



# THE INTERIM SUPERINTENDENT: A CASE STUDY

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*Considering the vitally important role that the superintendent plays in the overall functioning and wellbeing of any school district, the filling of that position should never be done in haste. Due to the importance of this process and the time it requires, school districts often employ an interim superintendent. In this single case study, one researcher engaged in qualitative research by actually assuming the role of an interim superintendent in a small West Texas school. The findings that emerged from this study consisted of identifying duties and roles of the interim superintendent in comparison with those of the regular superintendent. Major differences were found in the roles of the two positions.*

*Keywords: interim superintendent, role, duties, case study*

Considering the vitally important role that the superintendent plays in the overall functioning and well being of any school district, namely, “the professionally trained chief executive officer and educational leader” (Norton, Webb, Dlugosh & Sybouts, 1996, p. 122), the filling of that position should never be done in haste. The process of advertising, reviewing applications, conducting background checks, interviewing, negotiating contracts, naming a lone finalist, and ultimately hiring a superintendent is lengthy. Even more critical to the already time-consuming process of evaluating applicants is the necessity of making that philosophical match between the district and community. Due to the importance of this process and the time it requires, school districts often employ an interim superintendent.

Although education-related statutes vary from state to state, there may be no stipulation requiring school districts to have a superintendent. In Texas, for example,

The Texas Education Code does not expressly require a district to have a superintendent. The requirement may, however, be implied. Numerous Texas statutes require “the superintendent” of a district to perform certain tasks or give “the superintendent” exclusive authority in specific areas. If a district does not have a superintendent, there is no one to perform these tasks or exercise this authority. (TASB, p. 3)

Certain duties within a school district are performed solely by the superintendent, and many others are completed under the direction and supervision of the superintendent. Regardless, Guthrie and Schuermann (2010) pointed out the tremendous authority assigned to the position. The term authority implies the political role of the superintendency (Bolman & Deal, 1992). Additionally, the school leadership literature emphasizes the important role of the superintendent as a visionary leader (Hoyle, Bjork, Collier, & Glass, 2005). With that office vacated, many functions critical for the normal operation of the school district may go undone, which has the potential to diminish student performance and incur non-compliance with a variety of state and federal laws. For these reasons, the need for an interim superintendent becomes obvious.

## THE RESEARCH QUESTION

The guiding question leading this study centers on identifying the duties and roles of the interim superintendent. To address the research question, delineation between duties and roles is needed. According to The Random House College Dictionary (1982), a duty is an “action or task required by one’s position or occupation,” whereas a role is “the proper or customary function of a person or thing.” In other words, the duties may be viewed as what must be done, while the roles are a function of how it is done. Since the interim becomes the superintendent of the school

district during the time extending from the departure of the outgoing superintendent to the arrival of the new superintendent, one might reasonably assume that duties and roles of the interim are no different from those of the regular superintendent. Having had experience as a superintendent, when asked to serve as an interim in a school district conducting a search for a new superintendent, the researcher in this study viewed this as an excellent opportunity to answer that very question.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review is, by necessity, short since scant studies were located about the interim superintendent position. However, what was located ranges in date from 1996-2009, just over ten years. Susan Black (2009) posited, "Statistics on interim superintendents are difficult to ascertain since at times, interims replace interims" as the possible reason for the lack of a solid research foundation.

Sanacore (1997) focused on the importance of choosing an interim school superintendent carefully and reported that the interim is typically a retired superintendent paid to lead for anywhere from four months to a year while the school board conducts a search and secures a "permanent replacement." However, Sanacore (1997) recognized the positive impact of an interim superintendent when the role is "limited to maintaining stability during transitional periods" (p. 37). As the then executive director of the National Center for Improving the Culture of Schools based in New York, Sanacore had an interest in all phases of school leadership, including transitional periods between permanent superintendent assignments.

Fenwick's (1996) study of interim superintendents over ten years between 1981 and 1991 identified that interim superintendents act with the same power and authority as a permanent superintendent; however, the following was also noted:

Higher turnover rates, decreased tenure, diminished job appeal, a shrinking pool of candidates, longer superintendent searches, and school districts' economic stresses and political and social cultures contribute to increases in the incidence of interim superintendent appointments and tenures. Because of these dynamics, more interim superintendents are serving longer terms and are faced with leading school districts through flux and change. (p. 1)

Based on the information found for this short review, little is known about the interim superintendency, but much is conjectured. According to Education Week (2003), multiple cities have the need to hire an interim superintendent and often resort to hiring a private company to act as the interim superintendent. In fact, Susan Black (October, 2009) reported abuse of budgets when hiring retired superintendents as interims because of the large salaries received in addition to pensions. Additionally, Education Week (2001) explained that some interim superintendents have been hired with no educational background. As a result, a school district may encounter even more difficulties compounded by the use of an outside firm with little or no education experience (Education Week, 2003). A 17% turnover rate annually for superintendents leads to a "high demand" for interim superintendents; therefore, "Clarifying an interim's role is important" (Black, 2009, p. 54).

