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# ***Examining Superintendent Turnover Intent: A Quantitative Analysis of the Relationship Between Exchange Commitment and the Turnover Intent of Public School Superintendents in Texas***

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## **Introduction**

Quality leadership in a school district is critical to school improvement (Dunlap, Li, & Kladifko, 2015; Kersten, 2009; Leithwood, Seashore, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). School leaders must be capable of providing vision, focus, and support to their staff, in order to facilitate a positive working culture, and achieve sustainable academic success. Given the competitive nature and complexities of building a quality workforce, when a quality leader is hired, it is typically in the best interest of an organization to retain this talent. However, planning for employee retention requires a detailed understanding as to why an individual desires to leave their current job (Hackett, 2015). This can prove to be even more challenging in school systems where applicant pools are often limited.

There have been numerous studies related to the turnover and retention of school staff. Many of these studies, however, have focused on school principals and teachers, leaving a noticeable gap in the literature as it relates to the turnover of school superintendents (Sparks, 2012). This is significant because data suggests a national trend of high turnover among superintendents (Berryhill, 2009; Hackett, 2015). Lack of stability, whether for voluntary or involuntary reasons (Kersten, 2009), can have far-reaching effects (Fullan, 2000), resulting in mistrust, instability, and turnover of other employees working within the organization (Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004; Baker, Punswick, & Belt, 2010; Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). In fact, Simpson (2013) found that superintendents who serve in their roles less than 5 years document less growth in student achievement than their peers who remain past this time period. Superintendent stability and school district success are positively correlated (Alsbury, 2008).

## **Background to the Problem**

Districts across the country face the challenge of filling hundreds of existing superintendent vacancies (Kamler, 2007; Kersten, 2009). Specifically, the turnover of superintendents in Texas has been compared to a revolving door (O'Connor & Vaughn, 2018). This turnover has forced school boards to compete for talent in a limited applicant pool (Samuels, 2008). As superintendent turnover continues to evolve as topic of concern, identifying ways for school boards and state agencies to retain quality candidates will be vital. Researchers have identified an immediate need to conduct more extensive research on the tenure of a

superintendent (Hoyle, Bjork, & Glass, 2005).

The average superintendent tenure is three-to-five years (Grissom & Anderson, 2012; Johnson, Huffman, Madden, & Shope, 2011). Glass and Francehini (2007) reported that 55% of all superintendents would be unemployed within this time span. This short tenure can prove to be problematic for school districts (Williams & Hatch, 2012), due to the fact that longevity is related to stability, and allows a leader the opportunity to guide districtwide plans to completion (Hoyle et al., 2005; Palladino, Grady, Haar, & Perry, 2007). Without stability, many reform efforts are stopped midstream. Perpetual turnover of a school superintendent can have a negative effect on school performance (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004, 2011; Simpson, 2013), and has been connected with uncertainty, as well as increased costs associated with departure (Williams & Hatch, 2012).

As accountability and federal mandates continue to be high priority among school administrators (Hoyle, 2002; Simpson, 2013), the importance of recruiting and retaining a quality superintendent will become more vital to the survival of a district. While it is important to understand that there is no set timeline for achieving school improvement outcomes (Elmore & City, 2007), research recommends at least five years of consistency to experience reform. The retention of a superintendent is of importance to most school districts; however, many stakeholders do not fully understand the factors that contribute to the turnover of these professionals (Grissom & Mitani, 2016).

### **Related Literature**

Organizational commitment has garnered broad based attention from many scholars (Allen & Meyer, 1996; Balfour & Wechsler, 1996; Mathieu & Zajac, 1990; Mete, Sokmen, & Biyik, 2016; Meyer & Allen, 1991). In this same context, the construct of turnover intent has also been of interest (Lambert, Hogan, & Barton, 2001; Li, Lee, Mitchell, & Hom, 2016). Studies suggest that organizational commitment is a powerful predictor of turnover intention (Mathieu & Zajac, 1990; Meyer & Allen, 1997; Tett & Meyer, 1993). Despite this, research continues to be lacking in the area of organizational commitment and turnover of school superintendents.

