

# THE SUPERINTENDENT SEARCH: WHO ARE THE CONSULTANTS AND WHAT ARE THE BARRIERS\*

Jeremy Glenn  
Wesley Hickey

This work is produced by OpenStax-CNX and licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution License 3.0<sup>†</sup>

## Abstract

Superintendent search consultants are often used to assist school boards in finding the top leaders of a district. The role of superintendent search consultants suggest that they have an understanding of board perceptions that may help or hinder employment in this position. This paper addresses research on the demographic composition of superintendent search consultants in Texas, as well as these consultants' perceptions of barriers into the superintendency.



NOTE: This module has been peer-reviewed, accepted, and sanctioned by the National Council of Professors of Educational Administration (NCPEA) as a significant contribution to the scholarship and practice of education administration. In addition to publication in the Connexions Content Commons, this module is published in the International Journal of Educational Leadership Preparation, <sup>1</sup> Volume 4, Number 3 (July - September, 2009). Formatted and edited in Connexions by Theodore Creighton, Virginia Tech.

## 1 Introduction

With an emphasis on leadership in education today, school boards are faced with the challenge of finding quality superintendents. The selection of a school superintendent is one of the most critical decisions a school board makes. The first superintendents were required to conduct not only the school's business, but also be able to effectively teach the students (Konnert & Augenstein, 1990; Norton, Webb, Dlugosh, & Sybouts,

---

\*Version 1.4: Jul 20, 2009 11:03 am -0500

<sup>†</sup><http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/>

<sup>1</sup><http://ijelp.expressacademic.org>

1996). Social, economic, legal, and political issues led to an evolution of the superintendent's position over the last 25 years (Houston, 2001; Jackson, 1995). Social issues brought about by legislation such as *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the Elementary and Secondary Act of 1965 have had a dramatic influence on the type of educational leadership seen in the United States (Jackson, 1995). These federal statutes forced superintendents and school boards to address longstanding practices in school districts, thus shifting the role of the superintendent from one of isolation into an era of public accountability.

The superintendent, as Chief Executive Officer of the school district, has many roles and leadership responsibilities. In Texas, the law (Texas Education Code, 2008) lists duties that include budget development, program evaluation, personnel assignment, facility improvement, and policy recommendation, among others. These roles are similar among this position in other states. In other words, the superintendent is responsible for all areas of the day-to-day operations of the district, as well as the communication, education, and team building of the policy setting government body, the board of trustees. The superintendent may not do it all, but he/she is responsible for everything. This responsibility makes it imperative that the superintendent recognizes the importance of skills in working with others, since this is the primary characteristic of the job. Technical understanding of educational issues is important, but it is interpersonal traits that provide the foundation for success in educational leadership (Glass, 2000; Goleman, 1998).

Although the role of the superintendent has changed significantly over the years, superintendent candidates still seek the best pathway of preparation to the superintendency (Farmer, 2005; Zemlicka, 2001). While school boards are ultimately responsible for choosing a superintendent, frequently search consultants are used to screen and select the final pool of candidates. Therefore, it is imperative to conduct research in order to better understand search consultants and their perceptions of school boards' expectations of superintendent candidates. The purpose of this paper is to report on demographic data regarding superintendent search consultants and analyze their perceptions regarding barriers to the superintendency.

## 2 Method

The target population for this study was all superintendent search consultants in Texas. A snowball sample was used to identify search consultants. Snowball sampling increases the number of participants in the sample by asking well-known individuals within a particular field for recommendations (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2008). Bogdan and Biklen (2003) stated that participants in a snowball sample are often highly credible. Through snowball sampling, 108 consultants were identified. The survey was emailed three separate times, two weeks apart, to ensure the best possible return rate. A total of 61 inventories were returned, resulting in a 56.5% return rate.

