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ABSTRACT

As demands for accountability are heightened and job expectations become increasingly unrealistic, people are less interested in entering the superintendency or staying in it if they already have it. This study explored motivators and inhibitors that contribute to a person's decision to become a superintendent and remain in the superintendency. Of 259 superintendents in Texas school districts who received questionnaires by mail, 231 responded. Data were analyzed statistically. Results showed that motivating factors included focusing on the community's vision and making it a reality, love of job, and commitment to education. Inhibiting factors included fractious community politics, self-imposed unreasonable demands, and stress. It is recommended that superintendents be challenged to remain focused on their commitment to education and helping people, and that the local community, led by school boards, do all that they can to support superintendents in their work. Additionally, superintendents should be provided an avenue for sharing their successes with the local and broader educational communities. To overcome these obstacles, communities and school boards must also work with individual superintendents to better understand the negative factors of the job and, thus, encourage quality administrators to stay on the job. (Contains 51 references and 2 tables.) (RT)

Take this Job and LOVE It! A Study of Why Superintendents Stay or Leave

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Take this job and LOVE it! Why Superintendents Stay

The role of the school superintendent is filled with external pressures often played out in the arena of public criticism. This role has undergone significant change in recent years and today, there is more emphasis on curriculum and instruction, planning for the future, involving others in decision making, improving student achievement (Short & Scribner, 2000), managing fiscal resources (Thompson, Wood & Honeyman, 1994), and building cultural leadership (Schwahn & Spady, 1998). In fact, Houston (2001) writes that the superintendent must provide the "final answer" (p. 429) while being responsible for all aspects of the organization. Glass, Bjork, and Brunner (2000) report that nearly 60 percent of superintendents surveyed report that community pressure groups operate in their district. Certainly, superintendents are not strangers to controversy (Dennis, 1997), especially as the superintendency has become more and more a political job which must respond to diverse community needs (Keedy & Bjork, 2001).

Today superintendents must face conflict over values and interests, increased political activism, challenges to purposes and goals of education, and many other issues (Keedy & Bjork, 2001). At the same time, superintendents have many tremendous opportunities to change children's lives, alter organizations, and influence entire communities (Houston, 2001). In fact, newly appointed Education Secretary, Rod Paige, asserts that "there is no more important job than that of leading effective public schools" (Snapshot of a leader, p. 26). Yet, as the demands for accountability are heightened, and the expectations are more and more unrealistic, people are less interested in becoming superintendents or staying in this role if they already have it (Goodman & Zimmerman, 1999; Houston, 2001). Therefore the purpose of this study was to explore motivators and inhibitors that contribute to a superintendent's decision to become a superintendent and remain in the superintendency.

Literature Review

The shortage in general. According to a recent American Association of School Administrators (2000) study the overall median age of public school superintendents is 52.5 years old. Thus, as the current slate of practicing school superintendents ages, there are indications that there is a growing shortage of qualified individuals to fill the positions they leave vacant. In fact, one recent survey reported that 80 percent of the superintendents who responded were eligible for retirement (Cooper, 2000). The Illinois State Board of Education recently issued a report indicating that in the next three years 47 percent of current school administrators will become eligible for retirement (Rohn, 2001). Another Illinois report predicted that at least 40 percent of current superintendents will be retiring in the next five years (Pierson & Hall, 2001). Patterson (2000) interviewed fourteen superintendents and two years later, 75 percent of these individuals had left the superintendency altogether. Additionally, Rohn (2001) reports that as disconcerting as the retirement numbers are, Illinois school board members have identified a related concern - the size and quality of the candidate pool is shrinking. Filling vacancies with the most qualified candidate is a challenge for school districts, even those which hire experienced consultants to conduct the search (Lowery, Marshall, Harris, & Buck, in press; Tallerico, 2000).

