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Five Critical Skills Necessary for the Interim Superintendent in Texas

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Introduction

“Schools are highly complex places” (Goodall, 2013, p.121) and school district-level leadership is integral to student success (Bigham & Nix, 2011; Fertig, M., 2012; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000; Norton, Webb, Dlugosh, & Sybouts, 1996; Robinson, Lloyd & Rowe, 2008; Wallace, 2002;). Unfortunately, the mean tenure for superintendents is short - five to six years nationwide (Kowalski, McCord, Peterson, Young, & Ellerson, 2011) and three years in Texas (Bigham, 2011). Frequent leadership changes have the potential to disrupt the continuity of education for students in the school district. As these high level administrators move to other positions or retire, with them goes a wealth of understanding and expertise, hence, the need for increased emphasis placed on the most appropriate choice of an interim superintendent in transition to the permanent replacement.

A previous qualitative single case study on the interim superintendent was conducted over the expanse of a school year in a small West Texas community (Bigham & Nix, 2011) using phenomenological inquiry to facilitate meaning-making (Moustakas, 1994) during discussions between the researchers and case study participants. This case study offered an opportunity for the close examination (Kazdin, 1982) of the interim superintendent as he also facilitated the search for the permanent replacement for the position. Once the study was completed further interest developed regarding the skills exhibited by the interim superintendent, which led to continued discussion and analysis of data.

The conclusions reached by the Bigham and Nix (2011) single case study encompassed an understanding of the duty and role differences between the full-time and interim superintendent; the knowledge that while the duties are mostly identical, the roles differ, where the interim superintendent is typically a short-term position, but with potential long-term impacts on a school district (Bigham & Nix, 2011) thus, creating an interest in the skills that might also impact the interim position.

The Research Question

The importance of the superintendent in the overall functioning of the school district cannot be ignored, especially because of the impact on student outcomes. (Bigham & Nix, 2011; Fertig, M. 2012; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000; Norton, Webb, Dlugosh, & Sybouts, 1996; Robinson, Lloyd & Rowe, 2008; Wallace, 2002;). As a result of changes in the school district and demands from the state and federal government on education, skill requirements of administrators have increased

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according to Bolman and Deal (1991). And, since the superintendent of a school district has the potential for such a big impact on a school district, the need to identify leadership skills surfaced, in particular, the leadership skills that seemed to directly impact the interim superintendent's success. Therefore, the question guiding this paper was: What leadership skills surfaced to make the interim superintendent successful? Analyzing for skills occurred primarily during the reflections between the researcher (also serving as the interim superintendent), the incoming superintendent and the second researcher, who served to triangulate perceptions of the interim's experiences within the rich context of the previous case study (Bigham & Nix, 2011).

Theoretical Framework

Leadership is a complex process that has been studied using both qualitative and quantitative approaches in an attempt to understand the leadership process (Northouse, 2013). The single case study of an interim superintendent (Bigham & Nix, 2011) offered a unique opportunity to study the skills necessary for a successful interim experience with a positive impact on the community of learners. Skills are often a "neglected component of educational leadership..." (Hoy & Miskel, 2005, p. 382). Using a skills approach to leadership facilitated a deeper analysis of the single case study of the interim superintendent. "...the skills approach suggests that knowledge and abilities are needed for effective leadership" (Northouse, 2013, p. 43). Importantly, "Skills are capacities developed over time" according to Bolman and Deal (2006, p.71). In other words, they can be learned to fulfill a role (Goodall, 2013). The single case study of the interim superintendent (Bigham & Nix, 2011) had a limited window of opportunity - one year - of examining the experience from a skills approach.

Northouse (2013) examined Katz's (1955) skills approaches which are named as: the technical skills approach, the human skills approach, and the conceptual skills approach. A person utilizing the technical skills approach would demonstrate an analytical ability and would have specialized competencies accompanied by the ability to use tools and techniques appropriately. A person using the human skills approach would have an extensive understanding of people and how to build trust creating a climate that would encourage relationship building. The person using the conceptual skills approach would work more with ideas and concepts; more abstractly than concretely. Leaders can use a combination of the approaches, but would most likely have a dominant skills approach as determined by personality. This skills approach facilitated the examination of skills identified in the Bigham and Nix (2011) single case study.