The survey used obtained demographic data regarding search consultants and qualitative questions regarding barriers. The questions were analyzed according to themes. The questions asked were as follows:

1. What "Leadership Behaviors" might serve as barriers to superintendent candidates in their quest for a superintendent position?
2. What "External Forces" might serve as barriers to superintendent candidates in their quest for a superintendent position?
3. How might the "Organizational Structure" of a school district create barriers for superintendent candidates in their quest for a superintendent position?
4. How might the "Values, Attitudes, and Beliefs" of a superintendent candidate create barriers in their quest for a superintendent position?
5. List the one position you perceive as the most beneficial for an individual to hold prior to becoming a superintendent.
6. In general, what are the most significant barriers that superintendent candidates face in their quest for a superintendent's position?

### 3 Results

Demographic data were disaggregated by gender, ethnicity, age, educational attainment and career positions held. Both numbers and percentages were compared on all demographic categories. The analysis revealed the gender breakdown for the 61 superintendent search consultants responding to my study was 91.8% male and 8.2% female. Table 1 provides a breakdown of demographic information by gender.

**Participants by Gender**

Gender	Number	Percent
Male	56	91.8
Female	05	8.2
Total	61	100.0

**Table 1**

The ethnicity of the superintendent search consultants who responded was 3.3% African American, 86.9% White, and 9.8% Hispanic. All five female respondents were White. Table 2 presents demographic information by ethnicity.

**Participants by Ethnicity**

Ethnicity	Number	Percent
African American	02	3.3
White	53	86.9
Hispanic	06	9.8
Other	00	0.0
Total	61	100.0

**Table 2**

Search consultants typically serve in other capacities in education before becoming search consultants. It is not surprising then, that the vast majority of consultants were over 50 years old. Data analysis indicated an uneven distribution of age in search consultants. Most (47.5%) of the respondents were in their sixties. Over 30% of the respondents were in their fifties, and less than 10% of respondents were in their forties. In total, 89% of search consultants were 50 years of age or older. Table 3 provides a breakdown of participants by age.

**Participants by Age**

Age	Number	Percent
29 or under	00	0.0
30-39	01	1.6
40-49	06	9.9
50-59	20	32.8
60-69	29	47.5
70 or over	05	8.2
Total	61	100.0

**Table 3**

When reviewing education levels of search consultants, the data revealed that a significant number of superintendent search consultants held a graduate degree. Of the consultants who responded to my study, 41% held a master's degree and 57.4% held a doctoral degree. Four of the five females (80%) who responded to my study held a doctoral degree, as compared to 31 of the 56 (55.4%) male respondents. 50% of African American male respondents, 52.1% of White male respondents, and 83.3% Hispanic male respondents held a doctoral degree. Only one of the 61 respondents did not hold some type of graduate degree. Table 4 illustrates demographic information by participant's highest educational attainment.

#### Participants by Highest Educational Attainment

Educational Attainment	Number	Percent
High School Diploma	00	000.0
Associates Degree	00	000.0
Bachelors Degree	01	001.6
Masters Degree	25	041.0
Doctoral Degree	35	057.4
Total	61	100.0

**Table 4**

The background of consultants can sometimes help to determine which leadership characteristics, skills, and knowledge base search consultants find important when seeking a superintendent candidate. Individuals tend to use their own experiences when making judgments about what is effective and successful. In order to better understand the mechanism that drives the consultants' decision making process, respondents were asked to disclose the various career positions they had held prior to seeking a position as a search consultant. In a preliminary canvas, search consultants were asked which positions they had held prior to becoming a search consultant, in order to ensure that as many career paths as possible were presented to respondents. Career positions held by search consultants varied widely but all prior positions were in the field of education. Many of the respondents held multiple positions during the course of their careers resulting in 118 identified career paths. Table 5 provides a breakdown of the career positions held by superintendent search consultants who participated in my study.

