

*Research Article*

## **Superintendents' Perceptions Regarding the Supervision and Evaluation of Principals in a Rural State**

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*The goals for this quantitative study were to examine superintendents' perceptions regarding their own supervision and evaluation of principals in a rural state. Five research questions guided the qualitative inquiry: (1) What are the perceptions of superintendents' regarding their supervision of principals?; (2) What are the perceptions of superintendents' regarding their evaluation of principals?; (3) What are the perceptions of novice and experienced superintendents regarding principals' formative supervision?; (4) What are your greatest strengths as you supervise and evaluate principals? and (5) What recommendations would you give to improve your supervision and evaluation of principals? An online survey tool was used to gather perceptions from superintendents regarding their own evaluation and supervision of principals. Participants solicited included all 48 superintendents from a rural Mountain West state. Out of the participants solicited 23 superintendents agreed to participate (48% response rate). Results from this study provided implications for those who train superintendents and those who supervise and evaluate principals.*

Superintendents have a remarkably difficult job responsibility with board relations, budget, personnel, and improving students' academic performance from a district perspective (Hanover Research, 2014). But perhaps the most difficult job responsibility is improving the instructional leadership of principals by effective supervision and evaluation (Bjork, 1993; Rallis, Tedder, Lachman, & Elmore, 2006). Many studies have investigated the supervision and evaluation of teachers, and fewer studies have researched the supervision and evaluation of principals, and the research base regarding the superintendent is minimal (Murphy & Hallinger, 1986). In fact, the following quote rings true today, "Research on the superintendency in general is remarkably thin, while research on the leadership role of superintendents is sparser still. Only a handful of studies over the last 15 years examine the instructional leadership role of superintendents (Murphy & Hallinger, 1986, p. 2014). There are a variety of studies supporting instructional leadership for superintendents (Bjork, 1993; Petersen, 2002) and the role is emerging from a curriculum based leadership model (Belden, Russonello, & Stewart, 2005; Bredeson & Kose, 2007) to one where supervising and evaluating principals is a critical factor (Corcoran, Casserly, Price-Baugh, Walston, Hall, & Simon, 2013). The instructional leadership of superintendents could be viewed through the lens of the instructional leadership of principals with the

critical element focused upon elevating the supervision and evaluation of principals thus improving their performance and improving academic results for schools.

Clearly, "district-level leadership matters" as evidenced by Waters and Marzano's (2006) meta-analysis which revealed a positive correlation between district leadership and student achievement (p. 3). Forner, Bierkein-Palmer, and Reeves (2012) investigated effective leadership practices of rural superintendents and found developing a "close working relationship with the building principal" while supporting and trusting principals is a core leadership behavior for rural superintendents (p. 8). Developing instructional leadership in rural principals was a significant behavior for improving the performance of teachers and was desired by rural superintendents (Cray & Millen, 2010; Cruzeiro & Boone, 2009). School districts that are effective and are closing the achievement gap have school leaders who hold principals accountable and develop capacity to be instructional leaders (Leithwood, 2010). Strategies for improving one rural district included providing professional development supported at the district level for principals (Clarke & Wildy, 2011).

More recently, many of the changes occurring regarding the role of the superintendent that have emphasized instructional leadership and the supervision and evaluation of principals have

occurred in large urban school districts (Corcoran, Casserly, Price-Baugh, Walston, Hall, & Simon, 2013) and describe the role of principal supervisors. A central tenet of this initiative to improve the instructional leadership of superintendents is improving the capability of principal supervisors by reducing the number of principals to supervise and requiring accountability for the academic progress of schools (Corcoran, Casserly, Price-Baugh, Walston, Hall, & Simon, 2013). Although many urban and rural superintendents are involved in similar facets of district leadership including instructional leadership (Tobin, 2016), rural superintendents rarely have the option to assign district personnel or principals supervisors to account for the supervision and evaluation of principals and frequently are required to wear different “hats” and serve different district roles (Copeland, 2013). One study in a rural state found that 24% of superintendents were also serving as a principal in the same district and 10% of the superintendents were teaching one or more classes in their district (Garn, 2003). With these multiple roles and challenges, it would be important for rural superintendents to continue to focus on their instructional leadership by supervising and evaluating principals.