Methodology

Phenomenological inquiry (Moustakas, 1994) facilitated the meaning making of the experiences within which the interim superintendent participated in Bigham and Nix's (2011) single case study. As events and activities, such as regular board meetings, personnel decisions and the myriad of other issues that occurred, they were shared to gain an outside perspective from the second researcher and to place the leadership of the interim superintendent within the context of interactions (Northouse, 2013). "The more comprehensive the researcher's contextualization, the more credible and meaningful the interpretations of the phenomena," (Bigham & Nix, 2011, p. 15), thus, the continued reflections facilitated the recognition of the skills associated with the duties and roles of the interim superintendent. Northouse (2013) placed leadership skills into

Katz's (1955) three categories associated with the effectiveness of leaders: technical skills, interpersonal skills, and conceptual or cognitive skills. The analysis of tasks and their interpretation from a skills perspective led to the emergence and identification of five critical skills, all of which fell into the three categories identified by Katz (1955) and examined further by Northouse (2013).

Five Critical Skills

As a result of further discussion of the case study; the researchers identified five critical skills: (a) *experience* in Texas schools; (b) *time* and *flexibility*; (c) *attitude* and *commitment*; (d) *problem-solving ability*; and (e) *willingness to do the hard things*. Importantly, the interim superintendent in the Bigham and Nix (2011) single case study had no desire to fill more than the interim time period. Therefore, the skills presented in this study were contingent upon a person filling the position temporarily until a full time permanent superintendent was selected by the school board. Interestingly, Goodall (2013) identified flexibility and experience as critical to leadership teams, which would then indirectly impact school outcomes.

Experience in Texas schools

One of the many benefits of teaching or working in schools is that when a move becomes necessary, one can investigate state certification, recertify if needed, and have the opportunity to work in education in another city or state. However, when considering an interim superintendent position, the best person for the job will most likely be a candidate who has experience and understands the intricacies of education in Texas at all levels – campus and district. Goodall (2013) noticed the importance of trust and the value for experience at the leadership level. Northouse (2013) categorized experience as a conceptual skill since it includes working with ideas. The skillful leader accordingly, would ably discuss district goals and economic principles affecting the school district (Northouse, 2013), particularly school law and finance.

Navigating the Texas education system successfully is highly contingent on understanding the legal framework guiding school district policy making, most of which results directly from state legislative action. In fact, the Texas Legislature is so involved that Walsh, Kemerer, and Maniotis (2014) claimed "...the legislature is the biggest player in Texas education" (p. 12).

Judicial action is another area of significance for Texas superintendents, especially in school finance. As this study was being conducted, the Texas school finance system was being litigated (Scharrer, 2011). The final decision rendered by the State District Court, which is currently appealed to the Texas Supreme Court, was that Texas schools are inadequately and inequitably funded (Texas Taxpayer & Student Fairness Coal. v Williams, 2014). At the superintendent level of administration, a sound understanding of the state finance system is crucial to guide district policies and procedures to maintain fiscal stability (Sanacore, 1997). Since judicial and legislative issues like school finance often become intertwined, an understanding of state level politics, a network of reliable contacts, and experience in Texas lend themselves to greater effectiveness in the interim position. Additionally, the school board will have a need to keep the district operating as smoothly as possible, and if the interim superintendent is well versed in

policy and politics, his or her attention can be focused on meeting the immediate needs of the district as opposed to having to learn a new system.

Also, of importance to the interim position is an understanding of curriculum, instruction, and assessment. Success in the roles of Texas teacher, principal, and superintendent further enhances the interim experience. Any time a candidate has a clear understanding of the history of curriculum, instruction, and assessment, he or she will better facilitate education. Comprehension of the cycle of curriculum changes along with the accompanying textbook adoptions and mandated state assessments is important and can determine the fate of a district's autonomy or the resultant state oversight if a district fails to meet minimum state or federal expectations. Organizational culture (Bredeson, Klar, & Johansson, 2012) and district size also have the potential to impact curriculum decisions. Typically, the smaller the district, the more parent involvement and as a result, more questions about curriculum from school board members and the community at large.