## METHODOLOGY

The single-case methodology was appropriate to this study because it offered a close examination of one incident of interest in a common situation—one full of specific, interconnected issues. Kazdin (1982) explained that single-case designs facilitate the deep examination of one subject, and an essential characteristic is continuous assessment over an extended period of time. By conducting a case study over time, patterns have an opportunity to emerge and be identified. This research study of an acting interim superintendent occurred over a six month period, allowing for continuous assessment which resulted in a deep awareness of the situation.

Gall, Borg, and Gall (1996) described the importance of the completeness of the context. They said that in order for case study phenomena to be properly understood, the phenomena needed to be set within a context and that the more comprehensive the researcher's contextualization, the more credible the interpretations of the phenom-



ena. Gall, Borg, and Gall (1996) explained,

Tacit knowledge refers to the largely unarticulated, contextual understanding that is often manifested in nods, silences, humor, and naughty nuances. In other words, case study findings are more credible if they incorporate the implicit meanings present in a situation. Implicit meanings are those that the individuals being studied either cannot find the words to express, or that they take so much for granted that they do not explicate them in every day discourse or in interviews with the researcher. (p. 573)

The context in this study involved a researcher with previous public school superintendent experience, serving in the position of interim superintendent for a West Texas school district. Conscious effort was devoted to performing the work of the interim superintendent while simultaneously asking questions and making meaning of the observations as a qualitative researcher.

According to Yin (1994), "A case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident" (p. 13). Yin continued with the idea that the "case study may be about an individual, but the sources of information about the individual can include archival records from the organizational level" (p. 72). In this case study, the individual was the interim superintendent and the pertinent archival records included school board agendas and minutes that chronicled activities during the six months.

Clark (1986) emphasized that case studies were "rich in descriptions and details" and could "provide several topics for discussion, debate, and analysis" (p. 187). Clark further stated that case studies reveal the job's complexity (p. 188). The experiential involvement yielded from this study resulted in the identification and description of duties and roles revealing the complexity of the interim position.

Yin (1994) referred to the single-case study as "serving a revelatory purpose" (p. 44). Yin further observed, "... you would use the case study method because you deliberately wanted to cover contextual conditions—believing that they might be highly pertinent to your phenomenon of study" (p. 13). The interim position lends itself to a rich context that has the potential to reveal data of help to future interim superintendents.

## Theoretical Framework

This single-case study was grounded in phenomenology. The researcher, having served as a superintendent previously, possessed prior knowledge about the superintendency and had a unique awareness about the position. However, his understanding of the interim superintendent position was lacking.

Thus, in this case study of the interim superintendency, phenomenological inquiry facilitated the meaning making that should occur in such a study. Moustakas (1994) proposed several basic assumptions of phenomenology. The first is that "phenomenology focuses on the appearance of things" (p. 58). In order to understand and articulate the appearance of the duties and roles of the interim superintendent, the researcher discussed the interim superintendent position regularly with a peer in higher education. Additionally, phenomenology "seeks meanings from appearances and arrives at essences through intuition and reflection on conscious acts of experience, leading to ideas, concepts, judgments, and understandings" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 58). The discussions with a peer assisted with making meaning from the role of the interim superintendent—a crucial aspect of phenomenology.

Moustakas (1994) further assumed that the self and world were interrelated, inseparable components of meaning. This spoke to subjectivity as well as the intentionality of the case study subject. In this study, intentionality was defined as purpose, either ultimate or immediate. For the researcher as the interim superintendent, there was intentionality in serving in that position. Through engagement in the daily operations of the school district, while simultaneously fulfilling the roles of case study participant and researcher, this researcher had to be conscious of his own thoughts, reactions, and perspectives in learning about and understanding the duties and roles of the interim superintendent.

Another assumption is that "phenomenology is rooted in questions that give a direction and focus to meaning" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 59). By necessity, discussion among the researchers included questions to facilitate the expression of experiences and the thoughts of the dual role of researcher and case study subject. Successive questions probed for meaning, occurring within the context of the conversation.

The researcher's own thinking and intuiting, reflecting, and judging were considered "primary evidences in this scientific investigation" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 59). In this instance, phenomenology focused on constructed meaning with the perspective of the participant and the researcher being integral to that meaning.

