



Challenges of the public school superintendency: Perspectives in terms of preparation and support

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Superintendency is regarded as one of the most visible and powerful leadership roles in the world of education today (Sovine, 2000). This research was conducted to identify the challenges faced by assistant superintendents and their perspectives in terms of preparation and support. The study made use of the qualitative research design and was conducted in Region III, Philippines with 10 participants. Findings showed that assistant superintendents faced issues and challenges in terms of organizational and job-related mandates and have negative perspectives about the preparation and support extended to them. During the day-to-day operations in their respective divisions, assistant superintendents face governance and culture-related problems in terms of procurement, handling administrative cases and managing personnel-related actions. On the other hand, during the epidemic, public school superintendents faced several hurdles due to the complexities and challenges of education reforms at both the national and local levels. The school systems are undergoing continuous reforms and redirections as they transition from distance learning to limited face-to-face instructions. Additional obstacles have arisen because of increased public pressure for higher student performance in the face of the pandemic, causing problems throughout the educational system. As educational leaders, the Assistant Superintendents have a lot of work to accomplish to fulfill their duties. Furthermore, in the new normal, there is a leadership crisis due to teacher shortages, insufficient school finance, a lack of school facilities and resources to manage distance education, and excessive time demands. These complicated elements have added to the difficulties that assistant superintendents have in meeting the demands of their jobs. Finally, the critical requirement for skills and competencies to deliver efficiently and effectively has caused them stress, prompting them to seek personal and professional help by whatever means available. Based on the findings and analysis generated, this study recommends several pre-service activities, programs, and projects relevant to superintendency preparation and support. Conduct of immersion programs to prepare aspiring superintendents; coaching and mentoring of skills and competencies relevant to the functions of the job; attend graduate school; participate in exchange study programs; undergo induction program provided by DepEd; and intense preparation on legal and moral aspects of the leadership role.

Keywords: Public school superintendency, preparation and support, challenges, perspectives

INTRODUCTION

Superintendency is regarded as one of the most visible and powerful leadership roles in the world of education today (Sovine, 2000). The function of the school superintendent in the twenty-first century is becoming increasingly complicated. Today's educational leaders must manage increased expectations, higher accountability requirements, fewer perks than comparable private-sector employment, dwindling financial resources, and growing criticism from outside the field (Byrd, Drews, & Johnson, 2006).

Although there are numerous intrinsic benefits to working in the field of public education, superintendency is a difficult task. "The function of the school superintendent has

evolved into one of the most complicated leadership positions observed today," according to Short and Scribner (2002). Being the chief executive officer of any organization, according to Kowalski (2006), is a challenging task, and being a school superintendent is no exception. In today's educational environment, the superintendent is responsible for balancing the social, political, economic, and legal issues that affect the school, as well as handling the tensions that arise because of these issues. As a result, according to Cuban (1985), "conflict has become the DNA of the superintendency."

Many attempts were made in the last quarter of the twentieth century to rethink and enhance education for America's youth. There have been numerous attempts to improve and reform public schools. These efforts have included everything

from new state success standards to high-stakes testing and charter school legislation. However, one critical aspect has been generally overlooked: school district leadership, governance, and collaboration (Goodman and Zimmerman, 2000). According to Bennis and Nanus (1985), leaders must be able to respond to change and the issues that it brings. Leaders must have the necessary skills to stay in the game. Leaders, not managers, are essential to the success of education in the twenty-first century (Shelton, 1997). Furthermore, educational leaders must be proactive in responding to laws that necessitate significant changes in schools and education, such as the No Child Left Behind Act (Linn, Baker, and Betebenner, 2002). Unfortunately, public school superintendents, in our opinion, continue to work in an environment marked by conflict, insecurity, and uncertainty (Allison, 1988). We believe that superintendency turnover is mostly related to the position's difficulties. Longer tenures are required for key posts such as the superintendents to have long-term positive effects.