Research shows that the licensure process amongst states varies widely (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). The educator certification system must be understood by the interim superintendent. Nationwide, under the impact of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act (2001), teacher certification changed to require the most highly qualified teacher to fill a position. Even if a district has a human resource officer managing teacher and administrator applicants, the interim superintendent must also guide that process. An understanding of the interpretation of NCLB within Texas is crucial to the interim.

These three examples demonstrate the importance of Texas experience to the interim superintendent. The more experience a candidate has in various positions, the more effectively he or she will likely be able to guide and maintain a district's viability until a permanent candidate fills the position.

Time and flexibility

Goodall (2013) reflected on the nature of change inherent to schools, particularly in regard to roles. In the Bigham and Nix (2011) case study, roles were identified as how things were done. Additionally, Goodall (2013) saw flexibility as a dynamic process that responded to changing needs. Certainly, in the transition between the interim and the full-time superintendent, changes could require attention. Typically, interim superintendents from across the nation are retired superintendents (Sanacore, 1997). One advantage to hiring a retired superintendent for an interim position in addition to the knowledge and experience will be the time and flexibility necessary to devote to this endeavor. The interim superintendent (retired or otherwise) must have a willingness to spend the time needed to fulfill this position, and must be a skilled time manager. Northouse (2013) considered time and flexibility as technical skills because the interim superintendent should be knowledgeable about many types of work or tasks inherent to the administrative position. With this knowledge he or she would be able to use "appropriate tools and techniques" (Northouse, 2013, p. 44).

Research has implied that interim positions are more managerial in nature than leadership oriented (Farquhar, 1991; Pffiffner, 1988). Regardless, more than the typical forty hours is

required of the Chief Executive Officer of the school district. Situations often occur outside the normal school day. For example, inclement weather can spur a call late at night to determine if an announcement needs to be made about the status of school operation the next day. The school district could remain open but start late, or if the weather is too dangerous for buses transporting students, the school district could be closed. Board meetings can often continue into the wee hours of the morning depending on the importance of the agenda items being discussed. Attendance at a variety of district sporting, and academic events are expected. Honor banquets, cheerleading trials, parent issues, and board member issues, are all potential impacts on the time of the interim. Additionally, paperwork required for the state education agency may need to be completed. Therefore, when the interim superintendent accepts the position, there must be an understanding of the expectations on his time and as Northouse (2013) noted, he or she must have the appropriate knowledge base and skills for success at this level.

The interim superintendent must have a system of organization to minimize the time spent on menial matters in order to focus on the greater needs of the district. In-house delegation of certain tasks can relieve the drain on time and has the potential to feature administrators or teacher-leaders in areas outside their norms, providing an opportunity to demonstrate individual strengths to assist the district in the transition between permanent superintendents. Goodall (2013) saw the delegation of tasks as further understanding of the roles and skills needed by all members of school leadership.

In order to guide a district through the process of hiring a replacement superintendent, the interim must maintain a certain balance and efficiency to do all the things required for the district effectively. Whether the position is managerial in nature versus leadership-oriented is not as important as the ability to manage the daily demands on his or her time, using a strong strategy of organization and the “appropriate tools and techniques” (Northouse, 2013, p. 44) to accomplish the demands of the position.

Attitude and commitment

Probably most important to the success of the interim for the district is attitude. Lay (2015) asserted, “Good attitude is also a job skill...”(para.5), one that can be developed over time. The position of superintendent is largely seen as equivalent to the CEO of a business with all the accompanying stressors and has the potential to exhaust the administrator. Perhaps this is one reason why the typical tenure is so short. The interim must understand the potential stresses involved and make a concerted commitment to fulfilling the position completely and with a positive attitude. The benefit to the interim in conducting him or herself in this manner is a sense of accomplishment for keeping the school district and education processes stable for the period of service. Northouse (2013) considered attitude a human skill, meaning the ability of leadership to achieve common goals because of the accompanying understanding of the needs of district employees and the school community as a whole. As Northouse (2013) explained, “being a leader with human skills means being sensitive to the needs and motivations of others...” (p. 45).

