Will the Real "Open-door Policy" Please Stand Up:
Superintendent-Board Communication in Two Effective Rural Districts[1]

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Abstract

Based on case studies of several effective school districts, the research sought to answer the following questions: Which superintendent-board communication practices are used? How does communication work to advance or impede continuous improvement? Analysis of data from the two rural districts included in the study showed that differences were more pronounced than similarities. Despite the fact that the superintendents of both districts claimed to have an "open-door" policy, only one of the districts actually implemented the policy in meaningful ways. The superintendent in this district (1) involved the board in a wide range of issues, (2) shared information willingly, and (3) accorded the board an active role in evaluating his performance. There was also far more contention in the relationships between the superintendent and various constituencies in the district in which the "open-door" policy was more rhetorical than real.

Introduction

There is a considerable body of research on superintendent-school board relationships, but most of it focuses on narrowly defined features of the relationship, such as the communication vectors preferred by superintendents and school board members or their perceptions of the importance of various educational issues. Some research also looks at the roles and leadership styles of each party to the relationship, and a few descriptive studies examine the nature of the relationship itself. In some cases, researchers have sought to identify the features of effective relationships in order to offer guidance to districts where relationships are less effective. Land (2002) noted, however, that the connection between purportedly effective practices and districts' performance has not been established empirically. Moreover, as Land also claimed, few studies have provided detailed portraits of the relationship between boards and superintendents or explored how features of the relationship function to promote or impede performance.

What the extant literature does suggest is that (1) discord between a board and its superintendent tends to detract from educational focus and (2) the major source of such discord is role conflict (e.g., Wood, 1990). Such conflict is often explained in terms of the purported tendency of local boards to overstep their bounds through efforts to "micromanage" district operations (Land, 2002). Rarely in recent literature is such discord examined in light of an *inevitable* tension between lay governance and professional management of local schools (cf. Callahan, 1962). Nevertheless, a phenomenon that some researchers term "perceptual incongruence" between boards and superintendents (e.g., Feuerstein & Opfer, 1998; Mountford & Brunner, 1999) may point

to deep and persistent conflicts between communities and professional educators over the aims and practices of schooling (e.g., Owen, 2006).

Such dynamics are often evident in rural communities, where citizens try to sustain local control despite state and national policies that press for centralization (e.g., Theobald & Nachtigal, 1995). Moreover, in many rural communities, the effort to consolidate or close schools creates polarization between professional educators and local community members (e.g., Peshkin, 1982).

With the current study we intended to add to the extant literature by exploring the commonalities and differences in practices characterizing superintendent-board communication in effective districts. Because we were interested in how such practices might contribute to district effectiveness, we included only districts that were reputed to be effective. At the outset, we anticipated that we might discover a set of *uniform* communication practices used in all of the effective districts included in the study and thereby potentially establishing a basis for communication *effectiveness*. Alternately, we recognized the possibility that we might see little commonality in communication practices across the districts, a finding suggesting that no particular set of practices is required in order to promote effective district-level performance.

To explore these dynamics in depth, we posed the following general research questions regarding superintendent-board communication in effective districts: What communication practices are used? How does communication work to advance or impede continuous improvement?

Review of Literature

Although there are very few published studies that focus specifically on the communication between superintendents and school board members, there are a number of studies that consider related issues such as the character of relationships between superintendents and board members, superintendents' and board members' role clarity and role ambiguity, and critical incidents associated with board members' assessment of superintendents' performance. In this review, we divide the related literature into two periods. Studies conducted before 1990 tended to examine superintendent-board relationships without making reference to district effectiveness. After 1990, studies generally paid greater attention to the way superintendent-board relationships influenced districts' performance. The division between what we are calling "early research" and what we are calling "recent research" is, however, arbitrary, because it is solely based on publication dates. Some early research did consider performance outcomes, and some recent research ignores them. But, in the main, the division seems useful. We conclude the literature review with a recapitulation of the themes from research that specifically focused on rural districts.

Early Research

Whereas some early research focused on specific features of the relationship between boards and superintendents, other studies explored power dynamics more globally. In important ways, both sets of studies focused on the nature and ramifications of a system of educational governance in which lay boards and professional educators are required to work together to operate public schools.