#### Participants by Career Positions Held

Positions	Number	Percent
School Superintendent	052	044.1
Educational Service Center Employee	026	022.0
School Board Member	007	005.9
Attorney	000	000.0
College or University Professor	030	025.4
None of the Above	003	002.6
Total	118	100.0

**Table 5**

Respondents held a variety of positions during their careers. Nearly half (44.1%) of consultants who responded served as superintendent of schools during their career. Although no respondents reported having served as an attorney, at least one practicing attorney was identified in the preliminary snowball sample.

*Research Question Two: What position do superintendent search consultants perceive as the most beneficial position prior to becoming a superintendent?*

Survey items for this research question were open-ended and responses were given in a narrative format. Respondents discussed the one position they believed to be the most beneficial for a candidate to hold prior to becoming a superintendent. Twenty-two respondents (36%) listed the high school principalship as the most beneficial preparatory position for superintendent candidates. One respondent stated, “The high school principalship is the most beneficial position for aspiring superintendents to hold because it is complex in nature, and it involves dealing with a variety of district stakeholders on a daily basis.” It is the high school principalship that is most similar to the position of superintendent. This is consistent with data obtained from Farmer (2005) and Zemlicka (2001) in which practicing superintendents were asked which career path they perceived as the most beneficial in preparing them for the superintendency.

Another commonly listed position was the assistant superintendent position. Fourteen (23%) respondents listed the assistant superintendent position as the most beneficial preparatory position for superintendent candidates. These respondents emphasized the importance of central office training. In addition, 80% of female respondents listed the assistant superintendent’s position as the most beneficial preparatory position, as compared to only 17.9% of male respondents. Among male respondents, 39.3% listed the high school principal as the most beneficial preparatory position for aspiring superintendents. None of the female respondents stated the high school principal position was the most important preparatory position.

Approximately 16.4% of respondents listed any campus principal experience as the most beneficial preparatory position for aspiring superintendent candidates. These responses were general in nature and did not label one level of principal experience as greater than another. All of the African American and Hispanic respondents listed either the campus principalship (50%), or more specifically, the high school principalship (50%) as the most beneficial preparatory position for aspiring superintendents. Finally, a few respondents (11.5%) listed the business manager’s position as the most important preparatory position. Table 6 depicts the frequencies and percentages of the various positions that respondents listed as the most beneficial preparatory position for the superintendency.

#### Most Beneficial Preparatory Position for Aspiring Superintendents

Position	Number	Percent
High School Principal	22	036.0
Assistant Superintendent	07	011.5
Campus Principal (Any Level)	10	016.4
Business Manager/ Finance Director	07	011.5
No Response	07	011.5
Classroom Teacher	01	001.6
Total	61	100.0

**Table 6**

*Research Question Three: What barriers do superintendent search consultants perceive as the most significant for candidates seeking the superintendency?*

In order to answer the third research question, data from five open-ended questions were collected. Open-ended questions were included because they do not constrain an individual’s response; rather they tend to increase response possibilities (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). Increasing the response possibilities allows for a truer representation of the barriers that exist for superintendent candidates.

*Leadership behaviors.* Data gathered indicated three major themes that respondents perceived as the most significant leadership behaviors that serve as barriers for superintendent candidates. The first theme was the inability of the candidate to communicate effectively. One respondent specifically mentioned a “lack of tact and communication skills” as a specific leadership barrier. Many respondents mentioned how an “inability to communicate” or “poor social awareness” could limit the upward mobility of an individual’s career. One respondent felt that, “In the end, most successes and failures are about relationships, mostly related directly to the board level operations.”

The second theme that emerged was egotistical behavior from the candidate. Respondents expressed concern regarding candidates who were “overconfident” or “arrogant.” These types of behaviors were mentioned by multiple respondents as tremendous barriers for aspiring candidates. More specifically, three of the five female respondents mentioned being “emotionally expressive,” “nurturing,” and “not appearing too soft” as barriers. These were not common themes among male respondents. The third and final theme that emerged was a lack of leadership experience. Respondents mentioned how a lack of knowledge, as well as, a lack of experience created barriers for candidates.