Minority representation. The shortage in the pool of superintendent candidates is even more pronounced when one considers the number of minority individuals who enter the superintendency. Nationwide, 88 - 90 percent of all school superintendents in the United States are men (Skrla, 2001; Hodgkinson & Montenegro, 1999; Glass, 1992). While the number of women superintendents is increasing from only one percent in 1967 (Stoker) to 13.6 percent in 2000 (AASA, 2000), this is still low considering that 75 percent of teaching positions are held

by women (Skrla, 2001). While there are still limitations, Brunner (1999) reported that access to the superintendency for women is not denied by women board members or discouraged by search consultants.

There appear to be several factors that contribute to the shortage of women superintendents including career path trends. Typically women enter administration later than men, often in their late 40's (Shakeshaft, 1989), while the majority of male superintendents enter administration as young as 25 (Glass, 1992). Additionally, women tend to spend more years in the classroom than do men before they enter administration (Peters, 1986; Zemlicka, 2001) Certainly there are other reasons for the low numbers of women currently holding superintendency positions that are both internal and external. Allen (1996) reports that family concerns often serve as a barrier and Ramsey (1997) asserts that family support is necessary for women to succeed as a superintendent. Politics are also seen as a barrier because women seem to be less tolerant of the politics found in the role of the superintendent.

At the same time, men and women of color are also seriously under-represented in the superintendency with only five per cent of these positions held by minority individuals (Glass, Bjork, & Brunner, 2000; AASA, 2000). Jones and Montenegro (1983) assert that only within the past three decades have school districts been represented by superintendents who were African American, Hispanic, or Asian American. Yet only three percent of school administrators (this includes principals, as well as superintendents) are Hispanic, and only eight percent are African American (Digest of Educational Statistics, 1990). Typically, these individuals serve in districts where persons of the same race are represented in significant numbers (AASA, 1983). Also, Zemlicka (2001) found that minority superintendents held more educational positions prior to the superintendency, thus taking longer to achieve the position of superintendent.

Short tenures. Another factor contributing to the shortage of candidates for the superintendency is that the average tenure of a superintendent in the U.S. is a mere five to six years (Glass, 1992; Hodgkinson & Montenegro, 1999). Additionally, Lyons (1983) reports that superintendents in large urban districts have a tenure of approximately two and a half years, while Cummings (1994) noted a tenure of eighteen months in these districts. Chance and Capps (1990) studied the high turnover rates for superintendents within rural areas of Oklahoma and found that 41 rural school districts had three or more superintendents in the last five years. Forty-three percent of the 63 superintendents who left rural districts were either terminated or forced to resign. Twenty-three percent resigned to accept positions in larger districts. The current annual turnover rate in Texas, for example, is between 20 and 25 percent with 272 superintendent vacancies out of the state's 1,050 school districts during the school year 1998-1999 (Moses, 2000). Even more disconcerting, Deary (1989) reported that in Connecticut nearly one third of the turnover was involuntary, while 15 percent is more in line with the national average. An interesting finding regarding tenure was reported by Largent (2001) who found that Texas superintendents hired by a local school board had tenures nearly two years longer (5.85 years) than those hired through other processes, such as search consultants (3.97 years).

Inhibitors for the superintendency. Clearly, the opportunities to do this important job of the superintendency are fraught with difficulty that includes rapidly changing community demographics (Houston, 2001), increased community political activism (Keedy & Bjork, 2001), and increased accountability measures (Mathews, 2001). Callahan's vulnerability theory (1962) focused primarily on school board difficulty and Lutz (1990) extends this theory to include dissatisfaction reasons within the community. Greyser (1999) suggests that the role of the superintendent often leads to isolation as administrators move up the leadership ladder.

Additionally, leaders tend to put unrealistic demands on themselves that they have all the right answers (1999).

The term "stress" is often associated with the superintendency. In fact, a survey of retired school superintendents in New York cited stress as the most common reason for their decision to retire (Goldstein, 1992). Districts that have difficult political situations, little money, poor staff morale, and poor student achievement are especially stressful positions (1992). Brubaker & Coble (1995) suggest that subtle contradictions, for example, the expectation that a superintendent will cultivate a reputation as a leader who is authoritative, yet avoid appearing authoritarian, are inherently stressors in the job. On the other hand, Milstein (1992) suggests that while educational administrators believe their work is full of stress, the research suggests that most cope with it quite well. Simply put, even though within the last twenty-five years many efforts have been made to improve schools, superintendents face situations for which there are no easy answers (Goodman & Zimmerman, 2000).