One early source of information about this shared process of governance came from research in which superintendents and school board members responded to surveys. For example, some surveys focused on the skills, personal qualities, and role performance that board members expected from their superintendent (e.g., Alkire, 1988). A study conducted by Perkins (1981) found that board presidents generally considered a superintendent's most important functions to be (1) monitoring the progress of the district, (2) communicating on behalf of the district, and (3) overseeing the daily operation of the schools. In a study conducted by Haugland (1987), by contrast, board members ranked personnel management as the most important task of the superintendent, with school finance and curriculum development ranked second and third respectively. Based on a national study of board presidents in rural districts, Kennedy and Barker (1987) found that board presidents rated the following attributes as most important for superintendents: skills in interpersonal relations and communication, skills in financial and organizational management, and good moral character and personality. Studies conducted in different locales and in districts of different sizes suggested that context influenced the nature of superintendents' work and the character of their relationships with local school boards (e.g., Littleton & Turner, 1984).

Interestingly, a more complex rendering of these issues was provided by research on power dynamics that preceded the studies described above. McCarty and Ramsey's (1971) interpretation of board-superintendent relations suggested that community type influenced the role behavior of superintendents and board members. According to these authors, different types of communities had characteristic power structures that influenced power dynamics among interest groups, the board, and the superintendent.

In the dominated community power structure, where one special interest group dominated the board, the superintendent served as a functionary. The factional community power structure, by contrast, incorporated competing interest groups that vied for control. Here, the board included members from the competing factions, and the superintendent functioned as a political strategist, cooperating with the majority but mediating on behalf of vocal minorities. The pluralistic community power structure included many active interest groups, and board members formed coalitions with different groups depending on the issue. Despite their propensity to shift alliances, however, board members shared fundamental values and a strong commitment to the district. In this type of community superintendents took on the role of professional advisor: They expended considerable energy on work directed toward improving collaboration and district performance. With an inert community power structure, the community tended to be apathetic toward school issues; and lacking pressure from the community, the board tended to be a "rubber stamp" for the superintendent's decisions.

Overall, early research acknowledged the importance of a positive working relationship between the superintendent and the board. Generally, researchers equated a positive relationship with appropriate differentiation of roles. At the same time, researchers identified conditions in which role conflict and ambiguity or in which the domination of one party to the relationship compromised the effectiveness of efforts to govern school districts.

Recent Research

Although recent research concerning communication between district superintendents and school board members is limited, several in-depth studies do exist.

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These studies provide evidence regarding the factors that may affect such communication. For example, recognizing the link between power and communication, some researchers have focused on the power relations underlying community members' motives for seeking school board membership (Alsbury, 2003; Mountford, 2004). Other studies have investigated the effects of superintendents' social influence (Peterson & Short, 2001) and the relationship between administrative behavior (including communication) and student achievement (Land, 2002; Rice et al, 2000).

One insight clearly emerged from these studies. In investigations of perceptions of superintendents' and board members' attitudes, influence, and behavior, quantitative data often failed to provide an adequate representation of what was going on (Alsbury, 2003; Peterson & Short, 2001). Because each school district contends with a unique set of local problems and demographics (Alsbury, 2003), the dynamics of the relationship between its superintendent and board members is complex and idiosyncratic. Several researchers stressed the need for qualitative investigations of the dynamics of communication between administrative personnel and board of education members (Alsbury, 2003; Mountford, 2004; Peterson & Short, 2001).

Two related factors that affect communication between superintendents and board members are role ambiguity and role conflict (Alsbury, 2003; Moore 1998; Mountford, 2004; Rice et al, 2000). Sometimes board members lack clarity about the scope and limitations of their role, and administrators sometimes resent the intrusion of citizens into the professional work of school leadership. Furthermore, there may be differences in the ways the role of superintendent is perceived in urban in contrast to rural areas. For example, some urban districts now view the superintendent as the district's chief

executive officer and, as a result, choose to hire superintendents from outside the field of education (Eisinger & Hula, 2004). This approach provides a distinct contrast to the more traditional functions of educational leadership that most rural and small-district superintendents continue to perform.

Rural Trends

Some of the changes in the superintendency that are occurring in urban districts contrast sharply with what is taking place in small, rural school districts. Nevertheless, because more than 70% of superintendents serve districts with fewer than 3000 students (Glass, Bjork, & Brunner, 2000), the unique aspects of communication within smaller communities certainly warrants examination. While quantitative studies have shown that boards in most such communities claim to have a positive relationship with their superintendent (Glass et al., 2000; Rice et al, 2000), qualitative investigations of individual school districts have shown otherwise (Alsbury, 2003; Moore, 1998). Although research results from qualitative studies cannot be generalized, findings from such studies of superintendent-board relationships do provide significant insights into some of the problems that rural school districts face.

