

Leading into the Future: Perceptions of School Board Presidents on the Essential Knowledge and Skills for Superintendent Preparation Programs

This manuscript has been peer-reviewed, accepted, and endorsed by the National Council of Professors of Educational Administration as a significant contribution to the scholarship and practice of school administration and K-12 education.



Jenny Tripses
Bradley University

John Hunt
Southern Illinois University Edwardsville

JoHyun Kim
Texas A & M Commerce

Sandra Watkins
Western Illinois University

Reports in the media on American public schools are pretty dismal. Accountability measures enacted with the passing of the No Child Left Behind Law of 2002 include federal and state sanctions for school districts not making adequate yearly progress on state assessments. Typically these results are published locally, which only increases the perception that many American schools are failing to prepare students for the future. Often educators and in particular school leaders are scapegoated in the absence of any other solutions to educate American youth.

Marzano and Waters (2009) provide more promising evidence related to American schools. Their meta-analysis, which sought to uncover deeper understandings of the underlying relationships between district leadership and student achievement revealed, “when district leaders are carrying out their leadership responsibilities effectively, student achievement across the district is positively affected” (p. 5).

“The accountability movement has put school boards in a new, unfamiliar environment” (Marzano & Waters, 2009, p. 77). Historically, school boards have not focused to any great extent upon student achievement. This study sought the perceptions of sitting school board presidents of expectations for their superintendent. Findings of the study reveal these school board presidents fully support ISLLC and ELCC standards, which provide the foundation for superintendent preparation programs. Female board presidents’ perceptions of the importance of several factors were stronger than their male counterparts.

Introduction

Reports in the media on American public schools are pretty dismal. Accountability measures enacted with the passing of the *No Child Left Behind Law of 2002* include federal and state sanctions for school districts not making adequate yearly progress on state assessments. Typically these results are published locally, which only increases the perception that many American schools are failing to prepare students for the future. International comparisons as reported by the Program for International Student Assessments (PISA) from 2012, the most recent reported data, indicate that the United States lags behind other countries, many of which spend far less on educating their student populations. Often educators and in particular school leaders are scapegoated in the absence of any other solutions to educating American youth.

Marzano and Waters (2009) provide more promising evidence related to American schools. Their meta-analysis, which sought to uncover deeper understandings of the underlying relationships between district leadership and student achievement revealed, “when district leaders are carrying out their leadership responsibilities effectively, student achievement across the district is positively affected” (p. 5). Delving deeper into effective leadership, Marzano and Waters identified five district (superintendent) level responsibilities with a statistically ($p < .05$) correlation with average student academic achievement. The five responsibilities are “(1) ensuring collaborative goal setting, (2) establishing nonnegotiable goals for achievement and instruction, (3) creating board alignment with and support of district goals, (4) monitoring achievement and instruction goals, and (5) allocating resources to support the goals for achievement and instruction” (p. 6).

“The accountability movement has put school boards in a new, unfamiliar environment” (Marzano & Waters, 2009, p. 77). Historically, school boards have not focused to any great extent upon student achievement. The passing of No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2002) increased pressure on school boards and superintendent of schools to be more accountable for student achievement (Sell, 2005, Center for Public Education, 2011). Public displays of test scores, mandated by the law, have engaged communities to some extent in the process of evaluating performance of both school boards and superintendents. In *The State of the American School Superintendency-A Mid-Decade Study*, Glass and Franceschini (2007) reported local district public opinion surveys verified communities’ desire for better performance from their school districts. They claimed communities were not demanding reform but expected school district officials and boards to focus on doing a better job of educating their students. This highlights the fact “superintendents daily face local political realities set down by communities and boards” (p. xiv). This also emphasizes the importance of hiring the right superintendent for the community and monitoring the superintendent’s performance on a regular basis.

School reform agendas implemented every decade with initiatives and programs intended to raise student achievement have had limited results (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Reeves, 2011). Federal and state legislators along with community activists and school board members respond to increasing accountability by holding the superintendent of schools responsible for raising student achievement. This has led to greater scrutiny by school board members to hire the most qualified school superintendent. To date, little research has focused on the perception school board members have of the necessary

knowledge, skills, and abilities a superintendent needs to successfully lead a school district.

The purpose of the study reported here was to determine the perceptions Illinois school board presidents have of the competencies district chief executive officers need to successfully lead local districts in changing environments. The descriptive-survey asked school board presidents for their opinions on the relative importance of superintendent technical knowledge about schools as well as the critical personal and social competencies that ensure exemplary leadership. The study is based in part upon results from an earlier study conducted by Hunt, Watkins, Kersten, and Tripses (2011) that focused on perceptions of practicing school superintendents on the knowledge and skills effective superintendents needed in a changing world. In that study, practicing superintendents reported they needed rigorous preparation that linked theory to real world situations. The previous study was initiated in anticipation for a call for the redesign of superintendent preparation programs in Illinois. The researchers believed that the redesign team would benefit from hearing the voices of the superintendents in the field. The purpose of the current study was to gather information regarding the perceptions of another critical group of stakeholders, school board presidents. Specifically, the study sought the perceptions of school board presidents from three performance levels: competencies for a district chief executive officer (CEO); necessary skills in a changing world; and critical personal and social competencies of superintendents.

