

Evaluating the Superintendent: The Role of the School Board

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A collaborative superintendent/board relationship is essential to the successful and efficient oversight of a school district. The relationship between the superintendent and the school board lies at the heart of school governance (Callan & Levinson, 2011; Eadie, 2003; McCurdy & Hymes, 1992). To illustrate the importance of a collaborative superintendent/board relationship, Carter and Cunningham (1997) found that the primary reason for superintendents leaving their districts was due to the lack of support from and conflicting relationships with school board members. Further, Ray (2003) stated, “a superintendent can possess all the necessary competencies to be an effective leader, but it is the school board’s perception of success that really matters” (p. 5).

Theoretical Framework

School boards are charged with governing education by overseeing the implementation of state and federal mandates and ensuring academic excellence for all students (Bartusek, 2003; Hess, 2002; Kowalski, 2013; Resnick & Bryant, 2010). Throughout the United States, school district leaders continue to face new challenges such as changing demographics, high stakes testing, increased academic accountability, and constantly changing technology. These new challenges amplify the need for a collaborative relationship between the superintendent and the school board (American Association of School Administrators & National School Boards Association [AASA & NSBA], 1994; Eller & Carlson, 2009; Houston & Bryant, 1997). A consequence of the challenges requires superintendents and school boards to approach situations differently than ever before and collaborative approaches are now even more important. According to Moody (2011), role ambiguity and role confusion of the superintendent and school board relationship have intensified as a result of high stakes testing and district accountability. Therefore, it is crucial that each entity understands and respects the role of the other. To provide clarity and understanding of the different roles the school board and superintendent possess, in 1994, representatives from the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) and the National School Boards Association (NSBA) created a joint committee which provided specific recommendations for school board members to follow in order to build and maintain a collaborative relationship with the superintendent. Conversely, a joint committee also developed recommendations for the superintendent to follow to build and maintain a collaborative relationship with the school board.

The Evolving Superintendency

The superintendency has evolved over time; according to Griffin (2005), “the rules of the game have changed” (p. 54). While in the past, a superintendent could be called a successful superintendent by managing items such as books, bonds, buildings, and budgets; in the 21st century, a superintendent must be an expert in things such as collaboration, community building, communication, and curricular choices (Carter & Cunningham, 1997; Gober, 2012; Houston, 2001). As the role and expectations of the superintendency change, the pressures also tend to change and become more complex. A conflicted and mistrusting relationship between the superintendent and school board is one pressure that can result in a high superintendent turnover rate (Chance & Capps, 1992; Grady & Bryant, 1990; Kowalski, McCord, Petersen, Young, & Ellerson, 2011). Studies reveal the tenure of superintendents is between 2.5 to 6.5 years (Glass, 1992; Hodgkinson & Montenegro, 1999; Kowalski, 2011; Metzger, 1997; Renchler, 1992). As with any organization, a high turnover rate at the leadership level results in a lack of continuity of policy implementation, enforcement, and contributes to a general atmosphere of chaos and lack of direction. Interestingly, Carter and Cunningham (1997) found superintendents will leave a district due to a poor relationship with the school board; however, they also found that some superintendents stay but lack empowerment and are then unable to make effective changes within the district. In order to maintain a quality education and ensure continuous improvement, it is imperative that school districts retain consistency from the leadership at the top of the organization.

Superintendent/School Board Relationships

It is essential that those leading the school district share the same vision, beliefs, and mission as those governing the schools (Callan & Levinson, 2011; Eadie, 2007). Defining roles, building a trusting relationship, and communicating effectively are several important components to developing a successful and effective superintendent/school board relationship (Banicki & Pacha, 2011; Basom, Young, & Adams, 1999). Importantly, once the relationship is built, the work is not finished. Instead, it is important that both parties continue nurturing and supporting the relationship (Moody, 2011). Although it sounds easy enough, the task is quite difficult. Consequently, Eadie (2003) stated, “if developing an effective and lasting board-superintendent partnership were a breeze, we would see far fewer strained relationships and the average superintendent tenure would be significantly longer” (p. 26). Perhaps a positive relationship could be sustained if an evaluation process was agreed upon from both the superintendent as well as the school board members.