Currently, the instructional leadership of principals has gained importance in recent legislation including Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015), Race to the Top (RTTT) (USDoe, 2009), and No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2002), and is second only to teacher effectiveness (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Whalstrom, 2004). Although instructional leadership for both principals and superintendents has increased in importance, the supervision and evaluation of principals has not always been emphasized in past research or even in effectiveness. Between 1980 and 2010, only 20 peer-reviewed articles regarding principal evaluation were published (Davis, Kearney, Sanders, Thomas, & Leon, 2011) supporting a limited emphasis on instructional leadership of principals. The application of principal evaluation systems has often been inconsistent and viewed as inconsequential (Davis & Hensley, 1999; Reeves, 2008; Stronge, 2013).

As rural superintendents face the same challenges as other district leaders in urban areas with fewer resources, it is critical for rural superintendents to focus on leadership when management of the district requires attention (Lamkin, 2006). Because of the constant requirement to for districts to demonstrate student academic

proficiency, improving the instructional abilities of principals by effective supervision and evaluation is important for rural superintendents. An important consideration of supervision and evaluation for rural superintendents could be to continue to develop their instructional supervisory capacity (Miller, 2014) as opposed to focusing on compliance.

This study took place in a rural mountain west state as defined by the U.S Census Bureau with only two urban areas with populations greater than 50,000 people (U.S Census Bureau, 2010). In fact, this rural state has 19 counties out of 23 designated as a Frontier Counties with population density of “fewer than 7 people per square mile” (Rural Health Information Hub, Frontier Counties Map, 2010).

### **Research Design and Methods**

The goals of this mixed method study were to examine the perceptions of superintendents concerning their own supervision and evaluation of principals; and recommendations to improve their supervision and evaluation. Five research questions guided the inquiry:

1. What are the perceptions of superintendents regarding their supervision of principals?
2. What are the perceptions of superintendents regarding their evaluation of principals?
3. What are the perceptions of novice and experienced superintendents regarding principals’ formative supervision?
4. What are your greatest strengths as you supervise and evaluate principals?
5. What recommendations would you give to improve your supervision and evaluation of principals?

A mixed methods design was utilized because of the need to measure superintendents’ perceptions as well as understand their greatest strengths. A purely quantitative study could address their perceptions but would not have allowed the researchers to answer the superintendents’ greatest strengths when supervising and evaluating principals. A qualitative study would have allowed us to address the strengths and recommendation piece but would not have provided information about their perceptions. Mixed methods allowed us to address the quantitative and qualitative pieces of the study. The quantitative and qualitative pieces were compiled into an online survey tool that was used to gather perceptions from principals regarding their own evaluation and supervision as well as their strengths and recommendations.

## Study Participants

Participants solicited included 48 superintendents from elementary, middle, or high schools, in a rural mountain west state. All participants from the rural mountain west state were invited to participate. The state will not be identified due to the small sample size. This ensures we are protecting all participants' identity and responses.

Out of the participants solicited, 23 principals agreed to participate (48% response rate). Majority of the superintendents were male (21 participants, 91%). Overall, superintendents supervised and evaluated 50 female principals and 84 male principals. Superintendents averaged nine years of experience ( $M = 9.09$ ,  $SD = 7.02$ ) with some superintendents reporting one year of experience and others reporting over 20 years of experience. Superintendents were asked 20 questions regarding the supervision and evaluation of their principals. The survey was sent electronically during the spring semester to all participants with one follow up reminder.

## Instrument

The instrument used to collect data was a survey constructed by the researchers based on the supervision and evaluation of teachers and adapted to represent the supervision and evaluation of principals. The first section of the survey consisted of nine Likert scaled statements (1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Agree, and 4 = Strongly Agree), all focused on supervision. Items measured concepts such as meeting at least once a year to establish goals, discussing the principals' performance based on student achievement, and observing the principals in a leadership responsibility. The second section consisted of eleven Likert scale measuring evaluation. Items assessed concepts such as articulating a set of performance standards, using feedback to improve principals' performance, and identifying performance strengths. The instrument also contained two open-ended questions; one question asked about the greatest strengths of your supervision and evaluation of principals and the other question asked about recommendations superintendents would give to improve your supervision and evaluation. This instrument was given to superintendents to get their perceptions of their own supervision and evaluation of principals. Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the entire survey was 0.96. Reliability for each subscale was also adequate

(supervision: 0.93 and evaluation: 0.92). The final section of the survey collected demographic information from the sample, which consisted of (a) size of district, (b) size of community, (c) number of females he/she supervise, (d) number of males he/she supervise, and (e) number of years as a superintendent.

## Data Analysis and Findings

Data were analyzed separately for the quantitative and qualitative component. For the quantitative piece data was analyzed descriptively and inferentially. Descriptive analysis included means and standard deviations for the entire sample. Data were also broken down by subscale and experience. This grouping was used to conduct an independent t-test examining differences between novice and experienced superintendents' perceptions of the supervision and evaluation of principals. For the qualitative component data was analyzed thematically. The responses to the open-ended questions were analyzed to determine codes and themes. The process included coding and re-coding until themes emerged (Hatch, 2002). The findings of the study are presented by each research question.

