

# PERCEPTIONS OF SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENTS AND BOARD PRESIDENTS ON IMPROVED PUPIL PERFORMANCE AND SUPERINTENDENT EVALUATION\*

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## Abstract

It is well documented that the demands on school superintendents have not only become more taxing but have also changed in recent years. The superintendent needs to possess a high degree of knowledge and skills in a diverse number of areas, including psychology, finances, personnel, and general education while functioning at a very high level in managing school boards, parenting, transportation, counseling, workmen compensation, school law, special education, facilities, maintenance, taxes, politics, athletics, extracurricular activities, energy conservation, risk management (Clark 2010) and, most importantly, teaching and learning.

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## 2 En español

Es documentado bien que las demandas en supervisores de escuela no sólo han llegado a ser más cansadas pero también han cambiado en los últimos años. El supervisor debe poseer un grado alto del conocimiento y habilidades en un número diverso de áreas, inclusive la psicología, las finanzas, el personal, y la educación general al funcionar en un nivel muy alto a manejar las tablas de la escuela, el cuidar de los niños, el transporte, aconsejar,, la compensación de trabajadores, la ley de la escuela, la educación especial, las facilidades, el mantenimiento, los impuestos, la política, el atletismo, actividades fuera del programa de estudios, conservación de energía, la gestión de riesgos (Clark 2010) y, más importante, enseñando y aprendiendo.

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## 3 Introduction

The superintendent needs to possess a high degree of knowledge and skills in a diverse number of areas, including instructional leader, fiscal guru and diplomatic human resources professional the superintendent's responsibilities and expected level of expertise has grown. The superintendent's role involves being both manager and leader the role today is complex and deals with many competing issues. Additionally, the standards are part of the accountability movement, including the implementation of standards and measurement of pupil performance on standardized tests.. The question of how superintendents view student achievement and the growing importance given to that part of the role is answered by this recent study.

Add to this list of traditional functions issues related to high stakes testing, No Child Left Behind (NCLB) (2001) and Race to the Top (2009) have increased the pressure of the position. These movements have increased the pressures both from the board of education and the community at large. The public focus on test scores reported in the newspapers and television regularly moves the conversations from the board rooms to the kitchen tables all across America. For a majority of the American public, high stakes testing and comparisons made to Asian, European and other areas of the world represents/defines how well our students are doing(i.e., student achievement). The local, state, national and sometimes international emphasis on test scores would could likely focus or refocus all of the superintendent's time and attention on the singular direction of raising the scores of the students in the district.

## 4 Statement of the Problem

A demand for accountability at all levels of the educational process has been well documented. The evaluation of superintendents is one of the most important functions of a school board (Castallo, 1995). In this era of accountability one would expect pupil performance to be an important part of this evaluation. However, a survey of superintendents (Matthews, 2001) found that student performance was not evident on a list of the five most common criteria for superintendent evaluations. Most school board members receive little or no training in this area and may only see the superintendent a few times a month (Candoli, 1995).

A study conducted by Dillon, Moffett and Sullivan (2010) compared the perceptions of both superintendents and school board presidents regarding the evaluation of superintendents. Specifically on the topic of how well the superintendent has contributed to improved pupil performance, the results have changed from a similar study in 1989.

### Is student achievement utilized in the formal evaluation process (1989)

	Great Extent	Limited Extent	Not at all
Superintendent	3%	33%	64%
Board President	7%	54%	40%

Table 1

### Is student achievement utilized in the formal evaluation process (2010)

	Great Extent	Limited Extent	Not at all
Superintendent	22%	55%	23%
Board President	25%	57%	17%

Table 2

## 5 Review of the Literature

The process of superintendent evaluation, has remained perfunctory during this period of major changes in the education sphere (Carver, 2000). The evaluation is often unrelated to the functions of the position and, for the most part has not changed in recent history. Actual requirements for superintendent evaluations are few and with some districts foregoing the process completely (DiPaola, 2000). However, the connection between student achievement and leadership both at the building and district level is common content in the current research and articles noted especially by the Wallace Foundation(2003). The results of the 2010 study by Dillon, Moffett and Sullivan show differing results from the 1989 study especially as it relates to superintendent focus on a survey when ranking functions of the position.