Literature Review/Context

School boards in the United States of America, as governing boards for local public school districts, are either elected or appointed by their local communities. Historically, these boards have been in existence since the early 1700's, emerging in the New England colonies first, and then expanding throughout the remaining colonies. Initially their main role and function was to hire the head schoolmaster and oversee the maintenance of the school building. As people moved west and states were established, school districts continued to be formed and school boards played a vital role in the selection of superintendents and in the governance of school districts across the country (Sell, 2005).

Nearly 14,000 local school boards, with more than 90,000 members, govern school districts over the 50 states. "School boards derive their power and authority from the state. In compliance with state and federal laws, school boards establish policies and regulations in which their local schools are governed" (NSBA, 2013). The National School Boards Association asserts that school board members are champions for public schools, and one of their primary responsibilities is community engagement to improve student learning and student achievement. One of their chief functions is to hire, monitor, and evaluate the superintendent of schools, the chief executive officer, and to set policy for hiring other personnel in the school district. Boards are also responsible for additional governing responsibilities that include (a) overseeing the development and adoption of policies; (b) establishing and adopting budget priorities; (c) setting the direction for and adoption of the curriculum; and (d) providing direction and adoption of collective bargaining agreements as school boards work in tandem with the superintendent of schools and the district office staff to design policies (NSBA; Sell, 2005; Dervarics & O'Brien, 2015). A positive, productive relationship between the

superintendent and school board members is vital to implement a governance model, which impacts student learning and student achievement in the local school district (Marzano & Waters, 2009; Eight Characteristics, Sell, 2005; Dervarics & O'Brien, 2015)

Effective School Board-Superintendent Teams

“A high performance team is a group of people in a school or district that work interdependently to meet or exceed established goals. Team members hold each other accountable for results and are able to act independently, but they are aligned with the leader” (Kirtman, 2014, p. 2). Waters’ and Marzano’s (2009) meta-analysis study on the effect of superintendent leadership on student achievement, highlight the importance of superintendents working with school board members in establishing non-negotiable district goals for student achievement. Effective districts, as measured by higher student achievement, establish and maintain learning goals as the primary focus of district efforts (Eight Characteristics; Dervarics & O'Brien, 2015, Marzano & Waters, 2009; Reeves, 2011). Resources are allocated to reach student achievement goals. The superintendent and board, play critical but different roles in monitoring student achievement (Reeves, 2011).

The Iowa Lighthouse Study, conducted by the Iowa School Board Association, capitalized on the importance of the collaborative relationship between the school board and superintendent (Rice et al., 2000). Researchers interviewed 159 school board members, superintendents and school staff members in high and low-achieving school districts. Their goal was to compare the board/superintendent teams’ ability to encourage positive change by exploring the presence of seven working conditions for school renewal. They classified boards/school districts as moving or stuck on the seven conditions for school renewal. Research findings echoed the Waters and Marzano (2009); Eight Characteristics; Goodman, Fulbright, & Zimmerman (1997); and Dervarics & O'Brien (2015) study by emphasizing the importance of clear district-wide goals and expectations for improvements in student achievement by the school board and superintendent. Staff members from the Iowa Lighthouse Study (Rice et al, 2000) also described the school board as supportive of their work and board members articulated knowledge about learning in the schools and list specific initiatives.

By contrast, less effective boards fail to define a vision. This has implications in the hiring process because school boards who have not done the work of creating a shared vision often recruit a superintendent with his or her own ideas and platform, leading to boards with multiple agendas, tendencies to micromanage, and other nonproductive patterns of behavior. Less successful districts featured boards and superintendents that were not in alignment, as the superintendent “may develop solutions without board engagement” (Center for Public Education, 2011).

Kowalski (2006) former school superintendent and currently a professor of educational leadership and Carver (2006), noted expert on school boards that make a difference, agree there is no single relationship in the organization that is more important than that between the board and the CEO (in the case of schools, superintendent). No relationship in a school district that has a greater impact than the relationship between the school superintendent and the school board. Carver contends “a multitude of ethical, moral, professional, and social issues frame the relationship between a superintendent

and school board members” (p. 146). Kowalski points out that role confusion and dissatisfaction can emerge when boards are ethically bound to listen to the superintendent, but they are not obligated to act on the superintendent’s recommendations. When there is no harmony in this relationship, tension and relationship problems can emerge and impact the governance of the school district. Carver asserts this “relationship, (when) well-conceived can set the stage for effective governance and management” (p.153). Although Carver acknowledges one of the most important tasks of a board is the hiring of the CEO, he also contends that establishing an effective relationship is equally important. Defining roles, relationships, and responsibilities of the superintendent (CEO) with the board are of critical importance.

Board Roles

The research around characteristics of school boards in high and low achieving districts clearly distinguishes between habits and characteristics that effectively impact student achievement and those that do not (Dervarics & O’Brien, 2015). Boards in high achieving districts work continuously with their communities and faculty to clarify values and vision, establish strong communications structures, base decisions upon data and work hard to align and sustain resources to meet district goals (Eight Characteristics). This focus on student achievement based upon clear learning goals creates conditions where board members understand their role in holding the superintendent and his or her colleagues accountable for progress without engaging in the daily administration of schools (Center for Public Education, 2011). Effective boards are data savvy; they embrace and monitor data, even when the information is negative, and use it to drive continuous improvement (Center for Public Education, 2011).