Superintendent Evaluation Guidelines

The superintendent’s evaluation process is an important issue that must be addressed to maintain a harmonious relationship between the superintendent and school board. In order to evaluate the superintendent effectively, the board and the superintendent must define and agree upon the roles and responsibilities of each position (Callan & Levinson, 2011; Griffin, 2005). Moody (2011), in agreement with Griffin (2005), found “operational protocols” assist in improvement in communication between superintendent and board members (p. 81). Therefore, it is essential to establish standards for the educational leaders. For many years,

there were attempts to develop clear guidelines for campus and district leaders to follow. One attempt was made between 1988 and 1995, when several states began adopting the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) standards. In 1995, common guidelines were agreed upon by the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE). Since many found it difficult to focus on two sets of standards, NCATE, the American Association of School Administrators (AASA), and ISLLC guidelines were combined (Hoyle, Björk, Collier, & Glass, 2005; Lowery & Harris, 2003; National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2002). Some states, such as Texas, created and adopted their own standards. After the adoption of the ISLLC standards, the Texas State Board for Educator Certification (SBEC) was able to cluster their standards into three domains: (a) leadership of the educational community, (b) instructional leadership, and (c) administrative leadership. Standards provide guidance for daily decisions in all three domains. Lowery and Harris (2003) asserted, “When educators reflect in order to make good decisions, it is important that their reflections are guided by standards, rather than just their own experiences” (p. xii).

In order to maintain a successful relationship, it is imperative that a well-designed performance evaluation tool is implemented. Therefore, it is essential that formal guidelines are established because they can provide both guidance and standards throughout the superintendent performance evaluation process. It is important that both parties provide input on the target objectives for the superintendent evaluation (Callan & Levinson, 2011; Eadie, 2003). That is to say, the creation of the guidelines must be a collaborative process. Moreover, Callan and Levinson (2011) agreed with Weber (2007) stating the district goals should drive the evaluation of the superintendent. Dipaola and Stronge (2001) discussed several benefits of a structured performance evaluation. Those benefits include improvements in areas such as communication, school improvement, budgeting, planning, board relations, accountability, and clarification in the roles of the superintendent and school board members (Dipaola & Stronge, 2001).

Superintendent Evaluation Processes

As discussed, when school board members evaluate the superintendent, it is important that the superintendent has had the opportunity to provide input into the evaluation process. Oftentimes, school board members have limited knowledge of the duties of the superintendent. Thus, the evaluation process does not match the functions of the superintendent’s actual responsibilities (Moffett, 2011). Consequently, the input of the superintendent is of utmost importance. Goens (2009) acknowledged that in order for an evaluation to be credible it must include elements of integrity and fairness. Equity, integrity, and fairness within the evaluation process are enhanced when input from both entities exist. Langlois and McAdams (1992) indicated that while observing the superintendent in school board meetings is important, school board members must also rely on multiple data sources such as goal setting objectives, observations and perceptions from teachers, parents, and community members and superintendent self-evaluations (Kowalski et al., 2011). According to Goens (2009), while superintendents should be accountable, accountability is complex. Thus, the evaluation process can also be complex.

In a nationwide survey, Glass, Björk, and Brunner (2000) found that 80.3% of the 2,236 superintendents surveyed were evaluated annually. Further, the survey indicated that 12% were evaluated more often than once a year. They also indicated that only 50.2% of

superintendents were evaluated using the criteria associated with their job description. Similarly, Kowalski et al. (2011) reported approximately 80% of respondents are evaluated annually while 13% are evaluated more often than once a year. With this being the case, it is essential that personal and professional biases never interfere with the objectivity of the performance evaluation (Kowalski et al., 2011; MacPhail-Wilcox & Forbes, 1990). According to Garb (1997), judging an individual by characteristics such as race, social class or gender clearly exudes bias towards that individual. Without clear guidelines established for the evaluation tool, certain biases may factor into the evaluation of the superintendent. These biases may negatively affect the evaluation process. Borba (2010) noted that while biases may exist, there are steps that can be taken to avoid such unfair practices in the evaluation process.

Previous research revealed a void of identifying specific variables that might affect school board members' perceptions of the superintendent's job performance. As a result of the limited availability of research depicting the impact of biographical bias of school board members toward the superintendent's effective implementation of his job responsibilities, this study sought to determine if certain biographical variables of the school board members influenced his/her perception of the superintendent's job effectiveness. Particularly, this study explored whether the independent variables: (a) board member ownership; (b) board member experience; (c) number of years board member had worked with the superintendent; (d) board member gender; (e) board member level of education; (f) board member ethnicity; (g) whether the board member had children/grandchildren presently attending the school district; and (h) whether the board member was an alumni of the district that he/she was now serving on the board; influenced the dependent variable of the school board's perception of the superintendent's job effectiveness, as rated on the 10 subscales of the Texas Examinations of Educator Standards (TExES). Accordingly, this study addressed the following question and null hypothesis:

RQ1: For each of the 10 subscales of the dependent variable, superintendent effectiveness, is there a significant interaction effect between board member ownership and each of the following factors: (a) board member gender; (b) board member ethnicity; (c) board member level of education; (d) board member experience; (e) number of years that he/she has worked with the superintendent; (f) children/grandchildren presently attending school district; and (g) board member is a graduate of the district that he/she is now serving on the school board?