In the 2010 study of superintendent evaluations, both superintendents and board presidents ranked improved pupil performance as the number one function in a list of eight functions that were incorporated into superintendent evaluation. Yet, while citing the importance of six leadership issues (1. Vision and planning, 2. Graduation rate, 3. Professional development, 4. Data driven decisions, 5. High stakes test, 6. Special education) high stakes testing was listed as number six in the ranking of leadership issues as reported by ranking of superintendents.

In a study done in 1989 by Dillon, approximately two- thirds of school board presidents chose “Improve instructional leadership role of the superintendent” as a major purpose of evaluation and only 12.8% of superintendents did so.(p.3)” Superintendents ranked “improving pupil performance” as number three in importance out of eight. School board presidents ranked pupil performance fourth out of eight areas of importance.

This report focuses on one important component of the 2010 study by Dillon, Moffett and Sullivan, leadership at the district level and its connection to student achievement.

Amalia Cudeiro (2005) article in *School Administrator* identified three steps that superintendents use to improve and focus on student achievement.

First, superintendents place the focus on student learning by establishing a district wide vision centered on meeting student learning needs and by tying district goals for student performance to that vision. Second, superintendents set clear expectations by establishing the primacy of the principals’ instructional leadership role verbally and in writing. They clearly define what it means for principals to be instructional leaders and establish standards tied to evaluation and, in one case, merit pay.

Finally, superintendents hold principals accountable for being instructional leaders. They implement site visits and walkthroughs that focus on instructional practices and follow up with written feedback. Further,

they align principal supervision and evaluation with the instructional leadership focus and they include the review of student performance data in the process. It is not enough to seem to be doing the right things; principals need to be held accountable for generating measurable improvement in student learning.

Waters and Marzano (2005) have written extensively on the topic of leadership and its effect on student achievement. Their meta-analysis on district leadership reviewed 27 studies to examine the influence of district leadership on student achievement. The conclusion was that school board members need to hire superintendents who support district goals for achievement and support district and school leadership in ways that enhance stability. The findings suggest that when district leaders carry out their leadership responsibilities effectively, student achievement across the district is positively affected. Superintendent tenure is positively correlated with student achievement (Mayo, 2004).

In their Final Report to the Wallace Foundation, (2010) Maranzo found that in higher-performing settings, district leaders are more likely to set continual improvement goals for students and they are also more likely to specify targets for students and schools who have already met and who are still struggling to meet standards (2010).

*Balanced Leadership* by Marzano and McNulty (2003) reports on district leadership and the effect on student achievement. In higher-performing settings, district leaders often proactively monitor trends in schools' academic performance and in community contexts (e.g., demographic trends). Leaders do this in order to identify schools potentially at risk of not meeting Average Yearly Performance targets in future years. Target could then be set for those schools and students needing intervention. District leaders in higher-performing districts appear to have invested in district-wide curriculum development over a longer period of time, using well-institutionalized district curriculum systems.

In a doctoral study by Peter Bang-Knudsen at the University of Washington (2009), several actions by superintendents are identified as having a positive impact on student achievement. These actions are: establishing a collaborative learning environment, promoting professional development for principals, and implementing a coherent evaluation system of principals. A superintendent leads by setting a vision and expectations for principals as instructional leaders. Student achievement is often reported and evaluated by test scores. The superintendent, alone, cannot create the processes to promote student learning. The superintendent can, however, provide the structure and mechanisms for principals to guide the emphasis on student achievement in their respective schools. Evaluation of the superintendent may partially be based upon how well he/she provides direction to principals and holds them accountable for result.