Motivators for the superintendency. Houston (2001) reports that most superintendents find the job "exhilarating and challenging" (p. 429). In fact, many who leave the job actually come back to it in order to work in a job that offers opportunity to "change the trajectory of children's lives, alter the behavior of organizations, and expand the possibilities of whole communities" (p. 429). Patterson (2000) has noted that the superintendency is not just a job, but a lifestyle filled with important professional and personal accomplishments. It is an opportunity to do "difficult but valuable work" (p. 23) and to overcome challenges (2000). Through professional reflection, many long time superintendents have been able to ask hard questions and face the answers, thus contributing to their decision to stay on the job for the long haul (Kearns & Harvey, 2001).

Methodology

Sample. Using systematic sampling, researchers surveyed twenty five percent of the 1,036 superintendents in Texas school districts, which is a representative sample (Gay, 2001). Of the 259 superintendents receiving questionnaires in the mail, 231 responded which was a response rate of 90 percent. All respondents were assured of confidentiality.

Data collection. The survey questionnaire consisted of two parts. Part I asked for general biographical information and school district demographic information. This section also contained questions about retirement plans for the superintendent. The study included one open-ended question which asked superintendents to share whatever they would like with the researchers. Part II asked participants to identify factors that motivated them to remain in the superintendency. It also asked respondents to identify inhibiting factors for this position. Subjects responded on a Likert-type scale ranking each item from l (not very important) to 4 (very important). The survey was adapted from a list of motivators and inhibitors by Moore and Ditzhazy (1999) and then field tested with several groups of students enrolled in university superintendent certification programs. Results of the pilot testing were discussed in doctoral level superintendent courses and then further revisions in the questionnaire were made based on these discussions, thus increasing validity of the instrument (McMillan, 2000).

Data analysis. Utilizing the statistical package, SPSS, all responses were tallied and frequencies generated. Means were created and independent samples t-tests conducted to test for significance at $p = <.05$.

Findings

Biographical demographics. While only thirty percent of the superintendents responding were less than fifty years old, over 43 percent of the superintendents were between the ages of 50

and 55. Eighty-six percent were men, thirteen percent were women. Consistent with national figures for the superintendency, 91 percent were Anglo, 5.2 percent were Hispanic and two percent were African American. An additional two percent listed their ethnicity as "other." Sixty nine percent of these superintendents possessed a Master's degree, while 21 percent held earned doctoral degrees. Only eleven percent of the superintendents were in their first year on the job, 32 percent have served from two to five years and the remaining 57 percent have been a superintendent at least six years.

School demographic information. Nearly half of the responding superintendents served in school districts of less than one thousand students. Thirty-eight percent served in school districts that had a population of between 1000 - 5000 students. Seventy-four percent of the school districts were identified as rural, nineteen percent were suburban and five percent were urban school districts. Texas ranks each school district in the state from low performing to exemplary based on the results of the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS). Twenty percent of these superintendents were in school districts ranked as Exemplary. Forty-six percent were in Recognized districts and 33 percent of the districts were ranked Acceptable. Two (.9%) superintendents responding were from Low Performing districts.

Retirement plans. Only three (1.3%) superintendents indicated a desire to retire at the age of fifty, while 35 percent indicated plans to retire at age fifty five. Thirty two percent reported they plan to retire at age sixty, with 29 percent planning to retire at age 65 or older. Certainly, the fact that over one third of superintendents reaching age fifty-five plan to retire is a concern contributing to vacancies that may be difficult to fill. Interestingly, 37 percent of males plan to retire at age 55 or younger, while only 30 percent of females indicated the intent to retire at 55 or younger. Fifty four percent indicate that they plan to work after retiring from the

superintendency, while 31 percent are undecided. Only 12.6 percent have no plans to work after retirement. Those who plan to work after retirement would consider jobs as an education consultant (23.4%), college professor (14.7%), or private business (19.5%). Twenty one percent checked the category labeled "other." Fifty respondents failed to answer this question at all.