## Research Question One

Research question one asked, "What are the perceptions of superintendents regarding their supervision of principals?" Nine items on the survey addressed this question. Means and standard deviations were calculated. Results are presented below (see Table 1).

Overall, superintendents agreed with all of the nine statements regarding principal supervision as all statements had means higher than 2.50. Superintendents agreed most regarding meeting at least once each year with their principals to establish goals for their professional growth ( $M = 3.78$ ,  $SD = 0.42$ ) and observing principals in a leadership responsibility at least once a year ( $M = 3.78$ ,  $SD = 0.42$ ). Superintendents' agreed least with discussing how the school's faculty will actively engage students in learning ( $M = 3.13$ ,  $SD = 0.69$ ) and least with believing their principals improve their performance based on the feedback they receive from their superintendent ( $M = 3.13$ ,  $SD = 0.63$ ). The total supervision subscale score average was 3.48 ( $SD = 0.30$ ).

Table 1

*Superintendents' Perceptions regarding their Supervision of Principals*

Statement	<i>M (SD)</i>
I meet at least once each year with my principals to establish goals for their professional growth.	3.78 (0.42)
I observe my principals in a leadership responsibility at least once a year.	3.78 (0.42)
I walk through my principals' building to monitor classroom instruction in his/her school.	3.65 (0.65)
I meet with my principals to discuss how their performance will be assessed.	3.35 (0.49)
During this conference, my principals and I discuss student achievement.	3.74 (0.45)
During this conference, my principals and I discuss remediation for marginal teachers.	3.39 (0.58)
During this conference, my principals and I discuss how the school's faculty will actively engage students in learning.	3.13 (0.69)
I believe my principals improve their performance based on my feedback and supervision.	3.13 (0.63)
I believe I provide my principals with meaningful feedback during the school year.	3.35 (0.57)
<i>Total Supervision Subscale Score</i>	<i>3.48 (0.30)</i>

Note. Scale ranges from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree).

**Research Question Two**

Research question two asked, "What are the perceptions of superintendents regarding their evaluation of principals?" Eleven items on the survey addressed superintendents' perceptions of their evaluation. Again, means and standard deviations were calculated. Results are presented below (see Table 2). Overall, superintendents agreed with all 11

statements regarding principal evaluation as all statements had means higher than 3.00. Principals agreed most regarding evaluating the performance of their principals at least once a year ( $M = 3.70$ ,  $SD = 0.47$ ) and agreed least with perceiving their principals viewing their evaluation as valuable feedback ( $M = 3.00$ ,  $SD = 0.31$ ). The total evaluation subscale average score was 3.34 ( $SD = 0.30$ ).

Table 2

*Superintendents' Perceptions regarding their Evaluation of Principals*

Statement	<i>M (SD)</i>
My principal evaluation system clearly articulates a set of standards to rate the performance of my principals.	3.13 (0.63)
At a summative evaluation conference, my principals and I discuss the things we agreed to focus upon during an earlier goal setting conference.	3.35 (0.49)
During a summative evaluation conference, my principals and I analyze the data he/she collected during school year.	3.32 (0.48)
During a summative evaluation conference, my principals and I identify their performance strengths.	3.43 (0.51)
During a summative evaluation conference, my principals and I identify areas in which my principal(s) can improve.	3.50 (0.51)
During a summative evaluation conference, my principals are expected to reflect about their performance.	3.39 (0.58)
My principals view my evaluation as valuable feedback.	3.00 (0.31)
My evaluation accurately reflects my principals' performance.	3.17 (0.49)
The performance of my principals is evaluated at least once a year.	3.70 (0.47)
A variety of information (teacher evaluations, budget, student achievement) are used to evaluate my principals.	3.32 (0.57)
I ask my principals for input concerning their evaluation.	3.43 (0.66)
<i>Total Evaluation Subscale Score</i>	<i>3.34 (0.30)</i>

Note. Scale ranges from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree).