In the public schools in the Philippines, the Schools Division Superintendent (SDS), assisted by an Assistant Schools Division Superintendent (ASDS), handles a division comprising several districts with several schools. A division of schools pertains to all schools within a province or a city. The SDS provides general managerial and technical assistance to the Schools Division to ensure efficient operations and effective execution of policies and education programs. By designing division work methods and procedures, setting norms aligned with national and regional educational policies, plans, and standards, and ensuring compliance, the SDS ensures quality in the delivery of basic education services. The SDS is responsible for the Schools Division's effective and efficient use of financial, human, and physical resources, as well as the operations of public and private elementary, secondary, integrated, and learning centers that meet DepEd standards. The DepEd Assistant Schools Division Superintendent (ASDS), on the other hand, reports directly to the Schools Division Superintendent (SDS) and is responsible for providing overall management and technical assistance to the Schools Division for efficient

operation and effective implementation of policies and education programs. The Educational Management Test (EMT), also known as the Schools Division Superintendents Examination, is a requirement for appointment to the posts of Assistant Schools Division Superintendent (ASDS) and Schools Division Superintendent (SDS). As stated in DepEd Order No. 88, s. 2012, unless the DepEd Executive Committee recommends differently, the EMT is taken every five (5) years. The EMT is managed and conducted by the National Education Testing and Research Center (NETRC), now the Bureau of Educational Assessment (BEA) of the Department of Education, in collaboration with the appointed Board of Examiners. *DepEd Order No. 15, s. 2015 amends DepEd Order No. 88, s. 2012 and states that the designated Officers-In-Charge of the Office of the Assistant Schools Division Superintendents (OIC-ASDSs); regional, division and district supervisors; public elementary and secondary schools principals; division chiefs in the bureaus/centers/services in the central, regional and division offices; and administrators and professors in the private colleges and universities who hold Certificate of Registration as professional teachers issued by the Professional Regulation Commission (PRC) shall be allowed to take the EMT test. They must possess the following experience qualifications of at least five years of experience in administration and instructional supervision and no age requirement is necessary.*

Fewer studies have investigated the effects of superintendent tenure and turnover on education. Glass (2000) noted that "whether or not superintendents can measurably affect student achievement has not been the subject of extensive research." Bridges (1982) argued that, despite the importance of the superintendency in school governance, "nothing of consequence is known about the impact of the occupants of this role." With information indicating that the obstacles of superintendency are numerous, and further evidence indicating that a superintendent's average stay in a division is three years at most, it is critical for the researcher to assess a superintendent's preparation and support for the job.

The study was conceptualized to identify the challenges met by newly designated Assistant Schools Division Superintendents and their perspectives in terms of preparation and support. The research questions were: 1) What were the challenges that you encountered when you took office as Assistant Superintendent? 2) What are the challenges that you have in your role now? 3) How were you prepared or how did you prepare yourself for the Superintendency? and 4) What recommendations would you make to improve the preparation and support of new Assistant Superintendents?

METHODOLOGY

The study made use of the qualitative research design. It made use of the Interview Guide which was administered through google form to the Assistant Superintendents of Region III. With the target population of twenty (20), ten (10) Assistant Schools Division Superintendents responded to the request. Of the ten ASDS, 6 or 60% were females and 4 or 40% were males. In terms of age, two (2) or 20% belonged to the 50-59 age group, 7 or 70% belonged to the 40-49 age group, and 1 or 10% belonged to the 30-39 age group. Concerning experience, five (5) or 50% have (0-2) years and 5 or 50% have 3-5 years of a stint as ASDS. All the participants are doctorate holders. Two (2) or 20% are EMT passers, 6 or 60% are Career Executive Service Eligibles (CESE), and two (2) or 20% are EMT passers and Career Executive Service Eligibles (CESE) at the same time. A dual-cycle deductive approach was used to examine qualitative data (Creswell, 2013; Maxwell, 2013; Patton, 2014). During the initial coding phase of this study, the data was evaluated thematically in respect to the question items. During the secondary coding stage, emerging themes were improved and contextualized with the data to produce meaning. Literature comparison, expert review, and coding by a second researcher were used to triangulate themes for credibility (Patton, 1999). Direct quotations proved the themes' support.