### **Organizational Commitment**

Researchers have introduced organizational commitment in a variety of ways. Mowday, Porter, & Steers (1982) defined organizational commitment as the level of connection an employee has with an organization. This includes an individual's: (a) belief and commitment in organizational goals and values, (b) willingness to exert significant effort on behalf of the organization, and (c) a strong desire to remain as a part of the organization. The definition suggests that an employee's relationship with an organization is not passive, but active, and provides motivation to the worker to contribute more to the vision of the organization (Mowday, Steers, & Porter, 1979). Similar to the beliefs of Mowday et al. (1982), Brown (1969), and Hall and Schneider (1972) viewed commitment to an organization as the strength of the relationship that exists between an individual and an organization. Sheldon (1971) further stated that organizational commitment includes an employee identifying with the goals and values of the

organization. It is “the strength of a person’s attachment to an organization” (Grusky, 1966, p. 489).

Meyer and Allen (1991) identified three different themes of organizational commitment: (a) affective attachment to an organization, (b) perceived cost with leaving an organization, and (c) obligation to remain with an organization. In developing their three-component framework, Meyer and Allen (1997) specifically identified the concepts of commitment as: (a) affective, (b) continuance, and (c) normative commitment. They argue that the three are common in the view that commitment is a psychological state that (a) describes the relationship between an employee and an organization and (b) “has implications for the decision to continue or discontinue membership in the organization” (Meyer & Allen, 1991, p.67).

Balfour & Wechsler (1996) also suggest that there are multiple layers to organizational commitment. The researchers identify three dimensions of organizational commitment. These dimensions consist of: identification commitment, affiliation commitment, and exchange commitment. Identification commitment addresses the pride a person feels by being associated with an organization; affiliation commitment addresses the level connectedness an employee feels toward an organization; and exchange commitment addresses an employee’s desire to be recognized by his/her workplace. Each plays an integral role in understanding the various aspects of organizational commitment.

Exploring the connection an individual has to an organization continues to be of interest to scholars (Kacmar, Bozeman Carlson, & Anthony, 1999). This is due to the influence organizational commitment has on work related attitudes. Organizational commitment has been linked to both the performance and productivity of organizations (Cohen, 1996; Kontoghtorghes & Bryant, as cited by McMurray, Scott, & Pace, 2004; Naquin & Holton, 2002; Randall, Fedor, & Longenecker, 1990), as well as positively correlated to organizational identification, person-organization fit, and job satisfaction (Mete, Sokmen, & Biyik, 2016). Other positive relationships that have been identified in the literature are: (a) leadership member exchange (Kacmar, et al., 1999), (b) job involvement (Mathieu & Zajac, 1990), and (c) tenure on job (McMurray et al., 2004). Conversely, this construct has been negatively correlated with turnover and turnover intent (Aryee et al, 1998; DeConinck & Bachmann, 1994; Huselid & Day, 1991; Fields, 2002; Kirchmeyer, 1992; Loi et al., 2006), (a) job tension, (b) role strain, (c) voluntary turnover, and (d) organizational politics (Fields, 2002).

## **Turnover**

Well over 1500 scholarly studies have addressed the concept of turnover (Holtom, Mitchell, Lee, & Eberly, 2008; Muchinsky & Morrow, 1980). Despite this, there is still continued interest as to what triggers this action (Parker & Gerbasi, 2016). Understanding turnover can assist organizations in better mitigating the negative consequences that may result from someone exiting an organization (Hausknecht & Trevor, 2011; Hausknecht & Holwerda, 2013).

In general, there are two types of turnover: voluntary turnover and involuntary (Batt & Colvin, 2011; Ngo-Henha, 2017). According to Shaw, Delery, Jenkins, & Gupta (1998), “An

instance of voluntary turnover, or a quit, reflects an employee's decision to leave an organization, whereas an instance of involuntary turnover, or a discharge, reflects an employer's decision to terminate the employment relationship (p.511). Furthermore, turnover intent is a worker's planned decision to leave an organization (Tett & Meyer, 1993). It is known as the final sequence of withdrawal cognitions from a job (Mobley, Horner, & Hollingsworth, 1978).