Board members educated on the specific roles, relationships, and responsibilities of the superintendent of schools can more effectively design interview questions to address the candidate’s competencies and reflect the needs of the local school district. Strained relationships can occur due to role confusion, federal control, and the lack of board training (Mountford 2004) Board development sessions and training in educational leadership preparation programs can alleviate many problems with role confusion and tendencies to micromanage (Marzano & Waters, 2009; Center for Public Education, 2011). Hopkins, O’Neil and Williams (2007) investigated emotional intelligence and school board governance and found a strong relationship existed between behaviors indicative of effective board governance and emotional intelligence competencies. “Public school boards as well as corporate and non-profit boards of directors face a complex range of responsibilities that require self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management, the pillars of emotional intelligence” (p. 696).

Hiring competent superintendents has become a much more critical task for school board members in the last decade due to the pressure placed on boards of education and superintendents to meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), a demand set forth in the legislation of the No Child Left Behind Law of 2002. Since ISLLC and ELCC standards were designed for Educational Leadership graduate programs to ensure adequacy of performance in critical areas, research is beginning to emerge that analyzes the perceptions school board members have on the critical performance indicators associated with these standards. Rockwood (2010) focused on the differences in

perceptions of unit district school superintendents and school board presidents on the performance competency indicators that are most critical to a superintendent's success. The study utilized the six standards developed by the Interstate School Leadership Licensure Consortium (ISLLC). One of the findings relating to gender indicated females selected "promoting academic excellence" as a top indicator while males selected "models core beliefs and takes actions to achieve goals" as their top indicator for a performance (p.119). Rockwood suggests that gender does influence how people perceive their world and she posits that males tend to be more directive in their managerial style. The results of the study also indicated school board presidents and superintendents deemed ISLCC Standard 1 "Facilitating a Vision of Educational Excellence" as the most important standard followed by Standard 2 that focused on the learning environment and instructional programs that focus on high expectations for all students and providing a respectful, positive climate for learning.

Orr's (2009) quantitative study investigated qualities school board members were looking for in terms of hiring a superintendent in Indiana. Results indicated that there were no major differences in terms of the size of the school district, location and years of service. School board members expected their future superintendents to be "well versed in all aspects of the job" (p.75). According to Orr, the findings suggest school board members desire a superintendent candidate to be proficient in personal skills and be well prepared in all aspects of the superintendency.

Figuring out what a specific school board and individual members seated on that board perceive as being well prepared for all aspects of the superintendency is critical to successfully accomplishment of district goals. School boards who take seriously their responsibility to create a vision for their district (Center for Public Education) and based upon that vision, create a shared vision for the district, will take time to understand what their district needs in a superintendent. "Understanding the competencies that are needed for a position and recruitment or development of internal talent is a better use of your time than to put all the focus on the evaluation of poor performance" (Kirtman, 2014, p. 123).

Superintendent Roles

There is certainly no dearth of leadership theory or advice about what school leaders should do in order to successfully turn around school districts. Typically researchers distill their ideas into a list of key leadership behaviors, characteristics, competencies, etc. The foundation of the synthesis that follows came from Marzano and Waters (2009), the Center for Education, Bjork and Kowalski (2005), and Kirtman (2014).

Marzano and Waters (2009) used meta-analysis to determine the strength of relationships between district-level administrator actions and student achievement and more specifically, the district level leadership behaviors associated with student achievement. In answering the first question, they concluded that district level leadership does make a notable difference with a correlation between district leadership and student achievement at .24 that was statistically significant at the .05 level. Addressing criticisms that superintendents are irrelevant to improving student achievement, they conclude, "when district leaders are carrying out their leadership responsibilities effectively, student achievement across the district is positively affected" (Marzano & Waters, 2009, p. 5).

Marzano and Waters (2009) first responsibility for effective district leadership is ensuring collaborative goal setting. “Effective district leaders include all relevant stakeholders, including central office, building level administrators, and board members” (p. 6). Marzano and Waters’ second responsibility identified establishing non-negotiable goals for achievement and instruction. These goals must result in teacher and building level administrator action related to student achievement and classroom instruction. These first two responsibilities are consistent with the findings from the study “Eight Characteristics of Effective Boards” (Center for Public Education, 2011). that described the importance of establishing a high vision based upon common beliefs and values. Kirtman’s (2014) responsibilities described the process of collaborative goal setting and establishment of non-negotiable goals for student achievement while (Marzano and Waters, 2009) study included creating a commonly owned plan for success and a high sense of urgency for change and sustainable results. Another competency defined by Kirtman (2014) involves challenging the status quo. This competency requires that superintendent’s challenge the district’s constituents that include teachers, building level administrators, community and the school board to develop collaborative goal-setting, productive monitoring, and readjustments necessary to improve student achievement (DuFour and Marzano, 2011; Reeves, 2011).

Marzano and Waters’ (2009) third district leadership behavior, creating conditions where board alignment and support of district goals speaks directly to the purpose of this study. Similarly, the Eight Characteristics of Effective Boards addressed the need for boards and superintendents to form a united team to accomplish district goals. Kirtman’s (2014) competencies include building trust with all teams, which includes the school board and focus on team over self. This requires that members subordinate their own self-interests in favor of achieving the goals of the district. District educational leaders, especially the superintendent, must take primary responsibility to translate broad goals into actionable steps so teachers, building level administrators and the school board understand what is required for success (DuFour & Marzano, 2011).