RESULTS and DISCUSSION

1) What were the challenges that you encountered when you took office as Assistant Superintendent? The three major roles of an Assistant Superintendent are usually

rested on being the chairperson of the Formal Investigating Committee (FIC) on administrative cases, chairperson of the Bids and Awards Committee (BAC) which deals on the procurement processes in the government, and chairperson of the Human Resource Merit Personnel Selection Board (HRMPSB) which is mandated to govern the selection, ranking, promotion, deployment and hiring of personnel in the Department of Education. Added to these major functions are overseeing the efficient operations and effective execution of policies and education programs, as assigned by the Superintendent.

Most of the participants said that they had challenges in handling administrative cases, were not prepared with procurement concerns, and had difficulties in the ranking procedures. One participant said about the ranking: *“Some applicants would say, before ay pwede ngayon ay hindi na. When in fact ay clear naman sa mga policies.”*

Two participants had difficulties and said, *“The shift of role from a team player to a team leader. Since there was no preparatory training for Assistant Superintendents, it was difficult at first to lead several committees /programs which are very vital and require in-depth study.”* One said that he was overwhelmed by the workload, *“The workload was very demanding and different in nature because I was a school principal before my designation.”*

Two participants had impressions of being judged due to their young age. One said, *“Some subordinates who were older than me seemed to be doubtful on my capacity since I was just 30 years old at that time. Provision of technical assistance (TA) from my SDS was limited.”*

One participant expressed her sentiments due to many restrictions, *“My deployment as OIC-ASDS happened amid the Pandemic. The nature of work is so different from my previous work as Chief Education Supervisor for Curriculum Implementation Division. I adjusted a lot in terms of my work schedule. The work requires a lot of dealings with people from varied contexts and situations that are complex and uncertain.”*

Findings imply that the participants lack preparation and support during their adjustment period as Assistant Superintendents. The

required qualification standards (QS) in terms of eligibility, experience, education, and relevant training are found to be not enough to prepare them for the position. It further implies that 'competencies' play a big and crucial part for them to cope and manage their new roles in the superintendency.

The findings support Greenfield's (1995) assumption that school superintendents' work differs from that of other chief executive officers because of "the uniquely moral character of schools," the nature of the school staff as educated and independent, and the stormy context of schools in general, which threatens the stability of educational work.

2) What are the challenges that you have in your role now? The participants' profile shows that half of them have (0-2) years of experience as ASDS, and the other half have had (3-5) years already in the same position. However, there are still challenges that they are experiencing in terms of support and preparation. Added to that is the fact that leadership in the government today needs more agility and vigor due to the uncertainty and ambiguity of the pressing times.

The majority said that 'too much work to do' is a big challenge. Others identify education in the new normal as a major problem identifying distance learning as 'difficult to implement.

One said, "So far, in 3 years I have learned most of the duties of an ASDS. Reading and asking for insights from those who were assigned before me helped a lot. I am also blessed to have a "senior" superintendent who does not only guide but empowers me as well. However, handling administrative cases is still a challenge for me. No amount of reading and preparation beats how to intimidate I could be in front of lawyers." This implies the pressing need for 'competencies' in handling administrative cases, which points to the ASDS's ability to handle the administrative court even during trial-type investigations and hearings.

Another participant said that "Handling administrative cases is one of the tasks I consider more challenging. This is one function that I did not experience before my assignment as OIC-ASDS. Another is the provision of Technical Assistance to school heads as they adjust in their

Basic Education Learning Continuity Operational Plan (BEL-COP). Restrictions on mobility limited the opportunities to work closely with them. Their varying levels of technological proficiency is another limiting factor to effectively guide them via online platforms."