As most researchers of school district dynamics acknowledge, the relationship between the superintendent and board president is crucial (Peterson & Short, 2001). In a small or rural community, individuals are more likely to be acquainted with one another on a personal level, and the social familiarity between the superintendent and the board president often is especially important (Peterson & Short, 2001). One study found that as many as 75% of rural school board members were raised in the same community in which they were serving (Rice et al, 2000). This study also identified schools where as

many as 60% of the teachers were working in the schools they had attended as students (Rice et al, 2000).

The attitude of superintendents and school board members toward one another is especially important in smaller communities because these attitudes tend to be pervasive throughout such communities (Rice et al, 2000; Peterson & Short, 2001). According to some researchers, successful districts clearly define the roles that superintendents and board members should assume, and in these districts all parties strive to work together. In less successful districts, by contrast, administrators and board members tend to blame others for the problems that exist, rather than working together to find solutions (Peterson & Short, 2001; Rice et al, 2000). These dynamics are evident even in case studies of individual districts (Moore, 1998). In smaller communities, an individual board member or a group of community members can cause significant difficulties (Alsbury, 2003; Moore, 1998). Some research suggests that motives for school board membership and the perceived power it entails are changing (Mountford, 2004). According to some research, even one contentious board member can have a major impact on communication with the superintendent and the overall functioning of the school board (Alsbury, 2003).

Sometimes in smaller communities the interests of district administrators and of community members seem to become polarized. This circumstance is likely to occur in districts where the administrators see themselves as protecting students from a community that does not care about education (Moore, 1998). According to Mountford (2004), however, this perspective of district administrators indicates a disturbing lack of awareness of the socioeconomic realities confronting constituents, and it also draws into

question the motives that certain individuals have for seeking positions of leadership within school districts. Despite case studies revealing contention in some districts, other studies report on highly collaborative relationships between superintendents and school boards in rural communities (Glass et al., 2000; Peterson & Short 2001; Rice et al, 2000). Clearly, additional qualitative research is needed in order to provide a fuller understanding of the character of board-superintendent relationship in rural communities as well as the antecedents and ramifications of various dynamics associated with rural district governance.

Methods

Seeking districts thought to be effective, the research team contacted the eight major educational organizations in the state as well as the state education agency and asked their leaders to nominate "effective" districts in rural, suburban, and urban communities. Compiling the nominations from these organizations, the team then ranked districts on the basis of the number of nominations received. Those with the greatest number of nominations comprised the set from which study sites were chosen. A member of the research team contacted these districts in order to see which of these would be willing to serve as study sites. Of the districts that agreed to participate, two were rural and one was suburban. Review of state accountability data also confirmed that the districts were effective. Both rural districts, moreover, worked with fairly large populations of economically disadvantaged students. Table 1 in the "Findings" section below provides relevant information about the two rural districts.

In each of the districts, one member of the research team conducted interviews with the superintendent, other central-office administrators, the board president, one or

more additional board members, other community members who had information about communication between the superintendent and the board, the district's principals, and the superintendent's secretary. The interviewer used a semi-structured interview schedule as a way to gather comparable information across sites and informants. The questions on the interview schedule were, however, open-ended in order to encourage participants to provide extended responses. (See Appendix A for a copy of the interview schedule.) The research team obtained interviews from 11 participants in the suburban district, nine participants in one rural district, and 11 participants in the other rural district.

The researchers transcribed audiotapes of the interviews, and one researcher created a fine-grained set of inductive codes in an effort to identify the meanings implicit in the participants' comments. She used Atlas-TI to develop and apply a set of 66 initial codes. Review of the codes and their interrelationships enabled members of the research team to agree on the presence of five categories of data: data about the frequency of communication, the methods of communication, the topical focus of communication, the dynamics of communication, and the quality of communication. Using matrices to compare data from the three districts, the researchers discovered very straightforward commonalities across four of the five categories. They observed salient differences in communication dynamics, and these contributed to the identification and interpretation of emergent themes.