Monitoring achievement and instructional goals from multiple levels is a critical leadership skill (Marzano & Waters, 2009; Reeves, 2011). The school board characteristics that empower monitoring of goals include the need to first understand the importance of accountability and take seriously the need to use data as the basis for decisions (Center for Public Education). A primary role of the superintendent is to serve as the individual in the district with the expertise and positional influence necessary to create learning conditions for the board to operate from a decision-making processes based upon data.

The superintendent and board share responsibilities to allocate resources, each in different capacities (Marzano and Waters, 2009; Center for Public Education). Resource allocation includes professional development for teachers, administrators and school boards in order to effectively move forward in accomplishing non-negotiable learning goals.

Superintendents must provide leadership for both vertical and horizontal relationships within the district, while also providing leadership needed for those relationships outside the district (Kirtman , 2014). A superintendent effectively leads vertically by establishing and maintaining a strong partnership with the school board. Effective horizontal leadership connects the district with other superintendents through

professional organizations at the local, state, and national level while also working effectively with local community leaders. Community leadership has become increasingly important, as accountability measures at state and national levels have increased. Superintendents who fail to attend to their own learning about current initiatives and mandates will not serve their districts well because they understand that “accountability and evaluation are management tools, not strategic approaches for leadership to reach our goals for students” (Kirtman, 2014, p. x). Kirtman’s (2014) competency to a commitment to continuous self-improvement is intended to identify effective school leaders, but could also be applied to school boards.

Bjork and Kowalski (2005) identified five major role conceptions related to the superintendency: Superintendent as Teacher-Scholar, Manager, Democratic Leader/Statesman, Social Scientist and Superintendent as Communicator. The *American School Superintendent 2010 Decennial Study* (Kowalski, et al, 2010) investigated how often school boards emphasized each of these five major roles. According to the school superintendent respondents, the “highest level of substantial emphasis was placed on being an *effective communicator*, followed by *manager*, *instructional leader*, *statesman/democratic leader*, and *applied social scientist*” (p. xvi). Nearly all superintendents (95.3%) acknowledged that they were the board’s primary source of information (Glass, et al., 2000). Given rapidly changing technologies, the superintendent’s communications role with various publics is increasingly complex and important (Bjork & Kowalski).

Richard (2006) investigated the leadership behaviors in terms of “what is occurring” and “what should be” occurring in Ohio superintendents as perceived by board of education members. Findings indicated board members held high expectations of superintendents and that the expectations were higher than their perceptions of superintendents’ actual behaviors. In addition, female board members held higher expectations of the superintendent in the area of consideration of people and generally rated the actual behavior lower as compared to the male board members. Results of the study also suggest the importance of the superintendent being “students of the profession, learn lessons through the experiences of both self and others, and to work diligently to understand the board as a collected whole” (p.81). Richard asserts the importance of self-awareness on the part of board members in terms of their experiences and how increased self-awareness could possibly lead to better evaluation procedures for the superintendent.

Female school board presidents demonstrated high self-efficacy and recognized the importance of shared governance towards the ends of school improvement (Van Tuyle, 2015). Employing a measure designed to measure self-efficacy, Palladino, Haar, Grady, and Perry (2007) found that rural female superintendents described participants’ relationship skills as both cognitive and behavioral forms of engagement.

Superintendents play an essential role in developing conditions where boards engage in team building and collaborative efforts as a continuous process. Protocols and operating procedures must be continuously evaluated to ensure student learning remains the focus of superintendent board decisions and actions (Moody, 2011).

Methodology

The study employed descriptive-survey study design (Gall, Gall & Borg, 2006) and subjects were Illinois school board presidents. The researchers developed a self-administered survey, which was subsequently field-tested by selected staff members of the Illinois Association of School Boards. The instrument and procedures were modified based upon feedback gathered. The questionnaire received appropriate Institutional Review Board approval.

Part I of the survey asked respondents to provide demographic data type and characteristics of the district, years as board president experience, years of total school board experience, gender, enrollment of the district, and percent of free and reduced lunch eligible students. Respondents were also asked to comment on the AYP status of the district and the fiscal status of the district. In Part II, respondents were asked to respond using a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*Unimportant*), 2 (*Somewhat Important*), 3 (*Important*), 4 (*Very Important*), to 5 (*Essential*) to rate their perceptions of the importance of each prompt pertaining to superintendent skills needed.

A web-based survey method was utilized for data collection. The previous study, conducted in 2011, gathered insights of practicing Illinois school superintendents regarding the essential knowledge and skills superintendents need to be successful school leaders. The Illinois Association of School Boards sent an email to all 869 Illinois School Board presidents, which included a cover letter from the researchers and a link to the survey. Participants were informed that their response implied informed consent to participate in the study.

Qualtrics provided frequencies and percentages of closed-end responses. Data were analyzed to identify trends that might appear within the categories (Maxwell & Loomis, 1996). Using SPSS, independent samples t-test was conducted to test group differences between male school board presidents and female school board presidents. The effect size was also measured, where Cohen's (1992) conventional guidelines state that .01, .06, and .14 represents a small, medium, and large effect size, respectively. The alpha level of significance for this study was set at the .05 (Ary, Jacobs, & Razavieh, 2002). Through an inductive analysis (McMillan & Wergin, 2006, p. 94), "data are gathered first and synthesized inductively for understanding. Conclusions are grounded from the bottom up." For the purposes of this paper, the significance of the differing responses were analyzed based upon the gender of school board presidents.

