



Coalition of Rural and Appalachian Schools

RESEARCH BULLETIN

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Superintendent-Board Communication in Rural Districts

Although it seems logical to speculate that effective communication between superintendents and school board members would lead to high performance, there is limited empirical research that investigates such a linkage (Land, 2002). In fact, the research on superintendent-board communication tends to focus on narrow issues such as the extent to which superintendents and board members share perspectives on educational issues or the frequency with which they use particular communication vectors. There are very few studies, moreover, that use qualitative methods to provide detailed and nuanced information about the dynamics of communication between superintendents and board members.

In order to investigate such dynamics in rural communities, the Coalition of Rural and Appalachian Schools sponsored a study focusing on the commonalities and differences in practices characterizing superintendent-board communication. Because the research team was interested in how such practices might contribute to district effectiveness, the study included only districts that were reputed to be effective.

The Study

The team selected two rural districts from a list of effective districts generated by leaders of Ohio's major educational organizations. Review of state accountability data also confirmed that the rural districts on the list were high performers. To gather data in each of the districts, one member of the research team conducted interviews with the superintendent, other central-office administrators, the board president, other board members, community members who had relevant information, the district's principals, and the superintendent's secretary. The interviewer asked a series of open-ended questions in an effort to ensure that responses would be detailed but also comparable across sites and informants. Using transcripts of the interviews, the researchers coded the data and then organized the codes into broader categories. This process resulted in an interpretation that used the following five categories to make sense of the data: the frequency of communica-

tion, the methods of communication, the topical focus of communication, the dynamics of communication, and the quality of communication.

The Districts

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.

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 Findings: Commonalities and Differences

Members of the school community in both districts talked about the *frequent communication* between the superintendent and board members. 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.

Despite these similarities, there were two important differences between the communication approaches in the two rural districts. First, the reported “open-door policy” was implemented quite differently in each of the districts. Second, there was a clear difference in the extent to which the two superintendents were involved in contentious relationships with certain constituencies.

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. In fact, a fine-grained comparison of what the “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.

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.

With regard to the relationship between District A’s superintendent and board members, words like “collaborative,” “focused,” and “forthright” characterize the impressions reported by respondents. 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 comments from informants also seemed to indicate that the price of an amicable relationship was the board’s acquiescence to the superintendent’s point of view. Moreover, the relationship between District B’s superintendent and the

teachers’ association was notably strained. By contrast, the superintendent in District A had a forthright and friendly relationship with union leadership. He met with union leaders once a month in order to engage in dialog and collaborative problem-solving.

Clear Patterns and Continuing Questions

Findings from this study provide insights about the role of communication in the governance of rural school districts. First, communication and the relationships it supports are crucial to the smooth operation of districts. In small rural communities and perhaps elsewhere, open communication between the superintendent and the board fosters collaboration and builds trust. Effective communication also appears to depend on superintendents’ use of three practices: (1) making sure communication is frequent, (2) directing the board’s attention to issues of significance to district operations, and (3) providing both formal and informal channels of communication.

Despite the apparent value of these practices, the extent to which effective communication influences district performance is not clear. After all, both districts in this study were equally effective in producing academic achievement even though the dynamics associated with their governance were markedly different.

Additional research is needed to answer the questions that findings from this study raise. Among these are research questions relating to specific dynamics in rural districts:

- To what extent and in what ways are educational activities influenced by the relationship between the superintendent and the school board?
- What leadership practices are effective in repairing damaged relationships between superintendents and key constituencies?

Also important are research questions focusing on the extent to which dynamics identified in these rural districts apply to other rural districts and to districts in other locales. Two questions illustrate this line of inquiry:

- In what ways does the communication between urban (or suburban) superintendents and school board members affect district operations and performance?
- How does the complexity of an urban district influence the dynamics of superintendent-board communications?



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