Findings

This section first presents information about the two rural districts, describing their context and providing evidence of their effectiveness. Next it presents findings

about the rather superficial set of commonalities identified in the categories of data relating to frequency of communication, methods of communication, topical focus of communication, and quality of communication. Finally, it examines salient differences between the districts that contribute to the identification of two emergent themes: "openness is relative" and "conflict trumps communication."

District Profiles

District A encompasses a small town of approximately 2000 people and the surrounding rural countryside. Located along the Ohio River, the town is situated within a relatively low-density metropolitan statistical area. Nevertheless, the district also serves students from rural places further from the river. The locale of the elementary school is currently identified by the National Center for Education Statistics (2008) as rural fringe, while the locale of the middle school and high school, which are located in town, is classified as a mid-sized suburb. Most students who attend the school, however, are not residents of the town.[2]

Residents of District A tend to have extremely low incomes—a 2006-07 median income of $23, 469 in comparison to the State's overall median income of $30,362 (Ohio Department of Education, 2008). As a result, a large percentage of the district's children qualify for free or reduced-price lunches (61% at the elementary school and 83% at the high school).[3] These indicators of poverty reveal a community in decline rather than one

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[2] Considering that 81.5% of county residents are either over 18 or under five and therefore that the school-aged population more or less encompasses 18.5% of all residents, we conclude that the district's enrollment of 1300 students is mostly comprised of students from areas outside the town limits. With 2000 residents in the town itself, we calculate that approximately 370 students or 29% of all students come from the town, whereas approximately 930 students or 61% of all students come from the surrounding countryside.

[3] The NCES Common Core of Data reports a 0% free and reduced lunch rate for the middle school—an obvious error considering the high rates reported for the elementary and high schools.

that never prospered. In past generations farming was more lucrative; and blue-collar jobs in factories, steel mills, and on the railroad were far more numerous.

With regard to the racial and ethnic makeup of the school community, there is considerable homogeneity; in fact, 98% of the population under the age of 18 is classified as non-Hispanic white (NCES, 2008). Information available only at a county-level of aggregation—while unable to provide an exact accounting of circumstances confronting the district, nevertheless offer some insights about district demographics and economics. The comparisons presented in Table 1 reveal hardships in the county in which District A is located—indicators of conditions typical of Appalachian Ohio and the Appalachian counties in surrounding states: aging population, lower than average educational attainment, higher unemployment, and lower real property wealth.

Table 1: Comparison between County A and State on Key Indicators*

Indicator	County A	Ohio
% of population over 65	14.5%	13.3%
% of persons over 25 with a high school diploma	75.6%	83.0%
% of persons over 25 with a bachelor's degree or higher	10.3%	21.1%
Unemployment rate	4.5%	3.2%
Median value of owner-occupied housing units	$69,400	$103,700

* Data obtained from US Census Bureau (2008). These represent actual data from the 2000 census.

As these data indicate, the district and the region in which it is located face considerable challenges. Nevertheless, the schools have performed extremely well under the circumstances. In 2006-07, the district received the accountability rating of "effective;" its students' performance on State accountability tests equaled or exceeded

State-mandated criteria in 75% of cases. Table 2 presents a longitudinal view of the performance of both districts—with performance operationalized as the percentage of the total number of accountability tests for which performance equaled or exceeded State-mandated criteria. For example, in 2006-07, the State measured district performance on 28 accountability tests, and the district met or exceeded State-mandated criteria (i.e., required percentage of students passing the test) for 21 of them.

Table 2: Percentage of Accountability Tests Achieving Mandated Proficiency Rates

District	2006-2007	2005-2006	2004-2005	2003-2004	2002-2003
A	75.00%	82.61%	90.48%	93.75%	85.00%
B	82.14%	100.00%	95.24%	87.50%	80.00%

District B serves a mostly rural area of approximately 10,000 residents. Located in east central Ohio, the area is home to several light industrial operations but derives most of its economy from agriculture and tourism. The school district encompasses 119 square miles and is situated in close proximity to several large urban areas. The district enrolls 1,827 students in grades K-12. There is one middle school/high school complex serving 800 students in grades 7-12 and two elementary schools serving approximately 500 students each.