*External forces.* Influences outside of the organization over which the leader has no control are referred to as external forces. Local, state, and national community and conditions, government regulations, demographics, cultural climate, economic situations, geography, political climate, and family conditions are all examples of external forces (Irby, Brown, Duffy & Trautman, 2002). Data gathered from my study indicated respondents perceived three major themes that serve as barriers for superintendent candidates. The first theme examined how a community’s political power groups could create external barriers for candidates. Respondents stated, “Social unrest in a community,” as well as, “power struggles within the community and local organizations” could pose significant problems for aspiring superintendents. Respondents also noted that it is important for candidates to learn all that they can about a community before interviewing. The “political influence” in some communities will ultimately determine who becomes superintendent, and how long they serve in that position.

The second theme that emerged was an inability of school board members to work effectively together. Respondents noted that when school boards’ micromanage, are split, or have personal agendas, barriers for candidates can transpire. One respondent stated that barriers materialized when, “school board members who want to control the district and are not willing to give up power and members in the community have certain expectations of candidates.” Another respondent acknowledged that many school boards enter the interview process with preconceived perceptions. They view most candidates in the context of their last superintendent. If the last superintendent was perceived as effective, they look for similar traits. Similarly, if the board perceived the previous superintendent as ineffective, candidates with comparable traits will be perceived as ineffective.

Establishing relationships with other candidates and colleagues that might be in a position to influence the decision making process of others is known as networking. The final theme that emerged as an external barrier was networking. According to Eaton (2002) and Rueda (2002) networking is critical to the success of minority superintendents. Three White male respondents specifically mentioned the importance of networking, as it related to obtaining a superintendent’s position. These respondents felt it is important for aspiring superintendents to position themselves to meet the right people within a network. By meeting the right people and gaining successful experiences, the people within the network will find candidates opportunities as they become available.

*Organizational structure.* Organizational structure involves the design of the organization and how it operates. It is the way human resources are structured for highest performance and the way the parts are divided and related to each other (Merron, 1995). Data gathered from my study indicated two major themes in which a district’s organizational structure might create barriers for superintendent candidates. First, respondents noted that many districts seemed more comfortable promoting candidates from within. While this was not a barrier for internal candidates, it certainly created problems for external candidates. Additionally, the opposite could be true; as one respondent stated, “Some boards feel that their assistant superintendents and principals will always be in those positions, and do not allow them to become superintendents in their district.”

The final theme that emerged as an organizational structure barrier involved the change process. Respondents repeatedly mentioned that, “New superintendents must understand the tradition and culture of a district; too much change could cause problems.” One respondent stated, the “candidate must be flexible and understand that the structure in place will be difficult to change.” One key to reducing the resistance to change is communication. Proper communication can help ensure a smooth transition by quelling fears of the unknown. One respondent wrote, “Change is hard on everyone involved and a new superintendent needs to learn the organizational structure of the district and then move slowly involving all concerned in the process. No organization is standing still; it is either progressing or regressing, and that is what the new superintendent needs to know and utilize when changes are warranted.”

*Beliefs, attitudes, and values.* The foundation for principles that surfaced in the form of values, norms, ideas, and teachings is attitudes, beliefs, and values (Covey, 1992; Hernandez, 2004; Irby, Brown, Duffy & Trautman, 2002). Beliefs may change as new information is acquired, but attitudes and values remain constant. Nearly half of the respondents (47.5%) mentioned that it was important for the candidate’s beliefs, attitudes, and values to align with that of the school board and community. When these attributes do not align, or are in conflict, significant barriers will arise. One respondent stated, “The superintendent and school board match must be a good fit to ensure success; therefore, the team must share most of their values, attitudes, and beliefs.” Respondents repeatedly emphasized the importance of “understanding the community which candidates are entering” and “having similar values as the board members and community” members. One respondent stated, “If the values, attitudes, and beliefs of the superintendent do not match with the school board, it is a recipe for a bad experience.”