Human resource management leaders in education and the private sector have long struggled with hiring employees that remain on the job for an extended period. This has been a challenge due to the many factors that influence turnover. However, it is important to note that turnover is not always negative. Organizations often demonstrate no desire to retain employees that do not perform well (Hancock, Allen, Bosco, McDaniel, & Pierce, 2013).

In relation to other work constructs, turnover has been known to have a negative relationship with job satisfaction (O'Connor & Vaughn, 2018; Trevor 2001) organizational performance (Park & Shaw, 2013), organizational learning (Egan, Yang, & Barlett, 2004), perceived organizational support (Eisenberger, Fasolo, & Davis, 1990; Fields, 2002), and turnover intent (Allen & Meyer, 1990; Chang, Chi, and Miao, 2007). In contrast, a positive correlation has been identified between role ambiguity (O'Driscoll & Beehr, 1994), and job tension (Fields, 2002).

### **Conceptual Frameworks**

The conceptual frameworks related to this study are Social Exchange Theory (SET), and Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. SET has been widely used for understanding employee attitudes, behavior, and work relationships (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Lew & Sarawak, 2011; Shore et al., 2004). This theory focuses on the reciprocity of an employee/organization relationship. In essence, if an employee receives positive acknowledgments from an organization, it is likely that the employee will reciprocate with increased commitment and lower intent to leave (Eisenberger, Armeli, Rexwinkel, Lynch, & Rhoades, 2001; Lew, 2011). Maslow's Hierarchy of needs has also been fundamental to understanding employee behavior. This five-layer pyramid of needs depicts a variety of needs in the context of better understanding what motivates individuals; an understanding that can prove invaluable to a work environment.

#### **Social exchange theory**

Early introductions of social exchange theory focused on the balance between rewards and costs (Holman, 1964). Furthermore, Blau (1964) is noted with extending the perspective of SET by taking a more economic and practical perspective. However, in organizational literature, social exchange theory has been applied to better understand workplace relationships (Lew & Sarawak, 2011; Shore et al., 2004), namely, the exchange between employer and employee. In this exchange, satisfactory reciprocity is expected, not only in monetary terms, but also by way of positive acknowledgment and support (Lew & Sarawak, 2011). When employees believe that they have been treated fairly and duly recognized, they respond accordingly, increasing their commitment to the organization (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Kurtessis et al., 2015; Rhoades, Eisenberger, & Armeli, 2001; Wikhamn & Hall, 2012). However, the opposite is true if this reciprocity is not achieved, or an employee suspects lack of balance in the relationship (Karasek,

1979; Rousseau, 1995; Siegrist, 1996). When this occurs, job outcomes can be adversely impacted (Birch, Chi, 2016). This may include lower commitment to the organization and higher intent to turnover (Chirumbolo & Hellgren, 2003; Emberland & Rundmo, 2010). Organizational studies argue that exchange includes socio-emotional resources such as approval, respect, recognition and support (Eisenberger, Armeli, Rexwinkel, Lynch, & Rhodes, 2001).

### **Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs**

In 1954, Abraham Maslow proposed a theory of needs (Golembiewski, 2001). Maslow (1954) posited that in order for a person to be satisfied, five basic needs must be met: (a) physiological needs, (b) safety needs, (c) social needs, (d) esteem needs, and (e) self-actualization needs. The scholar explained that: (a) physiological needs include the need for relief from hunger, thirst, and fatigue, (b) safety needs include the need to be free from bodily harm, (c) social needs include the need for love affection and belonging to groups, (d) esteem needs include the need for individuals to be recognized and to achieve, and (e) self-actualization needs includes the need to reach one's full potential in a specific area. In this study, esteem needs will be of interest. "Receiving recognition and praise are fundamental motivators across all levels of employees. Recognition and praise help an individual know that people appreciate what that person has accomplished" (Sadri & Bowen, 2011, p. 47). However, understanding the various components of Maslow's Theory can assist organizations in the development of better recruitment and retention strategies, reduction of turnover, and increased productivity (Sadri & Bowen, 2011).