Motivating factors. When identifying factors that superintendents considered as reasons to become superintendents in the first place, superintendents indicated the desire to make a difference (3.74), a desire to positively impact people (3.71), the professional challenge (3.64), the personal challenge (3.61), and the ability to initiate change (3.58) as their top reasons. The only factors that had means of less than 3.0 were increased prestige/status (2.05) and the opportunity to relocate to a desired location (1.85). When motivating factors were disaggregated by ethnicity only the desire to make a difference was statistically significant at the $p = < .05$ level. When disaggregated by gender there were no statistically significant differences between males and females. Clearly, superintendents are motivated by intrinsic desires. They decide to become superintendents and they choose to stay in this role because they see the job potential as a tremendous opportunity to reshape the lives of children. While the increased salary and fringe benefits are obviously considered in the decision to become a superintendent and to stay in the superintendency (mean of 3.21), even more, these individuals accept this important, challenging position because of their commitment to helping others.

Table 1 goes here

Inhibiting factors. Inhibiting factors were not identified with the strength of agreement as were the motivators. In fact, the highest mean was only 3.02 for the factor labeled amount of

paperwork/bureaucracy. Other strong inhibitors for the superintendency were community politics (2.94), working with the school board (2.90), the increased time commitment (2.80), and the isolation or alienation from the campus setting (2.69). Factors that were the least important in deciding to become a superintendent or making the decision to leave the superintendency were small salary (2.28), job opportunities outside the superintendency (2.02) and the fear of failure (1.66). When data were disaggregated by ethnicity, there were no statistically significant differences. Looking at gender, the only significant difference was found in the category of increased commitment. While, data from this study suggest that identifying negative factors for the superintendency are not as clear cut as are identifying those issues that make the job of the superintendency one to be desired, there is a consensus that the tremendous time commitment involved to deal with issues of bureaucracy, the politicization of community involvement and board relationships create barriers that inhibit the opportunity to successfully negotiate the job of superintendent.

Table 2 goes here

General comments. The open-ended question had a variety of responses which could be categorized in two ways: Take this job and shove it! and Take this job and love it! Twenty-five percent of the negative comments that were made about the job focused almost exclusively on the difficulty of relationships with the board and on the difficulty of unifying diverse communities. One superintendent said "If the board doesn't trust me, I can't be their superintendent." Another comment reflected the challenge of the growing diversity within the community, "There are just too many factions in our community to keep any one happy long

enough to accomplish anything."

The positive comments about the job of the superintendency were more varied, but resonated with three main themes: advice for others, encouragement and love for the job despite the difficulties. Advice statements included such suggestions as, "Make sure it's the community's vision, not yours." Encouragement appeared to grow out of the job challenges, as one superintendent said, "after all, the only way to ride the horse is to stay in the saddle." Another encouraged by saying, "You can always defend a decision, if it's the best thing for kids." Several superintendents suggested, "If it were easy, everyone would want to do the job, consider your talents and hang in there!" Over half of the respondents emphasized their love of the job in a variety of phrases. One superintendent said, "Sure, I've made mistakes, but most of my mistakes were on the behalf of the kids. . . I can live with that." Or, as one superintendent said, "School is all I know and, after twenty-five years in the business, I still love school!" Finally, the most common reason for loving the job of superintendent was stated by a thirty year veteran who said, "I just like knowing that after a long day at work, I've done something good for someone. . . even if no one else notices but me."