Three participants identify organizational culture as a challenge and said, "The diverse kind of co-workers and lots of incapable individuals that could hardly deliver satisfactory service." Two other participants said that their problems are, "Navigating politics. Insecurities of some colleagues. Time management due to so many intervening activities."

Based on the interview transcripts, the ASDS continue to experience challenges after being in the position for quite some time. Findings imply that often, they base the acquisition of 'competencies' on their experience on-the-job. This implies further that preparation and support are lacking before their designation into position, and even during the first few years in their current position.

The findings support Holmes' (1991); Jacobson's (1988); Keeney & Devaney's (1982); Leach's (1991); Tagg's (1982); Tift's (1990); and Wallin's (1999) advice to rural superintendents, which includes the need to manage effective time management in the face of multiple responsibilities and to manage effective teacher recruitment, induction, and retention.

3) How were you prepared or how did you prepare yourself for the Superintendency? In terms of the actual preparation and support that they have received, the majority of the participants said that they relied on the coaches and mentors around them. Some said they were prepared by their former ASDS and SDS. On the other hand, half of them said that "Aside from surpassing the required exams to be eligible, too much self-preparation was undertaken by understanding the different Key Result Areas (KRA) of the job, printed strategic directions of DepEd, issuances, and guidelines about the job." One said specifically, "I also update myself by listening/watching news and updates from the Central Office (which also helped me keep abreast with the new issues). I attended seminars (webinars) on various topics.

I likewise observed the leadership styles of my former superintendents and weigh which are effective in specific cases and situations.”

Another participant said that *“Actually, I did not know that I wanted to be a superintendent. I just took the test for principalship and then became an Officer-In-Charge of a school for 6 months. I became a Chief Education Supervisor for Curriculum Implementation Division (CID) and School Governance and Operations Division (SGOD) for 2 years. Concurrent to that, I hurdled the eligibility of the CES stages. The experiences I had during those different positions I assumed contributed greatly to my position now.”*

Two participants clearly stated that they learned by doing the job. Two others said that they took doctoral classes on educational leadership and management. Others said that observing, listening, and receiving feedback from previous SDSs made them thrive.

One participant said, *“Aside from the many pieces of training I attended and positions I held in the DepEd, from a classroom teacher to a school head then a supervisor, I re-engineer my mindset so I can navigate through with my new work environment.”*

Findings imply that majority of the participants took courage to do self-preparation to hurdle the challenges of the superintendency. Learning to do it while on the job gives an implication that efficiency and effectiveness are not the definite and guaranteed outcomes of their efforts.

In recent years, several authors have claimed that the work of rural superintendents is like that of school superintendents in other settings. According to Chance (1999), the work of a rural superintendent is equally as full of conflicts, politics, and community input as that of any other superintendent. Superintendents, according to Leithwood and Montgomery (1986) and Manasse (1985), must serve as successful leaders and fulfill district goals regardless of the size or location of the district in which they serve.

4) What recommendations would you make to improve the preparation and support of new Assistant Superintendents? The participants shared their views and opinions on how DepEd as a whole must give support and design a preparation

pipeline for aspiring superintendents. The majority identified professional learning circles, leadership programs, and immersion activities being the top selected priorities. *Half also said that “Aspiring superintendents should attend CES leadership training and other leadership exchange programs and attend graduate school to better equip them with competencies.”*

A carefully designed induction and immersion program is a must according to some. *“If teachers are given Teacher Induction Program as preparatory training to understand the totality of being a teacher, a preparatory course should also be provided for new ASDSs. This course should focus on the jobs expected of an ASDS and how they should be able to accomplish them efficiently and effectively. The course must likewise tackle all dimensions of the job including the knowledge, skills, and attitude.”*

Another one reiterated, *“There should be at least a work immersion before the designation.”* Another one said the necessity to have rigorous training and preparation: *“The incoming ASDS should have at least 6 months training before his or her appointment/ designation.”* He added, *“Only eligibles and PMT passers should be allowed to be in the position even on OIC status. A recalibration of the Individual Performance Commitment and Review (IPCR) of the ASDS shall also be done.”*