## **Methods**

### **Purpose of the Study and Research Questions**

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between exchange commitment and turnover intent of superintendents in Texas public school districts. The predictor variable in this study was exchange commitment; whereas turnover intent was the criterion variable. Exchange commitment is a dimension of organizational commitment that is dependent on an employee being rewarded for work efforts (Balfour & Wechsler, 1996).

The following research question guided this study:

1. Is there a statistically significant relationship between organizational exchange commitment and turnover intent?

### **Design**

A quantitative research design was used to examine the relationship between exchange commitment and turnover intent of superintendents working in Texas public school districts. Specifically, for this study, a Pearson correlation analysis and linear regression were conducted.

## Participants

In this study, school superintendents in Texas public school districts were the target population. Each participant in this study met the following criteria: (a) listed in the Texas Education Agency (TEA) AskTED database as a public school superintendent and (b) had a listed email address during the 2016–2017 school year. At the time of this research, there was a total population of  $N = 1027$  that met this criterion. Three hundred and six superintendents responded to this survey ( $n=306$ ). It was determined that a sample of 306 would be well above the recommended sample for a total population of 1027 (Krejcie & Morgan, 1970).

### Demographic Overview of Participants

A review of demographic information related to this study offered further insight into the participants. In this study, the majority of participants reported being male (Table 1). Additionally, as it relates to age, the majority of participants (143) were identified as being between the ages of 45–54 (Table 2).

Table 1. *Number and Percent Distribution of Participants by Gender*

Gender	Number	Percent
Male	244	79.7
Female	62	20.3
Total	306	100.0

Table 2. *Age Frequencies and Percentages of Participants*

Age Classification	Frequency	Percent
25 – 34	0	0
35 – 44	51	16.7
45 – 54	143	46.7
55 – 64	88	28.8
65 – 74	24	7.8
Total	306	100.0

Participants were asked to report information related to academic degree received and district size. Most participants in this study reported having a master's degree (Table 3), and working in a small Texas district (Table 4).

Table 3. Frequency and Percentage Distribution of Participants by Academic Degree

Academic Degree	Number	Percent
Bachelors	0	0
Masters	214	69.9
Doctorate	92	30.1
Total	306	100.0

Table 4. Frequency and Percentage Distribution of Participants by District Type

District Size	Number	Percent
Small	218	71.2
Mid-Size	76	24.8
Large	12	3.9
Total	306	100.0

### Instrumentation

Data were collected using survey measures related to each construct. All measures were rated based on a five-point Likert scale including the following ratings: 1—Strongly Disagree, 2—Disagree, 3—Neither Agree or Disagree, 4—Agree, and 5—Strongly Agree. Measures used in this study were a 3-item scale of Exchange Commitment (Balfour & Wechsler, 1996; Fields, 2002), which is a 3-item scale that is a part of a larger organizational commitment scale. The exchange commitment instrument considers an employee's perceptions of an organization's feelings towards their accomplishments and efforts on the job. In essence, how the organization values their contributions. Similarly, The Scale of Turnover Intent (O'Connor, 2014) was developed as a standalone scale to assess the turnover intent of executive level school administrators. This instrument seeks to probe an employee's intent to leave by inquiring about the intent to leave a given job, job envy, and the prospect of resignation. All surveys were distributed via electronic mail (email) to the participants' email of record in the TEA AsKTED system. All surveys were self-administered by participants.

### Validity and Reliability

According to Cresswell and Guetterman (2019), evidence of validity can include the use and the purpose of an instrument in previous studies. For this study, a survey instrument



developed by Balfour & Wechsler, (1996) and O'Connor (2014) was used to elicit participant responses related to organizational exchange commitment and turnover intent. Previous studies have documented significant relationships when using both instruments to measure work related constructs (Kacmar et al., 1999; O'Connor, 2018; O'Connor & Vaughn, 2018). In addition, a panel of 12 superintendents with three to five years experience, reviewed each instrument. Balfour & Wechsler's organizational commitment instrument was reviewed, but accepted in its original form; however, the original iteration of O'Connor (2014) instrument of turnover was modified to accommodate feedback from the expert panel of superintendents. Upon final review, all reviewers reported that the instrument appeared to be an appropriate measure of turnover intent for this study.