Table 3

*Perceptions of Principals regarding their own supervision based on years of experience*

<i>Statement</i>	<i>0 – 3 years of experience n = 7</i>	<i>More than 3 years of experience n = 16</i>	<i>Effect Size</i>
Principals whose performance is unsatisfactory receive assistance in the forms of a mentor, coach, or other supports.	3.43 (0.54) *	2.81 (0.66)	1.03

*Note.* Scale ranges from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree); \* denotes significance at the  $p < 0.05$  level

### Research Question 3

Research question three asked, “What are the perceptions of novice and experienced superintendents regarding principals’ formative supervision?” Superintendents with three years or less of experience were compared to superintendents with more than three years of experience using an independent *t*-test. Only one significant difference was found between novice and experienced superintendents. The significant result is presented in Table 3. Results of the independent *t*-test indicated there was a significant difference in how novice superintendents supported principals who performance was unsatisfactory compared to experienced superintendents,  $t(21) = 2.18, p < 0.05$ . Specifically, novice superintendents stated principals whose performance is unsatisfactory received additional assistance ( $M = 3.43, SD = 0.54$ ) more than experienced superintendents ( $M = 2.81, SD = 0.66$ ). Cohen’s *d* effect sizes were calculated. The interpretation for Cohen’s *d* is defined as “small,  $d = 0.20$ ,” “medium,  $d = 0.50$ ,” and “large,  $d = 0.80$ ” (Cohen, 1988). The effect size for this significant difference was large ( $d = 1.03$ ).

### Research Question Four

Research question four asked, “What are the greatest strengths of your supervision and evaluation of principals?” Superintendents discussed the importance of communication between principals and superintendents as one strength. One superintendent stated, “...the open communication between my principals and [me] is a strength. It is not a once a year conversation but an ongoing process throughout the school year.” The communication needs to be delivered as “timely feedback in a coaching style...[with] clarity in expectations with ongoing feedback on a weekly basis supported in an evaluation framework focused on a collaborative learning culture supporting teachers supporting student achievement.” The communication also needs

to include “strengths and areas for improvement.” Superintendents do not only provide positive feedback to principals, they also felt it was important to identify areas where they should focus. Superintendents stated the focus of supervision and evaluation is typically on student achievement. While student achievement is important, feedback should also be focused “on instruction and student learning.”

Superintendents also discussed the importance of their previous experiences in the supervision and evaluation cycle. One participant stated, “I have been in their shoes for many years as a building level administrator and continue to understand the intensity of their work.” Superintendents feel their previous experience help them provide feedback to current principals. Their previous experience also allows them to build “a trusting relationship” with principals they are supervising and evaluating. Superintendents past experience allows them to have a difficult conversation with principals when needed. This difficult conversation is uncomplicated if the evaluation of a principal is well planned with adequate time so that the goals are “clearly defined” with focused objectives. “The evaluation should be based on [the] actual evaluation of the administrator and not just artifacts or hearsay.” Overall, superintendents’ communication and experience aid in the supervision and evaluation of principals being constructive, honest, and ongoing.

### Research Question Five

Research question five asked, “What recommendations would you give to improve your supervision and evaluation of principals?” Superintendents discussed improving the supervision and evaluation of principals by the use of formative supervision. One superintendent stated that supervision and evaluation should be more formative and less summative. Supervision and evaluation should also include more coaching and mentoring. Superintendents mentioned the need “to spend more time with” principals in their buildings. One

superintendent stated, “getting direct observation time is my greatest challenge.” Spending more time in school buildings would allow superintendents to build “trust with the administrative team.” Another recommendation from superintendents would be to include opportunities “to set goals and expectations”. If goals and expectations were established then superintendents would be able to support principals throughout the year. “Ultimately, the goal is to create a school community of success.”

### Discussion

This mixed-methods study of superintendents’ perceptions in a rural state was limited to the perceptions of superintendents regarding their supervision and evaluation of principals. The findings can be summarized by the following statements: Overall superintendents were in agreement with 20 out of 20 statements as all statements regarding their supervision and evaluation of principals as all statements had means higher than 2.50. One significant difference was found between novice and experienced superintendents whereas novice superintendents administered assistance to principals whose performance was unsatisfactory more than experienced superintendents. Superintendents reported communication was a strength of the supervision and evaluation process as well as previous experience to develop relationships with principals. Recommendations from superintendents to improve the cycle of supervision and evaluation of principals were directed to develop more formative supervision opportunities by building trust and increasing coaching and mentoring.

Regarding supervision, superintendents reported meeting principals and observing principals as least once a year, which is a recommended practice (Chopin & Wiggall, 2011). During this meeting, principals’ performance is addressed by focusing on student achievement, remediation for marginal teachers and how the school’s faculty will actively engage students in learning (Leithwood, 2010). In addition, superintendents are cognizant of the importance of meaningful feedback to improve the performance of principals during the school year (Hvidston, Range, & McKim, 2015; Micheaux & Parvin, 2018). An important component of supervision is when superintendents “set priorities for instructional leadership, for distributed leadership: for improved student achievement...” (Wells, Maxfield, Klocko, & Feun, 2010, p. 673).

