



The Conditions of Superintendents' Work

Although not definitive, evidence suggests that districts face shortages of qualified applicants for the superintendency (e.g., Glass, Bjork, & Brunner, 2000; Van Sciver, 2002). In addressing these shortages, policy makers may find it useful to understand why many educators view the superintendency as desirable, despite the difficulties and limited extrinsic rewards associated with it.

Contributing to this understanding is a study conducted by the Research and Leadership Committee of the Coalition of Rural and Appalachian Schools. In this study, researchers surveyed practicing Ohio superintendents regarding their greatest satisfactions and frustrations with the job. The survey also examined the personal and contextual conditions that influenced superintendents' views of the desirability of the position.

The Study

The researchers asked respondents to rate the extent to which different conditions would be likely to influence an educator's decision to become a superintendent. The conditions included on the questionnaire represented three factors, corresponding to three relevant themes in the literature: (1) satisfaction associated with "Making a Difference," (2) satisfaction associated with "Extrinsic Motivators," such as salary and benefits, and (3) distress associated with "Job Difficulty." The researchers analyzed the data to determine the extent to which superintendents viewed these three factors, and each of the conditions comprising them, as important. Data analysis also examined the effects of personal and contextual characteristics on superintendents' ratings of the importance of each of the three factors.

Research Findings

Superintendents rated *Making a Difference* as the most important condition of their work, *Extrinsic Motivators* as second most important, and *Job Difficulty* as third, with significant differences among all three. Analysis of two open-ended questions provided information about the specific character of superintendents' concerns. Results of this study connect with other findings showing that educators select the profession and remain with it because of their concern for children, respect for knowledge, and commitment to local communities (e.g., Daresh & Playko, 1992; Lortie, 1975).

Personal and Contextual Characteristics

Years of experience, "cosmopolitanism" (defined as greater focus on career opportunities than on remaining in one community), and working in an urban or suburban district were positively associated with ratings on the *Making a Difference* scale. Cosmopolitanism significantly predicted ratings on the *Extrinsic Motivators* scale, indicating, not surprisingly, that career-bound superintendents were more likely than place-bound superintendents to view external rewards as important to the decision to pursue the superintendency (cf., Carlson, 1972). District SES, measured as the percent of students eligible for free or reduced lunch, significantly predicted ratings on the *Job Difficulty* scale. In low-income districts superintendents were more likely to focus on the stressors associated with the job.

Struggles of Appalachian Superintendents

Findings from this study also suggest that the predominantly "localist" superintendents in low-SES, Appalachian districts are less likely than others to focus on making a difference. In fact, these superintendents may be struggling with fundamental problems of survival. Compared to other respondents, Appalachian superintendents rated the following as more salient: "burden of responsibility for federal, state, and local mandates," "accountability for outcomes beyond an educator's control," and "low levels of board support." Preoccupied with concerns about funding, meeting standards, and unsupportive boards, these superintendents may not regard themselves as having much efficacy.

Similar to district leaders in Appalachian Ohio, superintendents from rural, under-funded districts in other states report concerns about unfunded mandates (e.g., Rosborough, 1990) and board interference (e.g., Grady & Bryant, 1988). A recent survey (Public Agenda, 2001) also found that superintendents nationwide were worried about insufficient funding and the "unreasonable demands brought about by higher standards and accountability."

Local Level Recommendations

School boards can provide support by distinguishing their work from that of the superintendent. Avoiding "micro-management," boards can focus on goal-setting, policy development, consensus-building, and collaborative

decision-making (Mountford & Brunner, 1999; Van Alfen & Schmidt, 1997). Boards can also help district CEOs make a difference by evaluating these leaders in consideration of realistic and measurable goals for school improvement (see e.g., Castallo, 1999; Peterson, 1989).

State Level Recommendations

Recent history suggests that state policy makers tend to support explicit accountability regulations as the means to school improvement (e.g., Wise, 1988). Superintendents in Ohio, like those elsewhere (e.g., D'Amico & Corcoran, 1985), however, feel burdened by unfunded and intrusive accountability mandates. The situation is particularly acute in resource-poor districts such as those in Appalachian Ohio. Considering the limited impact (see e.g., Haney, 2000) as well as the undesirable consequences of accountability mandates, state policy makers should exercise caution in using this approach.

Conclusions

For many Ohio superintendents, particularly those in underfunded Appalachian districts, leadership opportunities seem to be constrained by pressing problems that might aptly be construed as "survival" issues. Obtaining reasonable levels of funding, gaining the support of their communities and school boards, and dealing with legislative mandates appear to be the major concerns of these district administrators. This study suggests that the superintendency might become increasingly desirable to Ohio educators if leaders in all districts were given adequate levels of support and as well as sufficient freedom to focus on meaningful core functions.

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