Data Analysis

A total of 276 school board presidents provided valid responses to the survey. This constitutes 31.8 % of the 869 school board presidents in Illinois. Illinois is somewhat unique because it has three distinct types of school districts. Of the 869 school districts in Illinois, 378 districts, or 43.5 %, are elementary school districts, educating students from pre-kindergarten through eighth grade. Another 101 school districts, or 11.6 % of the total, are high school districts, educating students in grades nine through twelve. The remaining 390 school districts, constituting 44.9 % of the total are unit school districts, educating students from pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade.

Among the 276 school board presidents completing the survey, 41.3 % represented elementary districts, 15.6 % represented high school districts, and 36.2 % served unit districts. Another 6.9 % concurrently served on elementary and high school boards. Generally, the percent of respondents from elementary districts was fairly similar to the percent of elementary districts statewide. The high school respondents were slightly overrepresented when compared with the percent of high school districts statewide, as the percent of respondents representing unit district was underrepresented when compared with the percent of unit districts, statewide.

Among the 276 responding school board presidents, 188 were male and 88 were female; therefore, 68% were men and 32% were women. The range of experience of school board service was also interesting, with the experience range separated into categories of one to two years' service (.7%), three to five years' service (12.7%), six to ten years' service (38.8 %), eleven to fifteen years' service (24.6%), and over fifteen years' service (23.2%). Since a typical school board term in Illinois is four years, a minimum of 86.6 % of the board members had served more than one term. A notable 47.8 % of the respondents had served eleven or more years as board members.

The respondents were asked to self-report themselves as representing urban, suburban or rural districts. In this category, 3.7 % claimed to serve urban districts, 41.5 % self-reported as suburban representatives and the remaining 54.8 % said they were from rural school districts. Perhaps somewhat related to this was the question about district student enrollment. Those representing districts with fewer than 500 students comprised 20.7 % of the total. Another 27.5 % came from districts of 500 to 1000 students. The largest percent of respondents, 40.6 %, represented districts with 1001 through 4000 students. Only 8 % came from districts with enrollments between 4001 and 10,000 students. Finally, the remaining 3.3 % represented districts with enrollments over 10,000 students.

The quantitative portion of the survey asked board presidents to respond on a five point Likert-type scale to 29 questions pertaining to knowledge and skills related to the superintendency. Respondents were asked to rate superintendent knowledge and skills from the Unimportant to *Essential*. Based upon independent t-tests, differences in the responses of male and female school board members to the survey questions were significant. In all questions, female board presidents rated the necessity for knowledge and skills pertaining to the superintendency more highly than their male counterparts. For example, of the 29 questions, male board presidents rated 14 of the 29 with a mean score of 4.0 or higher, while female board presidents rated 26 of the 29 with a mean score of 4.0 or higher. Independent samples t-tests results revealed that the difference between male and female board presidents' responses was statistically significant in 26 questions. Among these male versus female differences, 9 showed a close to moderate effect size and another five responses had moderate effect size.

There were five superintendent characteristics that were rated with a mean score of 4.32 or higher by men; women rated every item higher than men (see Table1).

Table 1

Independent Samples t-test for Gender on Superintendent Characteristics

	Males (n = 188)		Females (n = 88)		t	p	η^2
	M	SD	M	SD			
Establishing and communicating high expectations for effective teaching and student learning around the district's instructional goals	4.53	.62	4.67	.52	-1.89	.06	0.01
Inspiring and modeling high expectations for staff, students, and school Board members.	4.49	.58	4.72	.50	-3.31	.00**	0.04
Ensuring that financial, human, and material resources are directed toward achieving the school district's mission, vision and goals.	4.37	.68	4.61	.56	-3.17	.00**	0.04
Developing, monitoring, and sustaining effective teamwork among administrators, teachers, parents, and school board members.	4.32	.68	4.60	.58	-3.55	.00**	0.04
Demonstrating self-confidence and transparency in leading the school district.	4.32	.71	4.53	.57	-2.58	.01**	0.02

Note. 5-point scale (1=unimportant, 2=somewhat important, 3=important, 4=very important, 5=Essential)

* $p < 0.05$. ** $p < 0.01$.

None of the five characteristics in table1 are surprising in today's environment. The most highly rated item, *Establishing and communicating high expectations for effective teaching and student learning around the district's instructional goals* (4.53 males /4.67 females) deals with communicating high expectations for teaching and student learning. In an era of districts striving to make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) under the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), the fact this item tops the list is probably to be expected. Not only is there a negative public relations component to the failure to make AYP, but there may also be federal sanctions if the district or schools within the district receive Title I funding.

The second item, *Inspiring and modeling high expectations for staff, students, and school Board members* (4.49 males /4.72 females), while certainly related to the top item, is a bit broader in scope. The superintendent is expected to inspire and model high expectations for staff, students and school board members in all areas, not just academics. Essentially, the superintendent is expected to act as a district cheerleader and the district visionary in this response item. It may also be assumed that while the first item was primarily focused internally, with a few external implications, this second item spills out more quickly into the public domain. This is the type of superintendent behavior, which not only inspires those within the district, but also tells the public that this is a district on the move.

