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The Secondary Principal Position: Preparatory Position for the Superintendency

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Abstract

The following paper is a synopsis of a study which examined career paths to the Texas public school superintendency. The most common pathways to the superintendency were identified and delineated by educational attainment and gender. Five career paths were identified as the major pathways to the superintendent position. The secondary teacher, secondary principal, superintendent career path was most common. School administrators with doctorate degrees were found to more likely take the secondary teacher, secondary assistant principal, secondary principal, assistant superintendent, superintendent pathway. Female administrators were more likely to take the director route to the superintendency. These female administrators were more likely than their male counterparts to bypass the traditionally critical high school principal position in their rise to the superintendency. Additionally, active superintendent respondents most frequently identified the secondary principal position as the career path position that was most beneficial in preparing them for the superintendency.

The Secondary Principal Position: Preparatory Position for the Superintendency

There is a critical need for highly qualified Texas public school superintendents. The public school superintendency continues to evolve into an even more complex position. The growing complexity of the superintendency has led school boards to put even more value on experience (Mathews, 2002).   According to Howley, Pendarivis, and Gibbs (2002), the complexities confronting superintendents have increased in recent decades, compounding the pressures traditionally associated with the position. According to Howley et al., fewer applicants were applying for administrative positions than have done so in the past. Many educators were reluctant to pursue leadership positions because of the demands of the job and the increased pressure to show results (Howley et al., 2002). With forecasts predicting increased public school superintendent retirements, the urgency grows. Increased turnover rates in concert with superintendent retirements has fueled the growing number of vacancies across the state. The decreasing supply of experienced superintendents has increasingly forced the use of less seasoned superintendents. The degree of severity felt by districts differs based on region, but the critical need for qualified superintendents was reflected in all Texas public school districts. This need will continue to grow as veteran superintendents retire or otherwise leave the profession. This study defined the pathways to the Texas public school superintendency.

Bjork and Keedy (2001) reported that the two major paths to the superintendency were the teacher, assistant principal/principal, central office, superintendent path and the teacher, assistant principal/principal, superintendent path. The first career path was more common in the major urban districts with large student populations. Several central office positions of varying types existed in larger districts. The second path was more

common in smaller districts and rural districts. A contributing factor to the second path

prevalence in smaller districts was the limited number of central office positions available

due to district size. Tallerico (2000) found that the "good ole boy" system facilitated the

access of Caucasian males to the superintendency. This was more common in rural areas

than in major urban areas with large minority student populations.

Female superintendents typically remained in teaching and/or lower ranking

administrative positions for longer periods of time than their male counterparts. They

typically came to the superintendency later in their career than did men (Tillman &

Cochran, 2000). Spencer and Kochan (2000) reported that females were more likely than

males to interrupt their professional careers in order to devote time to raising a family,

which delayed the upward mobility of female administrators. This delay in their career

path resulted in a delay of the acquisition of the skills and experiences necessary to

effectively compete for the career path positions that led to the superintendency. Due to

this delay, some aspiring female administrators never reached the highest district-level

administrative positions before the end of their careers. A long delay in moving from the

teaching ranks to the administrative ranks effectively ended a candidate's chances of

becoming a superintendent. The use of data from more than 1,000 school districts in

Texas over a period of 4 years showed that gender differences in superintendents' salaries

were subtle rather than systematic. On average, female superintendents were paid

slightly more than male superintendents, but they also oversaw larger school districts

with bigger budgets (Meier & Wilkins, 2002).   Mentoring relationships were acutely

needed by two groups of women: women who aspired to leadership in nontraditional

fields (mathematics, science, business) and women of color (Alston, 2000).

Ortiz (2000) found that Hispanic female superintendents who obtained their graduate degrees in the 1970s have followed the traditional administrative path. They taught in secondary schools, were principals of secondary schools, had a number of central office positions, and advanced from associate superintendents to superintendents in different school districts. Hispanic females, who earned graduate degrees in the 1980s, deviated from the traditional path to the superintendency. The latter group of Hispanic females relied more on personal relationships with individuals in positions of authority for career advancement.