Regarding evaluation, superintendents reported using a clearly articulated set of standards (Catano & Stronge, 2006; Derrington & Sharrat, 2008) to guide a summative evaluative conference which includes a discussion of principal performance based on prior goals. Goal setting is critical part of the evaluation process as 90% of principals report goal setting is included in their evaluation (Fuller, Young, Richardson, Pendla, & Winn, 2018; Sinnema & Robinson, 2012). This conference and the principals’ performance is also based on data and performance strengths. The evaluation should contain areas for principal improvement and principal reflection and should use a variety of information possibly including teacher evaluations, budget, and/or student achievement data (Sanders, & Kearney, & Vince, 2012). Moreover, the evaluation should accurately reflect a principal’s performance and should include input from principals. In one study principals reported most superintendents formally evaluate principals yearly (86%), while nine percent of principals report being evaluated every 2-3 years and four percent of principals were not evaluated (Fuller, Young, Richardson, Pendla, & Winn, 2018).

Results of the independent *t*-test indicated there was a significant difference in how novice superintendents supported principals whose performance was unsatisfactory compared to experienced superintendents. Specifically, novice superintendents stated principals whose performance is unsatisfactory received additional assistance more than experienced principals. Novice superintendents reported that 84% of their superintendent preparation programs prepared them to be an instructional leader and novice superintendents were more frequently employed in rural districts (Kowalski, Petersen, & Fusarelli, 2009).

Communication between superintendents and principals (National School Public Relations Association, 2006) was a critical perceived strength in the supervision and evaluation of principals. An essential component in this communication was timely feedback from the superintendent within a collaborative relationship (Hvidston, Range, & McKim, 2015). Superintendents also described previous experience as a fundamental factor in developing a trusting relationship with principals. Strong relationships between rural principals and superintendents are characterized as “intimate, immediate, and informal” (Forner, Bierlein-Plamer, & Reeves, 2012, p.8).

Recommendations from superintendents to improve the supervision and evaluation of principals focus on the improvement of formative supervision. This process should include more coaching and mentoring as well as the establishment of goals and expectations (Anderson & Turnbull, 2016; Duncan & Stock, 2010; Protheroe, 2009; Vitco, & Bloom, 2010). A needed element in formative supervision from the perspective of superintendents is creating time in principals' buildings for observation of principal performance and providing feedback (Hvidston, McKim, & Holmes, 2018). One possible rationale for the high rating regarding both supervision and evaluation could be with rural staffs, it might be easier to supervise principals by being visible and developing stronger relationships (Boone, 1998).

### Implications

This mixed methods study revealed superintendents' perceptions regarding the supervision and evaluation of principals. Overall superintendents support the supervision and evaluation of principals by engaging in recommended practices. Specifically the recommended practices include meeting with principals to establish goals, observing principals, providing meaningful feedback, with productive summative conferences. As the performance of superintendents is critical to a cycle of supervision and evaluation improving the performance of principals (Hvidston, McKim, Mette, 2016; Honig, 2012), these perceptions of superintendents could be important to practicing principals as well as superintendent preparation programs. As rural superintendents report a lack of adequate training in personnel (Lamkin, 2006), superintendent preparation programs might want to include instructional elements regarding the

supervision and evaluation of principals in course work and be cognizant of the special challenges in rural districts.

It is interesting to note in this study, novice superintendents with three or fewer years of experience were providing assistance to principals whose performance was unsatisfactory more than experienced superintendents. Perhaps, experienced superintendents might have different expectations based their management experience whereas novice superintendents might be more connected with the past rigors of the principalship and the high expectations for academic proficiency because most of the novice superintendents might clearly remember their past principalship. It is interesting to note in a previous study, Hvidston, McKim, & Mette (2016) found novice principals viewed their evaluations with a higher value than experienced principals. Possibly novice superintendents also recognize the importance of remediation and mentoring as more valuable than experienced superintendents.

Although the instructional leadership of superintendents has evolved over the past decades, instructional leadership might look different in rural school districts where rural superintendents are responsible for a variety of different roles. Today's rural superintendents need to build and develop instructional leadership capacity within their principals by providing them with effective supervision and evaluation. Important elements in this process include developing trusting relations based on strong communication and emphasizing formative supervision. Rural school districts need superintendents who are committed to multiplying the effect of their own instructional supervision by advancing the instructional capabilities of their principals.

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