Least surprising (4.37 males /4.61 females) is the third item *Ensuring that financial, human, and material resources are directed toward achieving the school district's mission, vision and goals*, which deals with ensuring that financial, human, and material resources are being directed appropriately. Especially in Illinois, where the

state's financial situation is questionable, board presidents' concern in this area makes sense. Perhaps the only surprise is that it did not receive the highest mean rating. On the other hand, the fact that it was not is also somewhat encouraging, showing that board presidents are still concerned with academic achievement and overall high expectations.

The fourth competency area, *Developing, monitoring, and sustaining effective teamwork among administrators, teachers, parents, and school board members* (4.32 males /4.60 females), was related to the superintendent's responsibility for developing, monitoring, and sustaining teamwork among various constituencies. Schools have certainly shifted from a "closed door" scenario to one in which teachers work in team situations. Administrators must work with teachers, parents and school board members in order to effectively run a school district with all of the challenges existing in today's educational environment.

The final item, *Demonstrating self-confidence and transparency in leading the school district*. (4.32 males /4.53 females) among the top five is the need for a superintendent to demonstrate self-confidence and transparency in leading the school district. Both traits are extremely important in today's world. Much can be accomplished by a superintendent with the skills to remain calm and with the ability to reassure staff, parents, and community the district is on an even keel and on the correct path. The transparency issue is somewhat related to the previously mentioned skills in teamwork. Gone are the days when a superintendent could operate in secrecy or in a vacuum. Today, most individuals are more inspired by openness and invitational behavior.

In addition to the five items that male board presidents rated between 4.32 and 4.53, there were an additional six items which female board presidents rated at 4.32 or higher, but which male presidents rated below 4.32 (see Table 2).

Table 2
Independent Samples t-test for Gender on Superintendent Characteristics

	Males (n = 188)		Females (n = 88)		t	p	η^2
	M	SD	M	SD			
Exercising excellent decision-making skills in district and community.	4.19	.69	4.58	.56	-4.56	.00**	0.07
Demonstrating the ability to bring about needed change and formulating the district's reform agenda that is aligned to the Board's core values, mission and vision.	4.12	.74	4.49	.59	-4.09	.00**	0.06
Understand and execute the skills necessary to bargain with employee unions, implement terms of collective bargaining agreements, and establish productive relationships with various employee associations.	4.13	.78	4.45	.64	-3.32	.00**	0.04
Demonstrating the ability to listen intently to fully grasp others' perspectives on challenges and issues in the school district and community.	4.08	.76	4.41	.64	-3.51	.00**	0.04
Ensuring the use of a continuous improvement	4.13	.73	4.35	.72	-	.02*	0.02

process in school and district improvement planning.								2.27
Exercising excellent problem-solving skills in district and community.	4.05	.76	4.32	.65	-	.00**	0.03	2.86

Note. 5-point scale (1=unimportant, 2=somewhat important, 3=important, 4=very important, 5=Essential)
 * $p < 0.05$. ** $p < 0.01$.

In this category of items, female board presidents rated items at 4.32 and above while the males did not. T-test results showed statistically significant difference between women and men with moderate effect size in two items. These two were those that the women rated most highly; decision-making skills and the ability to bring about change in formulating a reform agenda. About the question of decision-making skills, female board presidents rated ($M = 4.58, SD = .56$) much higher than male board presidents ($M = 4.19, SD = .69$) and difference was statistically significant ($p < .01$) and effect size was moderate (0.07). About the question of the ability to bring about change in formulating a reform agenda, female board presidents also rated ($M = 4.49, SD = .59$) higher than their counterparts ($M = 4.12, SD = .74$) and difference was significant ($p < .01$) and effect size was moderate (0.06). It is interesting to speculate upon this difference between men and women on the need for a strong decision-maker as the district's C.E.O. Regarding the second issue; it could be that some board presidents may be more interested in protecting what the district already has in place rather than making major changes. At the same time, the gender difference on this one is interesting.

Between the remaining four from this category, two items rose to the level of close to moderate effect size regarding differences. These were the items dealing with listening intently to grasp others' perspectives, understanding and executing the skills necessary to bargain with employee unions, implement terms of collective bargaining agreements, and establish productive relationships with various employee unions. About the question of listening intently to grasp others' perspectives, female board presidents rated ($M = 4.41, SD = .64$) much higher than male board presidents ($M = 4.08, SD = .76$) and difference was significant ($p < .01$) and effect size was close to moderate (0.04). About the question of the skills necessary to bargain with employee unions, female board presidents also rated ($M = 4.45, SD = .64$) higher than their counterparts ($M = 4.13, SD = .78$) and difference was significant ($p < .01$) and effect size was close to moderate (0.04). In the previously mentioned statewide study of Illinois superintendents' perceptions of needed skills among superintendents (Hunt, Watkins, Kersten, and Tripses, 2011), listening intently to grasp others' perspectives was also rated very highly by respondents. Since Illinois has historically been a strong union state, the skills called for in the last item, pertaining to establishing productive relationships with employee unions, would seem to be particularly important, unless the district regularly employs an outside negotiator for collective bargaining purposes.