Moustakas' (1994) final assumption of "intersubjective reality" as part of the process in an investigation meant that the researcher plays a large part in the meaning making that occurs. Every perception begins with the researcher's personal sense of attached meaning, according to Moustakas (1994). As a result of the researcher's observations and experiences as an interim superintendent and the associated meaning attached therein, the logical organization of the findings naturally fell into the two categories of duties and roles. In summary, phenomenology allowed the uncovering of the initial meaning conferred to the duties and roles of the position of interim superintendent through a rich, contextual description regarding its fit within the West Texas public school environment.

## Limitations

Glesne and Peshkin (1992) asserted that trustworthiness of a study is enhanced when the limitations of a study are acknowledged. Furthermore, Glesne and Peshkin explained that "limitations are consistent with the always partial state of...knowing in social research, and elucidating [limitations] helps readers to know how they should read and interpret the work" (p. 147).

The site for this case study was an independent school district located in West Texas serving approximately 150 students, therefore limiting the representativeness of the study to other similar geographic locations. Since this study focused on the interim superintendent's experience over a short period of time (six months), the data collected during this time were undoubtedly different from data collected in other interim superintendent experiences that might have occurred at different times of the year and in other school districts.

As a single-case study, generalizability of this study to other settings is limited (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994), but transferability is applicable. In fact, "a single-case...is selected precisely because the researcher wishes to understand the particular depth, not to find out what is generally true of many" (Merriam, 1998, p. 208).

Because this is a single-case study of one interim superintendent in this particular school at this point in time, the research may or may not be transferable to other interim superintendents in other contexts. There is no sure way to know this except to conduct more research and compare the findings. As there is a shortage of case study research on the interim superintendent presently, this case study may provide insights and raise questions for further research.

Participants' perspectives may further limit this study. Other participants may have different perspectives, which would logically be expected to affect the results of a study. Again, only conducting more research and comparing the findings across studies would speak to the typicality of participants' perspectives.

## Goodness, Credibility, and Transferability

While reliability, validity, and generalizability are tests of quantitative research (Gall, Borg & Gall, 1996; Guba & Lincoln, 1981; LeCompte & Goetz, 1982; Merriam, 1998), the qualitative researcher refers to the goodness, credibility, and transferability of a study (Yin, 1994).

The goodness of a study refers to the extent to which what is recorded in the data actually occurred (reliability), and the extent to which there is a "fit" between the researcher's analysis categories and interpretations and what is actually true (validity).

Credibility is the extent to which data, findings, and conclusions are accepted as believable by participants and readers. Credibility is enhanced by triangulation, the use of multiple data and in-depth analysis to identify patterns across data (Denzin, 1978; Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996; Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995; Yin, 1994). LeCompte and Goetz (1982) contended that the credibility of a research study is weakened if the individual researcher does not demonstrate credibility as a part of the results of the study. In order to maintain credibility, this researcher discussed, at length, the activities in which he participated with his peer, who is an experienced researcher and who also has experience in the public school realm. In those discussions, questions were asked, clarifications were made, common understandings were developed, and ultimately meaning was made of the phenomena experienced.



Transferability refers to the concept of conveying from one situation to another the results of a study. In this situation, further research of the interim superintendent would yield results that may or may not be the same as the findings of this study.

## FINDINGS

In addressing goodness and credibility through lengthy discussions and common understandings, the researchers agreed that the observed phenomena logically fell into two categories. While many of the requirements of the interim paralleled those of the superintendent, obvious differences emerged in the context of this study. Those superintendent-level job performances that are essential for the proper functioning of the school district were identified as duties and made up one of the two major categories of findings. The second category of findings that emerged was unique to the interim superintendent and was labeled as roles.

### Interim Superintendent Duties

Both the duration of time that the interim superintendent is in place and the time of year of that placement will dictate many of the duties of the interim superintendent. The initial entry into the school district where the researcher served as the interim superintendent began in early-July and ended when the district dismissed classes for the winter break in December. Since the students and staff were on summer break at the onset of this study, the major tasks were to insure that everything was in place and ready for the upcoming school year. This meant that any needed personnel vacancies had to be filled, professional development and workdays had to be scheduled and organized, the curriculum had to be in place, the class schedule had to be planned, the budget and tax rate had to be developed and presented to the school board for adoption, and the facilities had to be in shape to serve the needs of students and faculty. School board agenda items serve as evidence that these tasks were needed and accomplished.

Once the school year was in motion, the fulfilling of the duties customary to a regular superintendent became the norm. These duties included such activities as working with the school board in conducting the business of the school, monitoring the invoice and spending processes, meeting with the administrative team as needed, being visible and accessible to faculty and staff, dealing with the occasional issues and problems that arose, etc. Additionally, as a member of a technology consortium, this school district was the recipient of a grant that required a sizable amount of time and attention, as did some internal issues and community relations specific to the school and community.