Measures of student achievement go beyond results associated with high stakes testing. In *Evaluating the Superintendent* (Goens, 2009), the case is advanced that testing alone is not the only measure upon which to evaluate a superintendent. Multiple measures or indicators of student achievement will yield a more fruitful analysis of the successes or deficiencies of educational programs. This comprehensive approach to measuring student achievement is needed to fully understand comprehensive programs and to more fairly evaluate the superintendent.

In *Evaluating the Superintendent* (Goens, 2009) the issues of measuring achievement and high stakes testing and its connection to superintendent evaluation are explored, Goens states:

## 5.1

“Finally, the belief that everything that’s important can be measured is just plain wrong. Valid and reliable statistics have their place as measures of the issues at hand, but they also can be gathered and presented in a way that is misleading and has no relevance or importance to progress. Many districts are collecting metrical data that is not relevant to quality schools or cannot measure the intangibles of people or organizations that make them great. Evaluating the superintendent and any other staff member must be done in a way so that results are truthful, pertinent, and legitimate. Superintendents and other leaders do not always work in a rational world, and often are assessed by individuals who do not have all the information they need “(Goens, 2009).p25

## 6 Conclusions and Recommendations

Superintendents and school board presidents distinguish between student achievement and high stakes testing. Too often, results of the state or commercial testing programs administered in the district are viewed as the ultimate measure of student achievement. Superintendents and school board presidents, however, see student achievement as encompassing several indicators and of being of greater importance for the district than the emphasis on singular test results.

An illustration of this ability to separate student achievement from high stakes testing is when survey participants were asked to rank eight roles common to the superintendent and six leadership issues identified as being dominant in superintendent - board of education relations. One of the roles, improving pupil performance, was ranked as the second most important role by both groups. The role identified as number one is vision and planning.

The leadership issue of producing test scores (i.e. high stakes testing) was ranked by 6% of the superintendents as being the number one priority. Ranking high stakes testing as the first or second of the most important leadership issues was considered by only 9% of the superintendents surveyed. Vision and planning was ranked as the number one leadership issues by 63% of respondents.

## 7 Summary

Superintendents and board presidents understand the importance of student achievement and the need for superintendents to focus and lead for improvement. Superintendents and board presidents clearly are able to get beyond the rhetoric of the popular media and not respond to the high stakes testing focus in a manner that makes it of primary importance in superintendent evaluation. Clearly, they want to work together to establish higher performing schools that will benefit their community.

The districts surveyed by the study by Dillion, Edwards and Moffett varied by size, student population, and geographical area. Yet, the majority of superintendents and board presidents ranked improving pupil performances as the most important superintendent function. Further, high stakes testing ranked as the last leadership issue. This agreement on the part of district leadership at both the administrative and board level is a positive note for the future of school districts and the governance model in place due to the agreement for both leadership groups on district direction.

Several superintendents and board members made specific comments about pupil performance that support the results of this 2010 study in the area of achievement and testing. When asked, "What do you feel are the major purposes of superintendent evaluation?" superintendents commented "Instructional leader, symbolic leader and facilitates Board of Education. . . . The improvement of student achievement. . . . To evaluate the individual's performance upon established goals important to the education of students. . . . Improve student achievement." When board presidents were asked the same question one comment was: "Improve district performance." One board member wrote a comment relating to the weakness of formal evaluation for superintendents. The comment that loosely could be seen as tied to pupil performance is, "No ties to student performance or improvement as it relates to salary increases."

Peter Senge, author of *The Fifth Discipline* (1990), uses the term *feedback* to describe the reciprocal or loop-back effect of a system's outputs upon the inputs. To truly engender growth, feedback must take the form of reflective information focused on learning, improving and enhancing both the system and the individual. The framework for this 2010 study provided a lens for superintendents and board presidents to reflect on the purpose and effectiveness of evaluation for the district leader. One can hope that this reflection will act a stimulus to honest dialog and more agreement on goals that will ultimately positively impact pupil performance.

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