Lastly, one participant said that *“There is a need for SDOs to establish and improve career pipeline for this will benefit potential third level candidates to go through relevant tasks and assignments. Active involvement in various committees is another effective preparation for this position. Moreover, I still recommend the four stages of the CESBoard to be experienced by ASDS aspirants. The simulation, in the Assessment Center (AC) of the CES stages, provides significant “take-aways” which may accelerate the journey of an ASDS as he/she passes through the difficult times.”*

The participants gave prime attention to immersion and proper training as pre-service activities for aspirants of the superintendency. This implies better delivery of services and proper adherence to the call of duty of newly installed assistant superintendents. Further, the appropriate pre-service preparation and support

to superintendents will ensure focus and better delivery of government services that will redound to prioritizing public welfare. As Lamkin (2006) puts it, *“Improved preparation and support for the role of superintendent could advance more potential candidates, could attract more qualified candidates and could enable more new superintendents to succeed in their first several years of service. Such improvement, however, requires a better understanding of the problems and challenges faced by rural superintendents.”*

CONCLUSIONS and RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this study have ramifications for recognizing current issues and challenges faced by public school assistant superintendents in practice. As educational leaders in today's public schools, assistant superintendents have obstacles in their organizational and job-related mandates and have negative perspectives about the preparation and support extended to them. During the day-to-day operations of school divisions, assistant superintendents face governance and culture-related problems in terms of procurement, handling administrative cases, and managing personnel-related actions. If society's current expectations are to improve education delivery services and transform our public education system, the assistant superintendent's current challenges must be better understood. Both DepEd and education stakeholders and partners should work together to improve our school systems. Public schools and the superintendency are facing many challenges in the wake of cultural, political, economic, and moral changes that are reforming the public school system. Notwithstanding the volatility, uncertainty, and complexity of the challenges brought about by the pandemic, which has rocked the whole educational system in terms of governance and operations. Those changes are greatly influencing governance, management, and policy development in the education sector. Because of the salary package, status, and authority that came with the job in the past, aspiring superintendents were many. The time has come for a more comprehensive and aggressive debate on the critical topic of school governance. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 made it more important for school

superintendents to reduce the achievement gap between privileged and underprivileged students.

During the epidemic, however, public school superintendents faced several hurdles due to the complexities and challenges of education reform agendas at both the national and local levels. The school systems are undergoing continuous reforms and redirections as they transition from distance learning to limited face-to-face instruction this coming year. There appears to be some confusion about the proper activities to take to satisfy the demands of the job while keeping the learners' welfare at the forefront of improvements. Superintendents' functions continue to be particularly troublesome in larger divisions, where context and localization of policies are given top priority. Superintendents also confront increased state and federal oversight of public schools, according to Ziebarth (2002). Because divisions differ in issues and contexts due to diversity, the Philippines' superintendency must balance diverse lenses when it comes to policy adoption and execution. The position of superintendency has shifted. Additional obstacles have arisen because of increased public pressure for higher student performance in the face of the pandemic, causing problems throughout the educational system. As educational leaders, the Assistant Superintendents have a lot of work to accomplish to fulfill their duties. Furthermore, in the new normal, there is a leadership crisis due to teacher shortages, insufficient school finance, a lack of school facilities and resources to manage distance education, and excessive time demands. These complicated elements have added to the difficulties that assistant superintendents have in meeting the demands of their jobs. Finally, the critical requirement for skills and competencies to deliver efficiently and successfully has caused them stress, prompting them to seek personal and professional help by whatever means available.

Based on the findings and analysis generated, this study recommends several pre-service activities, programs, and projects relevant to superintendency preparation and support. They are the conduct of immersion programs to prepare aspiring superintendents; coaching and mentoring of skills and competencies relevant to the functions of the job; attend graduate school;

participate in exchange study programs; undergo induction program provided by DepEd; and intense preparation on legal and moral aspects of the leadership role.

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