### Reliability

Previous studies have recorded coefficient alpha values for the Balfour & Wechsler, (1996) instrument of exchange commitment of .83 (Balfour & Wechsler, 1996; Kacmar, et. al, 1999). In this study, reliability was noted at .73. Similarly, a coefficient alpha was recorded for the Scale of Turnover Intent. The previous coefficient alpha for this instrument was .74. In this study, reliability was noted at .75 (see Table 5).

Table 5. Cronbach's Alpha Reliability Results

Measure	# of items	$\alpha$ – present study	$\alpha$ – previous study
Exchange Comm.	3	.73	.83
Turnover Intent	3	.75	.74

### Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) 24 for coding and analysis. This study utilized inferential statistics including the Pearson Moment Correlation and Linear Regression as well as descriptive analysis, which included measures of central tendency, and frequency counts for demographic information. The research question formulated for this study was tested at the 0.05 levels or better.

### Findings

#### Descriptive Analysis of Independent and Dependent Variables

The mean and standard deviation results of the independent and dependent variables are presented in Table 5. A review of the overall turnover intent of a superintendent was reviewed in this study. An overall moderate intent to turnover was observed among this group. In addition, superintendents in Texas public schools appear to have a high perception of exchange commitment within their organization.

Table 5. Means and Standard Deviation of Study Variables

Variables	<i>M</i>	SD
Exchange Commitment	12.67	1.95
Turnover Intent	7.18	2.54

### **Statistical Results**

A Pearson's product-moment correlation was run to assess the relationship between exchange commitment and turnover intent of school superintendents in Texas. A significant moderate negative relationship was found to be present between exchange commitment and turnover intent ( $r = -0.475$ ) (Table 6). From this finding, it was concluded that higher levels of exchange commitment are related to lower turnover intent among school superintendents.

Table 6. Variable Correlations

Variables	(1)	(2)
(1) EC	1.00	-.475*
(2) TI	-.475*	1.00

Notes. (\*) Denotes correlation is significant at the 0.001 level (2-tailed:  $p < .001$ ); Table legend: (TI) = turnover intent; (EC) = exchange commitment

A linear regression analysis (see Table 4) was computed to determine the linear relationship between the predictor variable organizational exchange commitment and the criterion variable turnover intent. The predictor variable exchange commitment resulted in a linear correlation coefficient ( $r$ ) of 0.475. This variable accounted for 22.5% of the variance in turnover intent. A statistically linear negative relationship was found between organizational commitment and turnover intent at the  $p < 0.001$  level. With regard to a Texas school superintendent, exchange commitment explains more than 20% of a superintendent's intent to turnover.

Table 4. Linear Regression Results for the Relationship Between Organizational exchange commitment and Turnover Intent

Variable	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
(Constant)	14.98	.840			
Org Comm.-E	-.616	.066	-.475	-9.41	.000

Note.  $R^2 = .225$ ;  $p = .000$ ;  $p < .001$ .

## **Discussion**

Prior research has stated that SET can be used to better understand workforce behavior (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). SET contends that reciprocity in relationships is key to increasing an employee's commitment to an organization, as well as decreasing turnover. This

study confirmed this notion in that results found that superintendents in Texas experience high exchange commitment. Furthermore, as exchange commitment increases, it is highly unlikely that a superintendent will depart, for this reason.

Furthermore, Maslow's Hierarchy of needs recognizes the importance of esteem, specifically, the need for individuals to be recognized and achieve. If individual needs are not met, discontentment can occur. This is relevant to the workplace in that discontentment with an organization can result in the exit of an employee, or at a minimum the thought of leaving. The current study validates this aspect of Maslow's theory, as it relates to work related behaviors, being that a negative relationship was found between exchange commitment and turnover intent. This reinforces the need to further explore specific factors or strategies that increase exchange commitment within an organization. More specifically, this finding solidifies the importance of a school board extending praise or commendations to a school superintendent for positive outcomes; especially if the superintendent is a quality leader. "Research has shown that lack of recognition from their direct supervisor is one of the main reasons employees leave their jobs" (Sadri & Bowen, 2011, p.47).