*General barriers.* The final open-ended question asked respondents to identify, in general the most significant barriers that confront superintendent candidates. Data from the open-ended questions were analyzed and converted to numerical form. According to Creswell (2003), “a researcher may quantify the qualitative data” to analyze the information and draw conclusions (p. 220). Responses to open-ended questions were first stratified and analyzed line-by-line. Concepts were grouped, and themes were generated. These themes were corroborated by an external reviewer to ensure reliability. Finally, the themes were coded, analyzed and then categorized, so that word phrases could be transformed into numbers (Creswell, 2005).

Data from respondents revealed that the majority of consultants perceive a lack of experience (34.4%) as the most significant barrier for candidates who aspire to become superintendents. One respondent stated, “It is important for candidates to have enough experience. Many people enter the superintendency before they are ready to lead a district.” Poor communication skills (9.8%) were the next most important barrier. Additionally, respondents stated that the lack of “social skills” and “people skills” created significant barriers for aspiring superintendents.

Even though White males make up 91.6% of America’s superintendents (Glass, 2000), only 8.2% of respondents listed gender or race as a significant barrier for candidates. Based on the research provided by Glass, 3.4% of superintendents are minority males, and only 5% are female. Twenty percent of females, 100% of African Americans, and 16.7% of Hispanics listed race and gender as a barrier to aspiring superintendent candidates. One respondent stated, “The good old boy network still exists in Texas, race and gender are still the biggest barriers for superintendent candidates.” Despite all of this, only 4.7% of the White male respondents mentioned gender and race as a barrier for candidates. Table 7 presents the perceived barriers for aspiring superintendents.

### Perceived Barriers for Aspiring Superintendents

Barrier	Number	Percent
Board/Candidate Chemistry	04	006.6
Communication Skills	06	009.8
District Politics	05	008.2
Experience	21	034.4
Gender and Ethnicity	05	008.2
Interview Preparation	04	006.6
Networking	05	008.2
No Response	11	018.0
Total	61	100.0

Table 7

## 4 Discussion

The gatekeepers of the superintendency are often search consultants. As such, an applicant should be aware of who these individuals are and their perceptions regarding the barriers that may exist. The more a candidate can learn about the perceptions that surround this process, the better prepared he/she can be. As the adage states, knowledge is power.

Most consultants are white, former superintendents, service center personnel, or college professors, and hold a Master's degree or above. The greatest percentage of consultants are over 50 years of age. This is likely because of the experiences that often provide the foundation for consultants often are associated with later career steps.

These consultants believe the high school principals' position to be the most beneficial in preparing for the superintendency. This is due to the multiple experiences that a high school principal must address. An understanding of sports issues, clubs, and graduations separates the high school principal from others. This does not mean that other positions are not important, or capable of moving into the superintendency, only that there is a perception that the high school principal experiences are important. Knowing this, an applicant should provide examples of similar duties.

The perceived barriers to the superintendency are related to working with stakeholders in the community, from political leaders to board members. A superintendent must develop consensus among many factions. Some of this comes with experience, which was determined to be important, and general social skills are fundamental to superintendent success.

Communication is important, and principals at any level should be able to provide evidence doing this effectively at the campus level. Effective communication to teachers and efforts to connect with the community will show that the principal has done some of the relationship building needed at the next level. Success at the principal level is a big predictor of effectiveness as a superintendent.

An applicant should take the experiences of the campus and relate them to the superintendency. School boards and consultants want to see this in the resume and interview. An individual with the ambition to be a school superintendent should build on the time and experience of campus leadership while addressing the barriers of the next step.



## 5 References

Bogdan R Biklen S 2003 Qualitative research for education: An introduction to theories and methods)Bogdan, R., & Biklen, S. (2003). *Qualitative research for education: An introduction to theories and methods* (4th ed.). Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

Covey S R 1992 Principle-centered leadership)Covey, S. R. (1992). *Principle-centered leadership*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Cresswell J 2003 Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed method approaches)Cresswell, J. (2003). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed method approaches* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Creswell J 2005 Educational research: Planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research)Creswell, J. (2005). *Educational research: Planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research*. Columbus, OH: Pearson.