H1: There is no statistically significant correlation between board member ownership and each of the bias factors.

Method

A survey instrument was used in this study and was developed using the Texas Examinations of Educator Standards (TExES). TExES Standards are a slight adaptation of the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) Professional Standards of the Superintendency. In fact, the TExES Standards are guiding principles that were modeled after the standards created by the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) and the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) principles. The

TEXES Standards as well as the ISLLC Standards are broader competencies which are then broken down into smaller behavioral facets that are outcome-based (Lowery & Harris, 2003). Using the TEXES standards, the researcher constructed items utilizing Likert-type scales as the evaluation instrument. There were 40 questions related to the standards of (a) human resource management, (b) district culture, (c) community needs and interests, (d) budgeting and resource allocations, (e) planning for instruction, (f) implementing and supporting instruction, (g) leadership and ethics, (h) political and legal issues, (i) facilities planning and management, and (j) organizational development.

The internal reliability was determined using Cronbach Alpha coefficients and each standard received a Cronbach Alpha coefficient above .74, excluding the TEXES budget standard which received .66. Although the budget standard received a Cronbach Alpha coefficient of .66, this was understandable due to the budget issues addressed by the Texas state legislature.

Statistical analysis of the data included a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) to assess main effects and interactions among the variables. Because the interaction between board member ownership and the other biographical variables was the main interest, seven MANOVAs were performed, crossing ownership with each of the remaining variables separately. If the interaction was not significant, the main effect of the biographical variable was assessed individually with the univariate tests of between-subjects effects.

For this study, the target population was the independent and common school board members in the state of Texas who served on a seven-member school board. According to the Texas Education Agency (TEA), Texas had a total of 1,041 independent and common school districts. However, the Texas Association of School Boards (TASB) stated there were 1,034 districts, of which, 935 school districts had a seven-member school board. For the purpose of this study, the Texas Association of School Boards' (TASB) numbers were used.

The sample for this study was a random sample chosen from the target population. To obtain a representative sample of the state of Texas, the number of participants was set at 280 school districts (Johnson & Christensen, 2004). This represented approximately 30% of the seven-member school districts in Texas. There was a response rate of approximately 31% ($n = 86$) in the study.

Although this study yielded a low response rate, there was an equivalent percentage from each of the five school district student size groups. Texas school districts that had only seven-member boards were divided into quintiles based on the size of the student population, measured by average daily attendance (ADA). ADA was obtained from the Texas Association of School Boards (TASB). The smallest districts with 41 to 280 students were less represented with 10% responding, while the districts with 281 to 632 students had 27% ($n = 23$) responding. However, the remaining groups with 633 to 1,283 students, 1,284 to 3,384 students, and 3,385 to 59,951 students had 19% ($n = 16$), 24% ($n = 21$), and 20% ($n = 17$) respond, respectively. Due to the similar response rates from each of the five district student size groups, a representative sample of the population was ensured.

Findings

Regarding the research question and hypothesis, data revealed that there were no statistically significant multivariate interactions between the 10 subscales of the dependent variable of

superintendent effectiveness (i.e., the superintendent's job effectiveness) and the eight independent variables of (a) board member ownership, which is whether the board member hired the current superintendent; (b) board member experience; (c) number of years board member had worked with the superintendent; (d) board member gender; (e) board member level of education; (f) board member ethnicity; (g) whether the board member had children/grandchildren presently attending the school district; and (h) whether the board member was an alumnus of the district that he/she was now serving on the board.

Specifically, the study found that the independent variable of ownership was not a mediator for the remaining seven variables on the dependent variables that rated superintendent job effectiveness. There were no significant interactions between the following: (a) Years of experience as a board member and ownership (Wilks' $\Lambda = .709$, $F[30, 197.33] = .82$, $p = .737$); (b) Number of years board members worked with the superintendent and ownership (Wilks' $\Lambda = .679$, $F[30, 197.33] = .93$, $p = .578$); (c) Gender of board members and ownership (Wilks' $\Lambda = .844$, $F[10, 71] = 1.32$, $p = .240$); (d) Level of education of the board member and ownership (Wilks' $\Lambda = .709$, $F[30, 197.33] = .82$, $p = .737$); (e) Board members with children/grandchildren currently attending the school district and ownership (Wilks' $\Lambda = .858$, $F[10, 70] = 1.15$, $p = .336$); and, (f) Alumni/Non-Alumni board members and ownership (Wilks' $\Lambda = .882$, $F[10, 70] = .94$, $p = .502$). Limited variance in reported ethnicities made statistical tests unwarranted for that biographical variable.