These findings are consistent with prior research (Fields, 2002). Despite this, few studies have examined the interaction between the aforementioned works constructs in the context of the school superintendency. This study fills a void in the research base, and offers perspective into the recruitment, retention, and the commitment a superintendent has to their organization, and highlights the inherent importance of the superintendent and board relationship.

### **Recommendations for Practice: *School Boards***

Findings from this study are extremely important, and suggest that exchange commitment is significantly related to turnover intent. These are valuable and worthwhile especially given the extremely high turnover rate of superintendents in Texas. The inverse relationship that exists between exchange commitment and turnover intent prompts recommendations for practice. Knowing that there are things the school board can do in practice to help slowdown superintendent turnover could perhaps add longevity to a superintendent's tenure in a school district.

The board works collectively and carefully to create policy that governs the district. Omitted from the day-to-day management and operations of the district, it is easy to overlook the efforts of the superintendent as he or she goes about their daily duties and responsibilities. Therefore, the board must be intentional and sincere in establishing timelines for recognizing, supporting and praising their superintendent. After first being trained in understanding the value of relationship and the correlation between exchange commitment and turnover intent, the board can engage in activities that improve the tenure of superintendents. For example,

- 1) It is important that there is mutual respect and reciprocity in the overall relationship between the school board and superintendent. What this looks like may vary depending on the personality of board members or the superintendent; however, it can serve as a starting point, and should be collaborative.

- 2) Board members should consider the impact exchange commitment might have on a superintendent's intent to remain in a school district, given the relationship between exchange commitment and turnover intent among this work group.
- 3) School boards who have determined that they have a quality leader should be intentional in recognizing the efforts put forth by their superintendent. For example, if a superintendent performs well, it would be prudent for the school board to acknowledge this. If this occurs, this will likely decrease at least one aspect of why a superintendent may depart from the organization. This may also prove to assist in overall organizational development in terms of recruitment, retention, and performance. As proposed by Soelistya & Mashud (2016), employees with a strong commitment will be more motivated and more satisfied with their job and are commonly less interested in leaving their organization.
- 4) Board members and search firms alike should be compelled to learn more about the work-related factors of this group and how they interact or influence work related to decision-making. While improving the commitment of these workers does not guarantee automatic transition or continued interest in the school superintendency, the prevention of turnover is certain to mitigate further diminishing effects on the current candidate pool while presenting opportunities to experience extended tenure and maximize opportunities for school improvement.
- 5) Board members should consider the development and systematic implementation of reward systems that acknowledge the achievements of their superintendent. It is important to note that any reward system developed should extend beyond monetary rewards and possibly include public or private displays of praise, an

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Due to the limited literature related to school superintendents, many opportunities are available to extend the research as it relates to this population. The following are recommendations for future research related to the population studied:

1. Replication studies to explore samples from other states
2. Studies that explore various aspects of organizational commitment based on gender, district size, and other staff members in a school district.
3. Studies that explore other specific factors that influence organizational exchange commitment.
4. Studies that explore other constructs of work related attitudes or behavior
5. Qualitative studies that extend the voice of the empirical data presented

### **Conclusion**

Great insight can be discerned from this study, in that basic recognition and mutual respect shown by a school board may be one of the keys to improving superintendent retention.

Throughout this study it was found that high levels of exchange commitment was negatively correlated with lower intent to turnover. However, while this study may have focused on the turnover of superintendents, implications can extend to other staff/employee relationships, namely superintendent/cabinet, and so on. “Receiving recognition and praise are fundamental motivators across all levels of employees. Recognition and praise help an individual know that people appreciate what that person has accomplished” (Sadri & Bowen, 2011, p.47). As school boards seek to identify effective ways to recruit and retain school superintendents, employing elements from the construct exchange commitment can serve as a starting point for relationship building and the pursuit of superintendent longevity.

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