According to Nozaki (2000), some districts were looking for ethnically representative superintendents who would continue to enforce the traditional norms. This continuation of the traditional norms often led to the selection of candidates that were demographically similar to their predecessor. This trend could be driven by both ethnicity and gender. Rural school boards were frequently looking for different characteristics than major urban school boards. Jackson (1995) observed that Black superintendents faced the challenge of leading all of the people and at the same time meeting their Black constituents' expectation that Black children would be given a better opportunity for success. These expectations were often conflicting. Black superintendents were thus faced with higher expectations than superintendents of other ethnicities.

Geographic location and district size impacted access to the superintendency. A California study revealed that many successful superintendents were hired due to their previous instructional experience and success (Peterson, 1999). Experience had become even more important to school boards as they selected superintendents.   An Illinois study revealed that 48% of Illinois superintendents held doctoral degrees in 2003 (Pierson &

Freeman, 2003). The typical superintendent in Illinois was a 53-year-old male with a doctorate who had been an educator for 25 years and had served in his current position for 6 years. The typical Illinois superintendent began his administrative career as a principal at the age of 33, and then after 10 years moved to the superintendent position. According to Beem and Kleinsmith (2002), the state of Missouri became the first state to require a written examination for state superintendent certification, based on the 1996 school leadership standards of the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium, with the goal to establish clear expectations for superintendents. These factors can affect both the mobility and the career path of aspiring superintendents.

Public school administrators' pathway to the superintendency was affected by their individual skills and values. To be operationally powerful, a superintendent's core values needed to be stated clearly and annotated extensively with specific examples and stories from school experience (Kelleher, 2002). Effective superintendents were able to manage school board relations, form alliances, foster positive working relationships, and be consensus builders. King and Blumer (2000) found that successful superintendents balanced the need for change with the need to retain the positive attributes associated with the existing organizational culture. According to Harrington-Lueker et al. (2002), successful superintendents built good relationships with their school boards and knew their communities and school systems well. Knowledge of the community, school system, and school board helped superintendents ascertain what advances and initiatives would both follow local norms and build on past successes. This knowledge also helped successful superintendents to gauge the acceptable pace of the changes that were sought in an effort to improve the district. Recent studies demonstrated the complexity of the role that superintendents undertook when they tried to balance educational, managerial,

and political leadership in ways that promoted school improvement and student

achievement. Holloway (2001) found that the most important superintendent functions

were fostering school board relations, developing and maintaining an effective school and

district staff, facilitating student learning, collaborating with and involving the

community, providing organizational resources and operations, implementing and

evaluating curriculum and instruction, providing professional development for school and

district staff, maintaining group processes, and understanding and responding to the

larger political issues. If a district's schools were mediocre, superintendent applause and

encouragement served only to reinforce the things that made them mediocre (Johnson,

1998).

Superintendent career paths were also affected by whether individuals were place

bound or career bound candidates. Being bound to a single geographic location limited

an aspiring superintendent's upward mobility. Carlson (1962) observed that place-bound

superintendents had more difficulty in persuading school boards that change was needed,

and place-bound superintendents were constrained in managing interest groups because

of their history in the district. Place-bound insiders spent too much time maintaining and

protecting their own interests rather than dealing with educational issues that may have

produced change. The place-bound insider was one who often modified himself or

herself to meet the needs of the position. The place-bound insider often attempted to

preserve the status quo and was frequently less likely to exhibit creativity in the

superintendency. The place-bound insider was the stabilizer, whereas the career-bound

outsider was the innovator. The career-bound outsider did not inherit the position and

expected to change the local superintendency rather than to be changed by the local

superintendency. Although both types of superintendents adapted to survive, the place-bound superintendent was more likely to adopt and exhibit community norms.

According to Carlson (1972), career-bound and place-bound superintendents had different career styles. He wrote:

The typical career-bound superintendent aims form the beginning for the top of the hierarchy-the superintendency. He sets his sights high and early and views positions below his goal as steps toward the superintendency. Preparing for the career, he is active and acquires his graduate training early, to the fullest extent, and from the better institutions of higher education.