The researcher realized that if the interim period had extended beyond the winter break, typical duties of a superintendent would have included such work as the development of the school district calendar for the upcoming school year, engaging in activities related to the administration of statewide assessments, approving field trips, participating in end of year ceremonies, banquets, and graduations, etc. Consequently, the time of the year and the length of service will influence the duties of the interim superintendent, but, in the big picture, no matter who is in the position, certain functions are the direct responsibility of the superintendent. No matter who that person is, what that person's leadership style may be, or what condition the school district is in, these duties must be done. Thus, the duties of the interim superintendent largely parallel those of the regular superintendent (Fenwick, 1996).

### Interim Superintendent Roles

While the duties of the interim superintendent may echo those of the regular superintendent, and many roles of the interim superintendent may be the same as the regular superintendent, the realization that they are not identical positions and that there are at least two major role differences between them emerged from the case study. One of those role differences lies in the area of visionary leadership, and the other lies in creating a condition that should assist in positioning the incoming superintendent for success. These two very distinct roles of the interim superintendent and the way they are carried out may largely impact the success of the school district during the interim period as well as the ease with which the leadership transition is made.

Not only is the superintendent considered the Chief Executive Officer and Chief Finance Officer, but he is also the instructional leader for every student in the entire school district. In fact, Norton, et al. (1996) emphasized the positive impact that decisions made by the superintendent can have on student learning and the importance of

advancing the school mission. Having completed a doctoral dissertation on the topic of instructional leadership, publishing articles and making presentations on the topic of visionary leadership, and as a superintendent, having led a school district in the development of a vision and mission statement, the researcher in this study completely embraces the vast importance of the need for a superintendent who is a visionary leader. However, experience as an interim superintendent revealed that this position should not assume the role of the visionary leader.

In no way should that be interpreted to mean that the interim superintendent should not be forward thinking, nor does it mean that a weak leader should be placed in the position of the interim superintendent. A visionary leader has the ability to assess the current status of the school district and see where (s)he intends to take that district in the future. Covey (2004) referred to this as beginning with the end in mind. The problem is that with the short duration of the interim superintendent, time will not allow him/her to reach that end point, and his/her vision for that end may not match that of the incoming superintendent. Nevertheless, key to the skills of the interim is the ability to ascertain the current vision. This experience in the interim superintendency suggested that maintaining the status quo for a short period of time until the new superintendent takes charge will result in far less confusion and dissatisfaction among the educational community than having the interim superintendent pave the way in one direction at the risk of the incoming superintendent forging a new path in a totally different direction. This is one major difference in the role of the superintendent versus the role of the interim superintendent.

A second very important role of the interim superintendent is to position the incoming superintendent for success. The political nature of the superintendency (Ramsey, 2006; Hoyle, Bjork, Collier, & Glass, 2005) sometimes creates an uncomfortable environment for the superintendent when difficult and often unpopular, but necessary decisions must be made. If, for example, the tax rate needs to be increased to generate sufficient funding to finance school district operations, budget cuts must be made, resulting in more frugality in classroom supplies, or one or more teaching positions must be cut due to a decreasing student enrollment. Without a doubt, various factions within the taxpayer community, the faculty, or the student body will react adversely to such changes. Worse yet, even though these tough decisions may be made to keep the school functioning properly, they sometimes lead to the political demise of the superintendent. If tough decisions like these need to be made, since the interim superintendent has no political attachment to the community, he is duty bound to make such decisions and take such actions so the new superintendent does not have to begin with adversity.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

In summary, the purpose of this research was to engage in a qualitative case study of the interim superintendency in search of information particular to the position to add to the knowledge base and assist interim superintendents in being successful and effective in fulfilling the job requirements. Emerging from the study was the identification of major duties and roles of the interim superintendent. While conducting this study, the researcher served as an interim superintendent for six months. Having had past superintendency experience was critical in delineating the differences in duties and roles of the interim superintendent. While the duties of both positions are essentially the same, the real differences were found in the roles, which, in either case, are not considered easy (Konnert & Augenstein, 1990). Recognizing that today's superintendent must be a visionary leader who leads the school district to success, the interim superintendent must create conditions under which the new superintendent may be successful in implementing that vision. Important to this eventuality is the realization that there is a unique set of personal and professional beliefs and skills brought to the position by any candidate (Konnert & Augenstein, 1990). Although the tenure of the interim superintendent is typically short, his/her impact potentially has long-reaching effects on the success of the district long after (s)he is gone.

According to the tenets of qualitative research, the findings of this study should be transferable to other school districts employing an interim superintendent. However, further case study research is needed to provide additional data from which to continue to build an understanding of the duties and roles of the interim superintendent.



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