According to the Ohio Department of Taxation (2008), the median income of the district's residents was $26,907 in the 2006-07 tax year. This is below the state's median income of $30,362. The effect of this comparatively low income level is reflected in the 33.4% of the district's students who are eligible for free or reduced price lunches – 42% at the elementary buildings and 22% at the high school. However, due, in part, to the dependence on agriculture and tourism, the economic base of the community has remained fairly stable. The light industrial firms within the district are all long-term

employers in the area. Also, many residents commute to nearby urban areas to work in health care, higher education, and manufacturing.

According to Ohio Department of Education (2008) data, the student population of District B is classified as 99.0% white with an almost equal number of females and males across all grade levels. Somewhat atypical for small rural districts in Ohio is the 99.8% graduation rate for District B in 2006.

Table 3, below, contains data from the Ohio Department of Development (2008) and from the Ohio Job and Family Services (2008) pertaining to the county in which District B is situated.

Table 3: Comparison between County B and State on Key Indicators

Indicator	County B	State
% of population over 65	15.0%	13.3%
% of persons over 25 with high school diploma	48.2%	83.0%
% of persons over 25 with bachelor's degree or higher	12.2%	21.1%
Unemployment rate (November, 2007)	5.9	5.7
Median value of owner-occupied housing units	$88,100	$103,700

These data reveal some differences between County B and counties such as County A that are more typical of Appalachia. For example, in County B 42.2% of the married couples include two adults in the work force, compared with 31% in County A. Median household income in County B is $35,489 compared with $29,127 in County A. The median value of a home in County A is $69,400 compared with the higher figure cited above for County B.

While still considered a poor, rural district, these data might also indicate a greater capacity in District B for supporting schools and educational attainment. The

schools in District B have also distinguished themselves with comparatively high levels

of achievement. According to criteria established under Ohio's assessment and

accountability system, the high school in District B was rated "excellent" for the 2006

school year, having met all 16 of the state indicators for proficiency. Results of the 2006

Ohio Graduation Test reveal a passage rate of 96.7% in reading and 89.3% in

mathematics for District B. One of the elementary schools in District B was named an

NCLB Blue Ribbon School in 2003 and, for the past two years, has been designated as a

"School of Promise" by the Ohio Department of Education. Table 2 (above) also shows

proficiency test performance in District B over a five-year period.

Superficial Commonalities

　　　　Members of the school community in both districts talked about the frequent

communication between the superintendent and board members. In one of the districts,

several interviewees described the amount of communication as "almost constant." In the

other, interviewees described it as "timely," "detailed," and a "two-way street." In fact,

interviewees in both districts described the superintendent's perspective on

communication as reflective of an "open-door" policy.

　　　　Methods of communication were also common across the districts. In both,

superintendents and board members used a combination of formal and informal channels

for sharing ideas and making decisions. Formal channels included board meetings,

packets of information sent prior to board meetings, and official newsletters. Informal

channels included telephone calls, memos, emails, and occasional face-to-face meetings.

　　　　Topics of communication were also similar in the two districts. They ranged from

broad considerations such as vision and mission of the district and instructional

improvement to more focused matters such as personnel issues, construction projects, and specific curriculum proposals.

Underlying Differences

Despite some apparent similarities, data analysis showed that there were important differences between the communication approaches in the two rural districts. The claim that the superintendent implemented an "open-door" policy, which was made by interviewees in both districts, seemed to be put into practice in meaningful ways in only one of them. Furthermore, there was a clear difference in the extent to which the two superintendents were viewed as contentious by various constituents. These differences in communication dynamics can be summarized using the categorization scheme presented below in Table 4.

Table 4: Communication Dynamics—Coding Scheme

Category	Category	Category Definition
Openness	Open-door	Meaning of "open-door" policy
	Board involvement	Level of board involvement in different types of decisions
	Disclosure	Amount of information disclosed to the board
	Oversight	Extensiveness of the board's involvement in evaluating the superintendent
Contentiousness	Conflict board-superintendent	Extent of conflict between the board and the superintendent
	Conflict union-superintendent	Extent of conflict between the board and the teachers union

Openness

The superintendents in the districts differed with regard to "openness" when this construct was taken to mean (1) involving the board in serious consideration of a wide range of issues, (2) sharing a great deal of relevant information with the board, and (3)

willingly according the board an active role in evaluating the superintendent's performance. Their "openness" was similar only with regard to the language used to characterize their approach. Despite their different practices, an "open-door" policy was attributed to both school leaders.