Additionally, Lay (2015) asserted, “A positive attitude thrives on trust, opportunity, commitment, and team involvement” (para. 9). Specific to team involvement, pursuant to TEC §§ 11.251 – 11.252, Texas school districts are required to implement site-based management

teams for district planning and decision-making. The interim superintendent plays a key role in the success of this process. The interim's approach can either maintain the team's effectiveness, or improve a previously dysfunctional team's process. In either case, the interim superintendent's attitude is critical. A positive attitude encompasses basics in interpersonal skills, largely including non-verbal communications; something as simple as how employees are greeted and treated during interactions can impart true caring and trust. Even though the interim superintendent position typically lasts a short time, conducting oneself with a positive attitude helps calm the potentially bumpy terrain smoothing the way for the incoming permanent replacement. The interim superintendent must be confident in his or her interpersonal skills, and must remain focused on district needs.

Perceiving the position of interim superintendent as temporary and short-lived is paramount to the interim's success. If a person is not committed to the job in this format and in a moral and ethical way, the job may seem easier than it truly is, which can facilitate the decline of the district's educational effectiveness. However, if the interim is committed to ethically and morally guiding the district daily in all aspects of the position, and in guiding the process for finding the best candidate for the permanent replacement, the quality of the outcomes will be more satisfactory for the school board, and most importantly, for the students being educated. Certainly conducting oneself with a moral and ethical compass has the additional benefit of a positive impact on the incoming permanent superintendent.

Too often, the easy solution to a problem would be to suggest the interim position is only temporary, minimizing the commitment to the position. Insight Assessment (2015) "... differentiated between someone who is more oriented toward the company, its people and its mission, versus someone whose goals are more self-focused" (para.1). Clearly, any interim superintendent would need to demonstrate a loyalty to the school district in order to maintain stability in the transitional time between permanent superintendents.

The school board must screen carefully the candidates who manifest this commitment. The Three Component Model of Commitment (Meyer & Allen, 1991) is one tool boards might use in their screening process. The model considers organizational commitment a psychological state with three distinguishing components: (a) Affection for the job ("affective commitment"); (b) Fear of loss ("continuance commitment"); and (c) Sense of obligation ("normative commitment"). Affection commitment would be the emotional attachment to a position of employment. Certainly any person taking the interim superintendent position would have to believe in the goals of a district and be willing to articulate this regularly by his or her actions. The criticism of this dimension has been the difficulty to measure it. The second component, fear of loss, would be the commitment occurring within the interim knowing the position is only temporary, but regardless of that fact, still has the willingness to commit to the job because of the overall compelling desire to maintain stability for the district. The criticism of this dimension is that it typically occurs over a longer period of time than the interim position may allow. The final component, sense of obligation, can occur as a result of an internalized norm, meaning the candidate has experience as a superintendent and is compelled by previous personal experiences to commit fully to the interim position. Although criticized for its theoretical approach and measurement difficulty, the Three Component Model of Commitment is still considered a viable

tool by which school boards may assess the skill of commitment portrayed by interim superintendent applicants (Meyer & Allen, 1991).

Problem solving ability

Problem-solving is an essential employment skill. Certainly, teachers in the classroom problem-solve every day and principals are met with the same challenge, often before reaching the door of the building upon arrival on campus. It stands to reason then, that an important skill for the interim superintendent would by necessity include the skill to problem-solve. According to Hill (2015) there are “four basic steps in solving a problem”(para.3) including: (a) defining the problem, (b) generating alternatives, (c) evaluating/selecting alternatives, and (d) implementing the solution.

When defining the problem, analysis of the purported problem must occur. Because schools serve people, problems can be complex in nature. What is presented as fact from a parent perspective may not be so when the problem has been clearly defined. For example, a student may report to the parent that a teacher does not like the child. The parent may report this to the superintendent, as so often happens in small towns. The interim has choices. The parent can be referred to the principal of the campus on which the child is registered or the interim superintendent can explain policies and procedures related to complaints and appropriate chain-of-command related points of contact. However the situation is handled, the interim must notify the principal of the complaint, who in turn will notify the teacher. At that point, the interim superintendent should remove himself from the situation since it is a classroom/campus level problem. If informal campus-level processes fail to result in a resolution and a formal complaint is filed, the interim would then be appropriately positioned to address the complaint if pursued to that level in the complaint/grievance policy. This is an instance where experience with Texas school district policy is a must because human nature has the potential to attempt the solution of the problem immediately without regard for policies that may be in place to guide such processes.