Eaton T M 2002 African-American school superintendents in the state of Texas: A study of their career path, barriers, and the characteristics of the school district they serve Eaton, T. M. (2002). African-American school superintendents in the state of Texas: A study of their career path, barriers, and the characteristics of the school district they serve. *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 63 (04), 1200A. (UMI No. 3050634)

Farmer T 2005 Career paths to the Texas public school superintendency)Farmer, T. (2005). Career paths to the Texas public school superintendency. *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 67 (01), 130A. (UMI No. 3206080)

Gay L Mills G Airasian P 2005 Educational research: Competencies for analysis and application)Gay, L., Mills, G., & Airasian, P. (2008). *Educational research: Competencies for analysis and application* (9th ed.). Columbus, OH: Prentice Hall.

Glass T 2000 2000 study of the American school superintendency: America's educational leaders in a time of reform)Glass, T. (2000). *The 2000 study of the American school superintendency: America's educational leaders in a time of reform*. Arlington, VA: American Association of School Administrators.

Goleman, D. (1998). *Working with emotional intelligence*. New York: Bantam Books.

Hernandez R M 2004 An analysis of superintendent and school board perceptions of the factors of the synergistic leadership theory)Hernandez, R. M. (2004). An analysis of superintendent and school board perceptions of the factors of the synergistic leadership theory. *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 65 (08), 2848A. (UMI No. 3143582)

Houston P 2001 Superintendents for the 21st century: It's not just a job, it's a calling)Houston, P. (2001). Superintendents for the 21st century: It's not just a job, it's a calling. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 82, 428-433.

Irby B Brown G Duffy J 2000 Organizational and leadership effectiveness inventory)Irby, B., Brown, G., & Duffy, J. (2000). *Organizational and leadership effectiveness inventory*. Huntsville, TX: Sam Houston Press.

Irby B Brown G Duffy J Trautman D 2002 synergistic leadership theory)Irby, B., Brown, G., Duffy, J., & Trautman, D. (2002). The synergistic leadership theory. *Journal of Education Administration*, 40(4), 304-322.

Jackson B 1995 Balancing act: the political role of the urban school superintendent)Jackson, B. (1995). *Balancing act: The political role of the urban school superintendent*. Washington, DC: Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies.

Konnert M W Augenstein J J 1990 superintendency in the nineties: What superintendents and board members need to know Konnert, M. W., & Augenstein, J. J. (1990). *The superintendency in the nineties: What superintendents and board members need to know*. Lancaster, PA: Technomic Publishing Company, Inc.

Merron K 1995 Riding the wave: Designing your organization's architecture for enduring success)Merron, K. (1995). *Riding the wave: Designing your organization's architecture for enduring success*. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold.

Noddings N 1984 Caring: A feminine approach to ethics and moral education)(Norton M Webb L Dlugosh L Sybouts W 1996 school superintendency: New responsibilities, new leadership)Norton, M., Webb, L.,

Dlugosh, L., & Sybouts, W. (1996). *The school superintendency: New responsibilities, new leadership*. Needham Heights, MA: Ally & Bacon.

Rueda D J 2002 Career perspectives of Mexican American male superintendents in obtaining the position of superintendent in the state of Texas)Rueda, D. J. (2002). Career perspectives of Mexican American male superintendents in obtaining the position of superintendent in the state of Texas. *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 64 (03), 753A. (UMI No. 3082897)

Texas Education Code. (2008). Chapter 11. Retrieved October 14, 2008 from <http://tlo2.tlc.state.tx.us/statutes/docs/ED>

Zemlicka B S 2001 career paths of Texas public school superintendents)Zemlicka, B. S. (2001). The career paths of Texas public school superintendents. *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 62 (07), 2312A. (UMI No. 3020901)