The study yielded interesting findings about the demographics of Texas school board members. From respondent data, the study found that Texas school boards were comprised of mostly Caucasian males whose highest education level consisted of a high school diploma or an associate's degree. Of those who participated in the study, 82.6% ($n = 71$) were Caucasian, with the remaining participants being Hispanic, African American, and Native American. Only 31.4% ($n = 27$) were females, while the remaining 68.6% ($n = 59$) were males. Results indicated that 31.4% ($n = 27$) of the participants had a high school diploma as their highest level of education and 15.1% ($n = 13$) held an associate's degree, while 36% ($n = 31$) of the participants held a bachelor's degree and 17.4% ($n = 15$) held a graduate degree.

Data revealed that 40.7% ($n = 35$) of the participants were new school board members having served 4 years or less, 23.3% ($n = 20$) served on the board for 5-8 years, 17.4% ($n = 15$) served on the board for 9-12 years, and 18.6% ($n = 16$) served on the board for 13 or more years. Also, 73.3% ($n = 63$) of the participants had served with the superintendent for only 4 years or less while only 26.8% ($n = 23$) had served 5 years or more with the current superintendent. Moreover, 61.6% ($n = 53$) indicated they served on the school board when the superintendent was hired, while only 38.4% ($n = 33$) indicated they had not participated in the hiring of the superintendent.

When the participants were asked whether they were alumni of the school district in which they served, 45.3% ($n = 39$) stated they were alumni, while 53.5% ($n = 46$) said they were not alumni. Additionally, 64% ($n = 55$) of the school board members had children/grandchildren in the district. Interestingly, the study showed a large gender disparity among superintendents across the state. From those who responded, the study found 89.5% ($n = 77$) of the superintendents were male, and only 9.3% ($n = 8$) were female superintendents.

Discussion

Although statistical significance was not common among the variables, the study yielded several findings relating to each variable. First, regarding the two variables of board member experience and the number of years the board member had worked with the superintendent, the study found that a large percentage of the respondents were new or inexperienced. Due to the complexity of school district policies and procedures, inexperience could have inhibited individuals from actively participating in, and having a thorough understanding of, school district business. Thus, both a lack of experience and a lack of active participation provide a school board member with limited abilities to highlight weaknesses in the superintendent's job effectiveness. Second, regarding board member gender, the study found that school boards were overwhelmingly comprised of males and superintendents were mostly males. Gender bias could have been a factor as board members evaluated superintendents. Third, regarding the variable of board member level of education, the study found that a large percentage of board members' highest education level was a high school diploma or an associate's degree. Generally, superintendents hold at least a masters degree and many hold a doctorate. This situation could have produced an environment in which school board members felt intellectually inferior to the superintendent and would therefore have been less likely to highlight perceived weaknesses of the superintendent.

Fourth, regarding the variable of whether school board members had children and/or grandchildren attending the school district, the study found that a majority of the school board members had children and/or grandchildren attending the school district in which they served. The level of participation in the school district prior to being elected to the school board could have influenced an individual's perception of the superintendent's job effectiveness. For example, individuals who were active in parent/teacher organizations or fundraising efforts at the campus level to enhance the learning environment for their children/grandchildren had already helped to create and, wished to maintain, an environment that was conducive to learning within the district. Perhaps joining the school board was a natural transition for those individuals and working positively with the superintendent perpetuated their altruistic motives.

Fifth, regarding the variable of whether the board member was an alumnus of the district, the study found a majority of the respondents were non-alumni. Interestingly, the study found that both alumni who hired the superintendent as well as the non-alumni who did not hire the superintendent were supportive of the superintendent's job performance. Perhaps alumni had a unique perspective in that they matriculated through the school district and could more keenly identify strengths and weaknesses of the district's learning environment. School board members who were non-alumni, did not hire the superintendent, and were also new members of the school board, as the study found, could have found it difficult to criticize the leadership of the superintendent, because the criticism might have been perceived by fellow board members as a criticism of their decision-making ability to hire an effective and qualified superintendent. Also, the new board member's criticism of the superintendent could have been perceived by fellow board members as a criticism of the school district in which they were alumni.