Northouse (2013) considered problem-solving a technical skill since it includes an analytical ability. Primary to problem-solving is the recognition of the necessity of situational analysis. More complicated problems may also occur, bordering on ethical dilemmas. State mandated assessments are required of students across the nation pursuant to requirements of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). Under this high-stakes system of accountability, incidences of cheating have been documented. If an incidence of cheating is witnessed, the test coordinator must report the situation to the superintendent. If this happens during the tenure of the interim superintendent, it will be important for him or her to follow the appropriate policies and procedures and problem-solving methodology to analyze the situation to protect the test integrity and district reputation. Most importantly, the first step is to define the problem to see if cheating occurred and follow the process from that point to its resolution.

Another strategy, similar in nature, is the Dilemma Management Process (Siccone, 2012). This method of problem-solving includes three steps: identifying, analyzing and managing a dilemma. Problems are referred to as dilemmas, primarily because a problem “presupposes there is a solution.”(Siccone, 2012, p.99). The dilemma regards choosing between two “equally

undesirable alternatives” (Siccone, 2012, p.99). For example, a primary-aged child categorized as one receiving special education services generally disrupts class by hurting other children consistently. Parents of hurt children wanted the child expelled but the response from central office is not forthcoming, causing a dilemma for campus officials. They cannot allow a child to hurt others, but they also cannot deny a child access to an education. Guidance is needed from central office so that policy and procedures are following appropriately. Statutory assistance from the Texas Education Code (TEC) would guide this decision-making process since TEC §37.007(e)(2) specifies that a student younger than ten years of age shall not be expelled, but removal to a Disciplinary Alternative Education Program (DAEP) is an option. Regardless of the problem-solving methodology employed, interim superintendent knowledge, skill, and judgment is integral to deriving an appropriate solution. If the interim superintendent does not have the requisite knowledge and experience in Texas, this situation may remain a dilemma, whereas the Texas Education Code clearly states acceptable alternatives.

Inherent to all leadership positions is the ability to “think on one’s feet,” sometimes in the absence of key information, such as a situation immediately impacting student safety. Decisions are made quickly when possible and more deliberately at other times. Problems can range from simple to complex. The dilemma with problem-solving is making a decision that sets an unacceptable precedent. Therefore, an interim superintendent should have a method of problem-solving, a procedure that can function in multiple situations. As one principal asserted, “... one of the key responsibilities for an interim is quickly assessing the issues within the system and decide [sic] which program or policy is central to the district... a core value...and decide what stays...”(Mugits, 2009, p. 89). This clearly demonstrates the need for district-level problem-solving skills to aid in the smooth transition between positions by resolving issues as they occur instead of leaving them for the incoming superintendent.

Willingness to do the hard things

While some interim superintendents might be tempted to do the bare minimum necessary to keep the school district functioning since the position is short term in nature, the interim superintendent whose moral code is steeped in ethics and integrity willingly makes the tough decisions as required. By making those determinations, the interim facilitates a smooth transition for the incoming permanent superintendent who can assume his duties unfettered by decisions some might label as unpopular or difficult. Although some may consider this willingness as an attitude, this study’s researchers perceive it as more related to work ethic with the determination and skill to accomplish those things deemed especially difficult. Northouse (2013) considered this a human skill since it takes into consideration the needs of others. Leaving situations unanswered also leaves them to grow in difficulty, whereas, the willingness to do those difficult things during the interim period, will demonstrate the interim superintendent’s capacity to work well with others with immediacy.

The preceding four skills embodied in the interim superintendent – experience in Texas schools, time and flexibility, attitude and commitment, and problem-solving ability – facilitate the accomplishment of difficult tasks. Experience in Texas schools brings awareness on a level necessary to understand the cycle of activities inherent to education. For example, the budget typically must be decided in the early spring or summer, which means there are specific tasks

necessary to the process that can facilitate the efficiency of the budget process. Therefore, the interim must communicate those expectations to the principals in order to have the necessary information to complete the budget with expedience (Norton & Kelly, 1997). This is just one example of an expectation for the district's continued stability in the transition between superintendents.