The career bound superintendent holds a more progressive view about education and aspires to greater prominence among superintendents than does his counterpart. In viewing his job he tends to be less satisfied. Regarding his career, the career bound superintendent finds it slightly more satisfying; he sees mobility, to a greater extent, as a desired or natural element of the career; he feels more strongly that one must take an active part in the pursuit of career objectives-one must confront the environment if one is to get ahead; and he tends to hold less limited success criteria of career judgment than his counterpart. (p 65)

Outgoing superintendents were replaced by career-bound superintendent candidates the majority of the time. School boards were more prone to hire a place-bound candidate when the board was pleased with the former superintendent's performance and wanted to maintain the status quo. The longer a superintendent stayed in a district, the less likely the school board would be to select an internal candidate. If the school board perceived

that change was needed, the board was more likely to hire a career-bound candidate from outside of the district.

Research Questions

1. Can a path analysis to the superintendent position be identified?

2. What superintendent position career path variations are associated with educational attainment or gender?

3. What career path position do superintendents perceive as most beneficial in preparing them for the superintendency?

Methodology

The data in this study were gathered through the use of a 31-question survey. Two pilot studies were conducted to refine the survey instrument. In early March 2005, the refined surveys were mailed to all superintendents in the North Texas education service center areas IX, X, and XI and in the West Texas education service center areas XIV, XV, XVI, XVII, and XVIII. Additionally, surveys were mailed to the superintendents of the seven major urban public school districts in Texas. Those seven districts were Houston, Dallas, San Antonio, Fort Worth, Austin, Corpus Christi, and El Paso. In all, 443 initial surveys were mailed in the first mailing. Superintendents who had not yet responded were mailed a reminder letter and second survey in late March. Due to the importance of the major urban data, a third mailing was conducted with this respondent group. The respondents' completed surveys were grouped according to career path subject responses. Seventy-one unique career path groups were identified.

Results

Five of the 71 unique career paths were very common. Collectively, they accounted for 212, over 66%, of the 321 respondents. These five paths follow:

- Secondary teacher, secondary principal, superintendent

- Secondary teacher, secondary assistant principal, secondary principal, superintendent

- Secondary teacher, secondary assistant principal, secondary principal, assistant superintendent, superintendent

- Secondary teacher, secondary principal, assistant superintendent, superintendent

- Secondary teacher, elementary principal, secondary principal, superintendent

These major paths are identified in the following table:

Table 1

Common Pathways

Pathway	Number	Percentage
ST-SP-S	122	38.01%
ST-SAP-SP-S	38	11.84%
ST-SAP-SP-AS-S	22	6.85%
ST-SP-AS-S	20	6.23%
ST-EP-SP-S	10	3.12%
Total	212	66.05%

In addition to these five major pathways, three additional pathways were identified. The director route, the elementary route, and the other route are identified in the following table:

Table 2

Other Pathways

Pathway	Number	Percentage
Director Route	60	18.69%
Elementary Route	6	1.87%
Other	43	13.40%
Total	109	33.96%

Superintendent respondents were divided into two groups, those who had a doctorate and those who did not. Nineteen percent of the superintendent respondents held a doctorate. The highest degree earned by eighty-one percent of the superintendent respondents was a master's degree. A higher representation of superintendent respondents who held a doctorate existed in the secondary teacher, secondary assistant principal, secondary principal, assistant superintendent, superintendent career path than in any of the other career path groups. Forty-six percent of the respondents in this career path group held a doctorate degree.

The vast majority of Texas public school superintendents surveyed were male. Male superintendents accounted for approximately 91% of the respondents, whereas female superintendents accounted for approximately 9% of the respondents. Three hundred twenty-six of the 358 respondents were male. Thirty-two of the 358 respondents were female. Fourteen of the 45 respondents that were grouped in the director career path group were female. A larger number of females existed in the director career path group than in any other group.

Superintendent respondents most frequently listed the secondary principal position as the most beneficial preparatory position. One hundred twenty-two respondents listed the principal position as the specific career path position that was most beneficial in preparing them for the superintendency. More specifically, the high school principal position was cited by 75 respondents as the most important preparatory position. Additionally, the secondary principal position was common to all five of the five most common career paths to the Texas public school superintendency.

Conclusions

The secondary principal position was identified as the key preparatory position for the superintendency regardless of district size. It was present in all five of the most common superintendent career paths. The findings implicated that aspiring superintendents should seek secondary school principal positions, particularly high school principal positions, as requisites for the Texas public school superintendent position.

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