board, school district, and community are constantly in a crisis mode in any substantial interaction with the superintendent.

There are multiple lessons to be learned from this study of extremes. First, superintendents clearly must be open, accessible, and scrupulously honest in all of their activities. Second, they must involve the board by keeping them well-informed, but at the same time educate the board as to their duties and responsibilities. Third, a superintendent should develop a relationship with the community and school staff that facilitates organizational equilibrium. This is accomplished by keeping people informed and by allowing employees to do their jobs. Finally, there is one area of expertise and that is a firm understanding of school finance.

This does not mean that the total responsibility for success must rest with the superintendent alone. In fact, school boards must do a better job of investigating a potential superintendent. One board member reported that the previous superintendent had been hired because he "dressed and acted like a superintendent." Another board member indicated that the board needed to investigate potential superintendents and not just hire anyone for the job. In those districts where the turnover rate was high, boards often failed to seek the best and frequently did not establish useful employment expectations. The state school board association and the state department of education also deserve criticism for failing to assist in the selection of an appropriate superintendent, especially in districts where turnover rates were high. The spiral downward for such districts continued with each hiring and termination. The state did not discipline in any manner those who committed highly questionable acts. In fact, a majority of the superintendents who did not succeed in the districts studied are currently not succeeding in their second, third, or fourth district.

Higher education institutions should programmatically respond to this study. If the skills that are valued are related to communication and openness, perhaps it is time to return to human relations and group processes training. These skills may be as important as managing systems and understanding school law. Since school finance is so important, it would perhaps be more relevant to not only learn finance theory but also to extensively focus on the application of such theory. But the issue for higher education goes beyond coursework. It is also just as important to look at the individual being admitted to programs and not just at their checkbook. The importance of ethical

behavior looms large in this study and necessitates that programs admit not only the very best intellectually, but also those with impeccable character. Screening of potential students becomes an important issue for those in higher education.

It is imperative that schools have the best leadership possible. Then, and only then, will the needs of children be fully addressed. This research provides some insight into the leaders needed; further research is needed to expand upon this beginning.

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