Nevertheless, a fine-grained comparison of what an "open-door" policy meant to participants in the two districts demonstrated how different these superintendents' communication practices actually were. For example, in District B, the Vice President of the board reported, "If there's something … important, he'll catch me day or night. So, in that area, it's pretty free and open communication. There's no structure to it." By contrast, the expectation in District A was that openness depended on the routine use of structured approaches to communication, as the following comment illustrates:

> This is the only district I have ever worked in where they have scheduled two meetings a month. The first meeting is always one where … issues are discussed, as kind of an information [item], asking for permission to proceed with projects. And the second meeting is one where we will actually take action: a lot of discussion in the first, and in the second, business. But in between memos, one page overviews, the superintendent's constantly updating us the day after every board meeting, so communication is always open.

Variability in the approaches to superintendent-board communication reflected sharp differences in how participants in each district viewed the role of their board. In District B, school administrators saw board involvement as a required (and often unwelcome) step in the process of implementing the superintendent's agenda, viewing the board as a body from which to elicit consent rather than a body from which to elicit ideas and

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meaningful dialog. As one administrator in the district disclosed, "I think the board kind of … goes along to get along or however you want to put it, you know, just that....I don't know if the board [members] are the ones holding all the real power."

Furthermore, in this district, administrators expressed an interest in limiting communication with the board. For example, one principal in the district shared, "Sometimes I question in my own mind, do we provide them too much information about situations?" According to another, "I'm growing as a person to eventually become a superintendent, and sometimes I think the board members know just a little too much." A third principal responded in a similar way, "I would like to see the board have the relevant information they need. Sometimes I think they get too much information."

In contrast to these comments in which administrators in District B revealed their desire to restrict the involvement of the board, comments from participants in District A illustrated high levels of receptivity to the involvement of board members. For example, the high school principal in the district characterized the interaction between the board and the superintendent as "talking back and forth." And the President of the board described the board's on-going involvement in decisions regarding the curriculum:

> Yes, all new programs like reading programs, math programs, they are all
> presented to us, and we try to have a board meeting at each building. And then
> that way they present any new programs [and these are] either denied or adopted
> by the board. So we have the final say of whether we want this reading program
> or this math program. And usually after they get together as a group, and then the
> curriculum director and the superintendent, then they recommend what we finally
> adopt. So we are really involved in all of that.

Comments from participants also suggested that differences in superintendent-board communication in the two districts reflected superintendents' leadership practices more than they reflected differences in the expectations or interests of the board or dynamics in the local communities. An interviewee in District A, for example, described the superintendent's leadership in the following way:

> I think his method of administration is that he works with them hand in hand trying to reach whatever goals they come up with together for our district and what direction they would like to see as a community.

A contrasting description exemplifies the leadership of the superintendent in District B: "We just...usually, it's just...what he wants us to know. Or if it deals with us...*we don't hear a lot, just what he wants us to know.*" Providing a similar critique, the board president commented,

> Sometimes, if there's … little things that aren't going so great, you don't always hear about them. Maybe [you hear] after the fact. And, I think although you don't hear the bad things, sometimes I would like to hear those communicated a little better.

Contentiousness

Just as "openness" differed across the two districts, so too did "contentiousness." In particular, the superintendent in District A appeared to engage in far more amicable relationships than did the superintendent in District B. Different levels of contentiousness were particularly evident in the communications between each superintendent and the teachers' union in the two districts.

With regard to the relationship between District A's superintendent and board members, words like "collaborative," "focused," and "forthright" seem to characterize the impressions reported by respondents. For example, the elementary principal described the relationship in this way:

> I think his method of administration is that he works with them hand and hand trying to reach whatever goals they come up with together for our district and what direction they would like to see as a community.

Particularly illustrative of this approach is the description that the superintendent provided about a critical incident that had occurred in the district. His commentary, though somewhat lengthy, is included to illustrate the type of moral reasoning on which his forthright communication with the board was grounded.

> With a particular issue that happened recently … my feeling was because the sensitivity of the issue, you needed to talk with the board president. I didn't want to spread information about a sensitive issue about a staff member if it didn't need to be done. Well, I got a call from the board president on Sunday saying that "I've been to church in the local community. This is out; I think maybe we need to talk with all of the board members about this." I had already spoken [about it] because one had contacted me, so I … said, "Good idea. I'll call the rest of them just to let them know that in fact these allegations have been brought forward and it's in the investigative stage at this point." I always try to [be open], and this was a little bit different because it was one of those issues that I didn't want to get going in the community, but once it was out there then I think they needed to know, and I told them immediately. I think they appreciate that.

