Implications From UCEA

Strengthening the Superintendent Pipeline and Professional Development Options

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The dramatic change over the past 20 years of the demographics, education and career trajectory of superintendents has significant implications for our nation's schools. Since 1923, the *State of the American School Superintendency* has documented the evolution of superintendents' careers and school district leadership more broadly. The most recent study found both an aging population of superintendents and a trend toward entering the position later in one's career (Glass & Franceschini, 2006). A follow-up study by the Center for Systems Leadership of the American Association of School Administrators (McCord, Jordan, & Jordan, 2008) explored the confluence of the career pipeline, incentives and disincentives to assuming the superintendency, and the availability and quality of mentoring and coaching for new and sitting superintendents. Despite the above trends and their implications for increasing support, superintendent mentoring and leadership development seem to be rare, leaving many, particularly new, superintendents ill-equipped for increasing accountability demands and fiscal pressures in leading districts.

In recent years, particularly given increased accountability expectations, superintendents' work increasingly has shifted toward leading district educational improvement. A growing body of evidence (Waters & Marzano, 2006) demonstrates the important impact that superintendents' directions and actions can have on student achievement and the achievement gap.

The Superintendent Pipeline

Most superintendents agree there is a shortage of superintendent candidates for available positions. In fact, only 15% of current superintendents believe the current supply is adequate, given the escalating number of openings. As noted above, superintendents are entering positions later (55 years of age in 2006, up from an average of 51 in 2000) and 4 in 10 plan to retire by the end of the decade. Over 42% of districts are led by superintendents who are new to district leadership, and in 2006 alone, 17% of the superintendents were new to their districts (Glass & Franceschini, 2006). Most advance to the superintendency from assistant or associate superintendent positions (37%) or principal positions (47%), though close to 10% came from other positions (including noneducational positions).

Incentives & Disincentives for the Superintendency

Leaders are strongly drawn to the superintendency for three key reasons: (a) able to make a difference (74%), (b) provide leadership for learning in their district (52%), and (c) able to address challenges in their schools and district (35%; McCord et.al, 2008). Only 41% viewed salary compensation as a meaningful incentive. Strong disincentives for considering the superintendency include the nature of funding for public education (54%), anticipated family sacrifices (46%), and challenges related to school board relations (44%). In open-ended comments, superintendents stressed their desires to make a difference in their communities and their worries that diminished local control and increased pressure would hinder their capacity to make a difference.

Mentoring and Coaching That Matters

Despite evidence that certain superintendent practices are more efficacious than others and that working conditions are increasingly challenging, few leadership development options are focused on developing their

skills and approaches. Preparation for the role comes primarily from their master's degree in educational administration (80%), a degree typically required for a principal license and likely completed many years ago. However, 51% have earned a doctorate, most commonly in educational leadership. Glass and Franceschini (2006) reported that most rated their preparation as effective or very effective (71% for their master's program and 57% for their doctoral program), but such preparation was likely insufficiently focused on the superintendency.

Only 20% of the superintendents reported having access to a formal mentoring or coaching program, yet almost all agreed that such ongoing programs are important for aspiring, new, and experienced superintendents. Instead, most superintendents acquire mentoring or coaching informally (McCord et al., 2008). Nearly two thirds of superintendents reported that they were mentored or coached by neighboring superintendents, 40% received mentoring or coaching through their state professional association, and a few (13%) had a private consultant. In the 2006 American Association of School Administrators study, about half the superintendents had participated in state association sponsored training. Most rated it as effective, whereas just over 24% had participated in training through intermediaries and rated those experiences as effective.

Implications

The growing number of superintendents new to the role or with limited experience has important implications for recruiting, developing, and sustaining high-quality district leadership. Over 52% of superintendents recommend an increased focus on recruitment. Research underscores the need for a unified effort to increase the supply of qualified individuals aspiring to the superintendency and to develop and sustain this supply pipeline through high-quality professional development, mentoring, and coaching. The availability of focused and high-quality preparation and development opportunities is a key element in encouraging aspiring superintendents and in developing those who are currently in the position.

There are several key policy strategies. Boards of education must support their new and experienced superintendents in obtaining mentoring, coaching, or other leadership development. Superintendents recommended (49%) the development of formal mentoring and coaching programs. Although guidance from neighboring superintendents can be beneficial, more carefully constructed mentoring and learning

networks may offer better planned, high-quality, and more sustainable support in the longer term.

Additionally, state agencies, professional associations, and intermediary organizations (including universities) should work together to offer programs and support for aspiring, new, and experienced superintendents, including leadership development approaches that foster professional learning communities and networks. Indeed, 38% of superintendents emphasized the importance of professional learning communities.

References

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