Limitations

A limitation to be considered when interpreting results of this study is that since it is state-specific, generalizations beyond Illinois are limited. Although all Illinois school

board presidents were surveyed, only 31.8 % of the 869 school board presidents responded to the survey, so perceptions of a larger percentage subjects is not represented here. As previously stated in the study, Illinois is organized into elementary, high school and unit (pre-K through 12) districts. The high school districts were slightly overrepresented among the respondents and the unit districts were slightly underrepresented. Other states having different school district structures may reveal other board member perceptions.

Unlike the previous study conducted by the researchers, in which the superintendent respondents were asked to comment on the quality and needed improvements in superintendent preparation programs (in which they had personally participated), the researchers found it necessary to interpolate the data from this study in order to transfer the findings to information useful for superintendent preparation programs.

Discussion/Conclusions

The purpose of the study was to gather perceptions of school board presidents from three performance levels: competencies for a superintendent; necessary skills for superintendents in changing environments; and critical personal and social competencies of superintendents. The research sought the opinions of school board presidents in order to inform both school boards and graduate school superintendent preparation programs.

The results were clear that school board presidents value superintendent expertise in all items included in the survey. As in all complex undertakings and especially those that involve developing and sustaining board/superintendent relationships, the devil is in the details. The research reports that superintendents and boards must pay close attention to shared vision based upon high student achievement; monitoring not only progress of efforts to raise student achievement but also the processes used by superintendents and boards to increase student learning; tend to the professional development needs of educators throughout the district as well as their own; and allocate resources strategically. Superintendent expertise that includes highly developed team leadership and interpersonal skills seems critical.

The significant difference revealed in this study was gender. Female board presidents as a group rated the competencies as more important than male board presidents. One way to view this finding might be to teach future superintendents to consider differences of perception based upon gender. We regard this as a limited approach and instead recommend that superintendent preparation programs instead focus on the need to continuously understand and employ practices that value different opinions and bring groups to develop courses of action to accomplish common goals. "Leadership retains the responsibility for synthesizing the needs of many stakeholders and then focusing the entire organization on the best means to achieve its goal" (Reeves, 2011, p. 64). Leadership in this sense involves both the superintendent and other school leaders and the school board working in conjunction based upon the common good.

Further study is needed regarding the gender differences between male and female school board presidents. The differences on our survey between males and females rose to the level of significance in all cases, and 13 of the 29 responses showed either a close to moderate or moderate to large effect size. In all cases, the female board

superintendents, as a group, rated all 29 superintendent competencies more highly than did their male counterparts. Rockwood (2010) suggests in her research that men are more directive in their leadership style, and women, by implication, are more nuanced. Richard (2006) suggests that women have higher expectations of superintendents regarding the importance of their consideration of people.

Effective teamwork, interpersonal skills, and leadership skills in group processes are implied in both ELCC and ISLLC standards, but not explicit. Our recommendation is that superintendent preparation programs carefully consider how these competencies can be taught and developed in their programs. Some students enter preparation programs with these skills, many do not. Implementation of non-negotiable goals (Marzano and Waters, 2009) may cause superintendent board teams to engage in counter-productive behaviors identified by the Center for Public Schools (2011). Alternatively, superintendent board teams who develop visions based upon high expectations for student achievement, work to align and sustain efforts to achieve goals, present as a united team, maintain accountability measures, allocate resources based upon goals, understand school improvement, base decisions upon data rather than unsubstantiated stories from constituents and work hard on their own professional development should experience progress in their districts. The work involved is very difficult and superintendents without understandings and necessary skills to constantly work with boards will encounter difficulties. That's a tall order for both superintendents and boards. Preparation programs have to provide future superintendents with the necessary skills to lead diverse groups as boards tend to be.

The findings of this research reveal that for participating Illinois board presidents in this study, female board presidents hold *establishing and modeling high expectations and devoting financial, human, and material resources along with focused development, monitoring and sustaining effective teamwork necessary to achieve those expectations*, more highly than male presidents. The last significant difference related to gender responses in this study relates to the *superintendent's level of self-confidence and transparency*. Others have noted gender differences between male and female board presidents and or superintendents (Van Tuyle, V. 2015; Rockwood, P.R., 2010; Palladino J, Haar J, Grady, M., Perry, K 2007; Richard J.V., 2006). While we recognize the importance of these findings, we also contend that the broader implication for superintendency preparation programs is to prepare future superintendents to not only be aware of gender differences within the context of other kinds of differences but to focus to a greater extent upon the necessary skills to identify differences in perception as part of the context related to developing high performing superintendent board teams.

Effective boards from the Center for Public Education's study held the superintendent and his or her colleagues accountable for progress. But they did not engage in the daily administration of schools. Explained one board member: "I am not a professional educator....(The superintendent and her staff) are the professionals, and we say to them, 'These are the results we want to see; you are in charge of how to do it.'" While this statement may seem like an unrealistic dream to practicing superintendents working on a regular basis with the school board they have, we believe that this board members attitude should serve as a goal. Superintendent/board teams that recognize their interdependent roles and the need to continuously monitor their progress as a team will

move into the effective school board (Center for Public Schools, 2011) and competent superintendent (Marzano & Waters, 2009) categories.