Additionally, when the interaction between the independent variables of alumni/non-alumni and ownership were tested, there was not a statistically significant interaction found within the TExES subscale of instruction implementation, while there was a statistical

significance for the remaining nine standards. Regarding the variable of implements instruction, this anomaly is better understood if it is remembered that high-stakes standardized testing has taken a very prominent role in Texas education. Additionally, this issue is factored into the Texas Education Association's (TEA) academic and financial ratings for the school district and could have heightened a board member's awareness of the issue.

Finally, there remained several interesting items worth noting about the study's participants: (a) a majority of the school board members hired their current superintendent, (b) a majority of school board members had worked with the superintendent for only four years or less, and (c) a majority of the school board members were newly elected and/or appointed to the school board and had served for only four years or less. This study's premise was that if school board members hired the current superintendent, then they would tend to be supportive of his/her job performance. The study's findings support that hypothesis.

Although the study's response rate was low, it is worth noting that this study's findings provide further support to the body of research that indicates there is a high turnover rate for superintendents. At the time the study was conducted, a majority of the participants indicated they were new school board members serving with new superintendents that they hired. Thus, the school board members lacked a long term working relationship on which to judge the accomplishments and job effectiveness of the superintendent. Above all, responses of the participants were mostly supportive of the superintendent that they hired.

The participants were asked whether they evaluated others' job performance in their respective professions. The study found that when testing the independent variable of ownership with the independent variable of evaluates others, there was no statistical significance found. However, when the interaction between the variables of evaluates others and ownership was tested, there was a statistically significant between-subjects interaction found within the TExES subscale of instructional planning, while there was no statistical significance found for the other nine subscales. The interaction occurred because school board owners who evaluate others and non-owners who did not evaluate others rated superintendents higher on instructional planning than owners who did not evaluate others and non-owners who did evaluate others.

Regarding the variable of evaluation of others, the study found that a majority of the respondents had experience evaluating others in their respective professions. For the school board members who hired the superintendent and performed evaluations of others in their respective professions they rated the superintendent higher in instructional planning. Perhaps, this reinforced their belief that they hired the most qualified instructional leader for their school district. Also, school board members who did not hire the superintendent and did not perform evaluations in their respective professions, rated the superintendent higher in instructional planning. Again, the study found that a large percentage of the participants were new board members, and criticism of the superintendent could have been perceived as criticism of their peers on the board for hiring the superintendent. Moreover, due to the complexity of school district policies and procedures, new school board members might have felt unqualified to highlight weaknesses of the superintendent and instead provided a rating that did not truly reflect their perception of the superintendent's job effectiveness.

Implications and Conclusions

This study yielded results that indicate school boards throughout Texas perceived the job effectiveness of superintendents in a positive manner. In order to create such a harmonious environment, it is essential that school board members and superintendents define the roles and responsibilities of both parties involved. Role ambiguity tends to cause conflict within the relationship. However, with clear goals and role expectations, the evaluation process will be much easier for both entities.

Specifically, this study provided evidence that school boards and superintendents have a healthy and collegial working relationship within the state of Texas, and school boards are pleased with the job effectiveness of superintendents. Finally, this study did not find that the variable of ownership or the demographic variables examined were attributable to any conflict that existed among school boards and superintendents. However, in order to deter such conflict, it is crucial that the superintendent and school board collaborate. Additionally, over time, collaborating on educational issues will only build a more trusting relationship.

Above all, the significance of this study is that the bias variables examined do not influence school board members' perceptions of superintendents. In this study, school board members rated their superintendent's job effectiveness using the TExES leadership competencies. Using the TExES competencies, a majority of the school board members rated their superintendents positively. The positive superintendent evaluations by school board members, combined with a lack of support for the bias variables examined, suggests that school board members were driven by the leadership competencies rather than the bias variables.

Although the school board members rated the superintendents positively, the question of superintendent tenure still remains. The percentage varies from study to study, but according to Kowalski et al. (2011), approximately 15% of superintendents left their previous job as superintendent due to school board conflict. In other words, conflict among superintendents and school boards still exists. In order to prevent such turmoil, it would behoove superintendent preparation programs as well as state and national school board training institutes to begin teaching aspiring superintendents and training elected school board members in areas such as, but not limited to, conflict resolution, collaboration, communication, relationships, and change.

Times are changing in the educational arena, which, in turn, changes the role of the leader. Thus, in order to provide the most applicable information for the changing times, our preparation programs must adapt the curriculum accordingly. Then, newly hired superintendents will have the necessary skills to manage or possibly prevent conflict between the superintendent and school board members. In an ideal world, the collegial superintendent and school board relationship would allow the superintendent to remain with the district and provide the stability needed for academic growth within the district.

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