Recommendations

Clearly, Texas superintendents choose to seek this job because of their commitment to education and helping people and they remain in the superintendency when they feel that they are enabled to make this vision a reality. Therefore, in agreement with Schlechty (2001) educators must be challenged to remain focused on this main mission. Likewise, the community, led by school boards, must do all that is within its power to support and undergird superintendents in this challenging assignment. They must increase efforts to provide opportunities for superintendents to stay focused on this worthy goal of helping others.

Additionally, superintendents need an avenue for sharing their successes with the local community and the broader educational community. Additionally, school boards must continue to review salary and fringe benefit packages to be competitive with other districts.

Considering those factors which are inhibitors to the superintendency, communities and school boards must also work with individual superintendents to better understand the negative factors of the job in order to overcome these obstacles and, thus, encourage quality administrators to stay on the job. Patterson (2001) suggests encouraging superintendents to be resilient "in the face of adversity" (p. 18) by being positive in spite of the negative, by staying focused on what superintendents care about, by remaining flexible in strategy planning, by acting rather than reacting, and by applying conservation efforts during tough times. Staff development must be provided for superintendents that focuses on reducing the impact of inhibiting factors by providing training in human relations skills (Kerrins & Cushing, 2001), community building (Owen & Ovando, 2000), shared decision making and empowerment (Lambert, 1998). Certainly, improved training opportunities that lead to improved performance will lessen natural stresses that make the job of the superintendent so difficult.

Conclusion

Goldberg (2001) interviewed 43 educational leaders over an eleven period. These leaders all appeared to have five major qualities of leadership: a bedrock belief in what they were doing, the courage to swim upstream in behalf of their beliefs; a social conscience that was committed to issues of racism and poverty; a seriousness of purpose with high standards and devotion to their causes and situational mastery, high personal skills and feelings of accomplishment. Clearly, the characteristics that make for strong leadership, are related factors that this study identified as motivators for superintendents to seek out the job and stay in the job:

a desire to make a difference, desire to positively impact people, the professional and personal challenge, and an ability to initiate change. The job of a school superintendent is shaped by broad social challenges, such as the changing demographics of the U.S., and the growing diversity of children in our schools. Because of the influence of superintendents as community and school leaders, it is imperative that every effort be made to reconfigure this role in such a way that inhibitors are de-emphasized and the motivating factors of the job are emphasized. Recruiting and retaining effective superintendents in a job they love is critical. Success for all students is a necessary goal that can only be achieved with quality leadership in our schools. While the many pressures and responsibilities, faced by superintendents, increase each year, leaders who care about others, who can create shared visions to motivate and inspire, and who are tenacious in the face of adversity are desperately needed in these challenging times (Hoyle, 1999). Clearly, the superintendency is a job about "touching hearts," a job that is almost "sacred" (Houston, 2001, p. 433). . . a job to love.

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Table 1.

Motivating factors for superintendents deciding to stay in the superintendency in order of importance

(n = 231)

Motivating Factors	Mean	Std. Deviation
Desire to make a difference	3.74	.47
Desire to positively impact people	3.71	.47
Professional challenge	3.64	.58
Personal challenge	3.61	.59
Ability to initiate change	3.58	.54
Increased salary and fringe benefits	3.21	.73
Support and encouragement from others	3.07	.80
Teacher of teachers	3.05	.67
Increased prestige and status	2.05	.82
Relocate to a desired location	1.85	.85

1 = no importance, 2 = of little importance, 3 = important, 4 = very important

Table 2

Inhibiting factors for superintendents deciding not to stay in the superintendency in order of importance

(n = 226)

Inhibiting Factors	Mean	Std. Deviation
Amount of paperwork/bureaucracy	3.02	.90
Community politics	2.94	.97
Working with the school board	2.90	.92
Increased commitment	2.80	.98
Isolation/alienation from campus setting	2.69	.87
Increased emphasis on standardized tests	2.56	.95
Litigation surrounding education	2.55	.96
No tenure/lack of security	2.49	1.02
Salary too small	2.28	.91
Job opportunities outside superintendency	2.02	.92
Fear of failure	1.66	.78

1 = no importance, 2 = of little importance, 3 = important, 4 = very important

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