References

- Ary, D., Jacobs, L. C., & Razavieh, A. (2002). *Introduction to research in education* (6th ed.). Wadsworth Group, Thomson Learning, Inc.
- Björk, L. G., & Kowalski, T. J. (2005). *The contemporary superintendent: Preparation, practice, and development*. Thousand Oaks, California: Corwin Press.
- Björk, L. G., Kowalski, T. J. & Browne-Ferrigno (2014). The school district superintendent in the United States of America.
- Carver, J. (2006). *Boards that make a difference: A new design for leadership in nonprofit and public organizations-3rd Ed.* San Francisco, California: Jossey-Bass.
- Center for Public Education. *Eight characteristics of effective school boards*. downloaded at <http://www.centerforpubliceducation.org/Main-Menu/Public-education/Eight-characteristics-of-effective-school-boards/Eight-characteristics-of-effective-school-boards.html>
- Cohen, J. (1992). Quantitative methods in psychology: A power primer. *Psychological Bulletin*, 112(1), 155-159.
- Dervarics, C. & O'Brien, E. *Eight characteristics of effective school boards*. The Illinois School Board Journal, Vol. 83, No.4 pp.10-12.
- DuFour, R. & Marzano, R. (2011). *Leaders learning: how district, school, and classroom leaders improve student achievement*. Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree Press.
- Gall, M. D., Gall, J. P., & Borg, W. R. (2006). *Educational research: An introduction* (8th ed.). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Glass, T. E., Bjork, L., & Brunner, C. C. (2001). *The study of the American superintendency, 2000: A look at the superintendent of education in the new millennium*. R&L Education.
- Glass, T. E., & Franceschini, L. A. (2007). *The state of the American school superintendency: A mid-decade study*. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Education.
- Goodman, R.H., Fulbright, L., and Zimmerman, W.G. (1997). *Getting There from Here: School Board-Superintendent Collaboration Creating a School Governance Team Capable of Raising Student Achievement*, 1997. Arlington, VA: Educational Research Service and New England School Development Council.
- Hopkins, M. M., O'Neil, D. A., & Williams, H. W. (2007). Emotional intelligence and board governance: Leadership lessons from the public sector. *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, 22(7), 683-700.
- Hunt, J., Watkins, S., Kersten, T., & Tripses, J. (October, 2011). Restructuring (Retooling) superintendent leadership programs to enhance district leadership. *Education Leadership Review Special Issue: Portland Conference*, 12(3).
- Kirtman, L. (2014). *Leadership and teams: the missing piece in the educational reform puzzle*. New York, NY: Pearson Press.
- Kowalski, T. J. (2006). *The school superintendent: theory, practice, and case-2nd Ed.* Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications.
- Kowalski, T. J., McCord, R. S., Petersen, G. J., Young, I. P., & Ellerson, N. M. (2011). *The American school superintendent: 2010 decennial study*. Lanham, Maryland:

- Rowman & Littlefield Education. ISBN-13: 978-1607099970, ISBN-10: 1607099977
- Marzano, R. & Waters, T. (2009). *District leadership that works: striking the right balance*. Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree Press.
- Maxwell, J. A., & Loomis, D. M. (2003). Mixed methods design: An alternative approach. *Handbook of mixed methods in social and behavioral research, 1*, 241-272.
- McMillan, J., & Wergin, J. (2006). Introduction to reading educational research. *Understanding and evaluating educational research*, 1-12.
- Moody, M. (2011). Superintendent-Board Relations: Understanding the Past to Promote the Future. *Educational Leadership and Administration: Teaching and Program Development, 23*, 75-84.
- Mountford, M. (2004). Motives and power of school board members: Implications for school board-superintendent relationships. *Educational Administration Quarterly, 40*(5), 704-741.
- National Policy Board for Education Administration (NPBEA). (2011). Educational leadership program standards: 2011 ELCC district level. Retrieved from: <http://npbea.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/ELCC-District-Level-Standards-2011.pdf>
- National School Boards Association. (2013). What do school boards do? Alexandria, VA: Author.
- No Child Left Behind Act, Public Law 107-110, 115 Stat. 1425 (2002).
- Orr, Leonard. (2009). *What Indiana school board members look for when hiring a superintendent* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Indiana State University, Terre Haute, Indiana.
- Palladino, J. M., Haar, J. M., Grady, M. L., and Perry, K. (2007). An efficacious theoretical perspective of rural female school superintendents. *Journal of Ethnographic and Qualitative Research, 1*, 40-49.
- Program for International Student Assessment (2012) downloaded at <http://www.oecd.org/pisa/keyfindings/PISA-2012-results-US.pdf>
- Reeves, D. (2011). *Finding your leadership focus: what matters most for student results*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press. ISBN 978-0-8077-5170-1.
- Rice, R., Delagardelle, M., Buckton, M., Jons, C., Lueders, W., Joyce, B., Wolf, J., & Weathersby, J. (2000). The lighthouse inquiry: School board/ superintendent team behaviors in school districts with extreme differences in student achievement. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association. Seattle, WA.
- Richard, J. V. (2006). *Leadership behaviors of Ohio school superintendents as perceived by board of education members: A re-examination* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). The University of Akron, Akron, Ohio.
- Rockwood, P. R. (2010). *Board and superintendent perceptions of the Illinois professional standards for school leaders critical for superintendent success* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa.

- Sell, S. (2005). Running an effective school district: school boards in the 21st century. *Journal of Education*, Vol. 186 (3), pp. 71-97
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/42742618>
- Van Tuyle, V. (2015). A profile of female Illinois school board presidents and their perceived self-efficacy. *NCPEA Education Leadership Review*. Vol.16, No.1 – April 2015. ISSN: 1532-0723.