The superintendent in District A also had a forthright and amicable relationship with union leadership. He met with union leaders once a month in order to engage in dialog and collaborative problem-solving. In fact, the district's union president indicated that the positive relationship that the teachers had with the superintendent and the board made the district a "great place to work."

In District B, frequent communication between the board and superintendent appeared to sustain a relationship of mutual trust. In fact, the board president described communication as "family-like," a comment certainly suggesting that the relationship between the board and the superintendent was amicable. Nevertheless, some evidence also seemed to indicate that the price of an amicable relationship might have been the boards' acquiescence to the superintendent's point of view. The superintendent, for example, talked about "conflicts of micro-management" between himself and the board in such a way as to suggest a rather authoritarian stance. In describing his response to these conflicts, he said,

> We've gone into executive session, we've had work sessions, and I've been very point-blank about the situation and how it is. And, it's a face-to-face resolve, and we say exactly what's on our mind, and we get it resolved. But, you know, I can't always say that it's pretty.

Whereas the claim of contentiousness between the superintendent and the board is arguable, a high level of contentiousness in the relationship between the superintendent and the teachers' association seemed quite evident. Several respondents talked about conflicts between the superintendent and the union, indicating that the relationship had become strained. The teachers had apparently held a vote to demonstrate their lack of

confidence in the superintendent, and they threatened to strike. One respondent—a community journalist—explicitly described a critical incident to which others had just alluded:

> The superintendent was involved in a kind of bizarre situation with some emails. This is probably four or five months ago, in which he was shooting emails back to, between him and someone he was, I think he referred to as his "cousin." And he said at one point that—they were having a union battle at the time with the teachers, and it got very testy. At one point he was sending emails back and forth to his cousin, and she made some comment about something that appeared in the paper, just about the teachers said they were "fed up" or something like that, and he said—jokingly, I think—but I mean, it was just an email so you don't really know, he said, "I'd like to smack every one of them." And, that—what happened was, those emails were released, ok, because what happened was, I think, somebody hacked in, or they had some sort of security problem. And, actually, the technology coordinator ended up getting fired over it.

This incident not only revealed the on-going tension between the superintendent and the union but also indicated the extent to which communication—even private communiqués—reflected and influenced the relationship between the superintendent and constituent groups, in this case the teachers and also some members of the local community.

Discussion

Findings from this study provide insights about the role of communication in the governance of rural school districts. First, as has been reported elsewhere, communication and the relationships it supports are crucial to the smooth operation of districts. Particularly in small rural communities, open communication between the superintendent and the board fosters collaboration and builds trust. Nevertheless, the extent to which effective communication and amicable relationships influence district performance is not clear. In this study both districts were equally effective in producing academic achievement, but the dynamics associated with their governance were markedly different.

The latter claim seems to run counter to literature about school leadership that argues for a causal link between aligned efforts directed toward student achievement and high performance (e.g., Waters & Marzano, 2006). In District B there may have been some alignment, but the superintendent's, board members', and teachers' focus had clearly been directed away from student achievement toward other matters. Perhaps their loss of focus was too short-lived to exert an influence on student achievement. Possibly the critical incident described in this study will have an impact on district performance in years to come. Or maybe structures in place at the building level work to protect the teaching-learning process (what some call the "technical core") from outside threats, including those produced by the superintendent, board, and teachers' union. In any case, one can imagine superintendent-board or superintendent-union relationships that are so contentious that they do disrupt the technical core, and some researchers have reported on such occurrences (e.g., Kerchner, 1991). A useful next step in this line of research would

be to explore the conditions that determine districts' resilience in the face of inevitable conflict, because few districts—even those peaceful ones like District A—are completely free from conflict.

In addition, the study provided evidence of the suspicion with which professionals in some districts regard representatives of the local community. Notably, the concern of administrators in District B to limit citizen's engagement in meaningful decision-making brought to mind findings from earlier studies (e.g., Callahan, 1962; Owen, 2006: Peshkin, 1982). Nevertheless, the example provided by District A suggests that it is possible for professional educators and community members to share responsibility for governance of schools through open communication, maintenance of trust, and attentiveness to educational priorities.

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