Time and flexibility facilitate difficult decision-making. Time management skills used by the interim superintendent set an example for other administrators, especially if a dilemma occurs for which an administrator is ill-prepared. For example, no one feels particularly prepared to deal with child molestation and when there is the potential that it is perpetrated by an employee, a dilemma is presented that requires a method of investigation in order to protect the child and a potentially mistaken maligning of an employee. Clearly, the ability to prioritize the issue is a critical skill that cannot be put off for a later date.

Attitude and commitment skills demonstrate the ability of the interim superintendent to address difficult issues due to school district loyalty. Depending on the nature of a dilemma presented to the interim, he or she may or may not involve other members of the school district administrative team. Instead, if the issue is dire, and confidentiality is critical, the district's legal council may be consulted for a solution to the problem. There would be a sense of obligation to resolve this issue as effectively and quickly as possible.

Problem-solving skills are integral to dealing with any serious issue faced by the interim superintendent facilitating the willingness to do the right thing and make the hard decisions, because of moral and ethical imperatives. The result may not be popular with other district employees. For example, in an alleged molestation issue, there may be lifelong friends of the employee who do not believe the situation occurred making the work environment tense and uncomfortable for the interim. However, the interim who embraces the opportunity to resolve issues immediately and embodies these five critical skills will function well and will ultimately leave the district in good shape for the incoming superintendent.

Conclusion

The five skills found in the continued dialogue between researchers cannot be generalized to other interim superintendent experiences because they come from a single case study, however, it is hoped that further research will examine the interim superintendent experience for additional data.

Reviewing the five skills that emerged through the single case study of an interim superintendent (Bigham & Nix, 2011) used the lens of Northouses' (2013) examination of Katz's (1955) Three-Skills Approach to effective leadership framed and validated this analysis. The Three-Skills Approach to school leadership (Katz, 1955) included: technical skill, human skill and conceptual skill. These five skills are of particular importance to administrators and school boards in Texas, in part, because local control is critical to community members. In the absence of the knowledge of the requisite skills for the interim superintendent, school board members may be less able to choose the best candidate or help that person maneuver within the vacuum left by a vacating

superintendent. The five skills identified in the Bigham & Nix (2011) were validated as a result of the how easily they fit into the Three-Skills Approach.

Table 1 shows the three skills identified by Katz (1955) and providing the definitions for each, followed by the five critical skills that emerged from the continued discussion of the interim superintendent research experience (Bigham & Nix, 2011). Two of the five fit neatly into each of the technical and human skill approaches and the remaining skill fit into the conceptual skill approach. The interim superintendent in the Bigham and Nix (2011) study used all three of the skills approaches based on the needed responses to a variety of situations that occurred over the expanse of the year.

Table 1

Correlation of Five Critical Skills with Katz (1955) Leadership Skills Approach

	Technical Skill Approach	Human Skill Approach	Conceptual Skill Approach
Definition	“competencies in a specialized area, analytical ability, and the ability to use appropriate tools and techniques”	“Knowledge about and ability to work with people” “...creates an atmosphere of trust...”	“..ability to work with ideas and concepts” “...works easily with abstractions.”
Skills	Time/Flexibility Problem-Solving	Attitude/Commitment Willingness to do hard things	Texas Experience

Note. Skills approach definitions are cited from Northouse (2013, pp. 44-45).

Also important to remember, time is of the essence in filling the vacancy left by the outgoing superintendent, but considering the impact of school district leadership on student outcomes, filling it with the person devoid of the necessary skills, could have a negative impact on the district. The interim is the buffer between the outgoing and incoming superintendents and if chosen with knowledge and intent, can work him or herself right out of a job and feel good about doing so. As a result of the Bigham and Nix (2011) single case study on the interim superintendent position, these five skills proved necessary and critical to this interim superintendent’s success. Considering again, that a single case study cannot be generalized to other situations, more research is required in other interim superintendent experiences to test these findings.

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