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# Table of Contents

# Editorial Review Board

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# Through the Looking Glass: Comparing Superintendents' Preferred Principal Characteristics to ELCC and Texas Principal Standards

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## Abstract

This study investigated the alignment between Texas superintendents' perceptions of the necessary professional characteristics of principals through the hiring process and the ELCC principal standards and the Texas principal certification standards. Texas superintendents were surveyed and interviewed to create a framework comparing their market-driven views with the standards guiding principal preparation. The study determined that superintendents often sought characteristics that lay just outside the domain of the formal standards, such as moral purpose, trustworthiness, and "fit." Incorporating the superintendents' views into principal preparation program planning has important implications for programs in terms of producing qualified, effective, marketable, and ultimately employable principal candidates.

## Key Words

superintendent perceptions, principals, hiring standards, ELCC standards

## Introduction

**P**rincipals do important work, work that directly impacts student achievement (Waters & Cameron, 2004) and, among all school-related factors, is second only to classroom instruction in its contribution to what students learn at school (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). That said, key responsibilities fall on either side of the practicing principal; namely, the preparation program that prepared him/her and the superintendent who hired him/her.

Principal Preparation Programs (PPPs) are tasked with producing principal candidates who have the knowledge and skills to be successful, and their work is guided by national and state-level standards that outline what successful principal candidates should know and be able to do. The work of the PPPs matters (Young, 2015).

Likewise, superintendents are tasked with choosing and hiring principals who will be successful in their local schools, tasked with decisions guided largely by their own experiences, their understandings of the needs of their communities and schools, and their savvy for judging candidates based on interviews and artifacts. Too, the role of the superintendent is central to a principal's success (Normore, 2004).

## Objective

This exploratory study arose from one PPP's efforts to align coursework with the Educational Leadership Constituent Council (ELCC) national program accreditation standards and the Texas State Board for Educator Certification (SBEC) state standards for principal certification. Examining the sets of standards informed the PPP about what outside agencies determined were the critical

knowledge and skills for principals and provided direction for candidate training. What was missing, however, was the insight of the superintendents who are actually hiring these principal candidates. The PPP desired to travel "through the looking glass" to explore what is on the other side of the mirror, to determine what superintendents were looking for in principals. That reported insight would describe market demand for principal candidates, which would in turn inform application of standards alignment and curriculum objectives for PPPs.

The missing data piece, the superintendents' input, led to the research questions guiding this exploratory study:

1) What professional characteristics do superintendents seek in principal candidates?
2) Do the professional characteristics they seek align with the ELCC and SBEC standards?

Understanding how market demand aligns with accreditation and certification standards will inform the work of PPPs working to produce the most effective and viable principal candidates.

## Significance

Exploring the vocabulary superintendents use when describing ideal principal characteristics yields insight into how those superintendents operationalize their constructed perceptions of principal effectiveness.

Understanding superintendents' views assists PPPs in developing a profile of an ideal candidate aligned with both the governing standards and superintendent perceptions, ultimately resulting in a more capable candidate, as well as one more likely to get hired.

## Theoretical Framework

The underlying theoretical approach for this study involved a social constructivist perspective (Patton, 2002). School superintendents, in the process of selecting new principals, have a formidable task: assessing how much and what parts of the persona that a candidate reveals is true, predicting whether the known and assumed qualities of that candidate will 'fit,' and assuming that the criteria for selection will still be relevant for the length of the offered contract.

The superintendents surveyed in this study have, over time and through their interactions and experiences, constructed independent realities of what constitutes "professional characteristics" of principals, and it is those realities, more than any set of standards developed by any agency, that directly drive market demand for new principals.

Since 1995, PPPs accredited through the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) [recently reformed as Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation, or CAEP] have relied on the ELCC standards as a guiding force for preparation practices. Prior to 2002, the focus of accreditation was on evidence gleaned from program syllabi and other documents.

Subsequently, the ELCC standards were revised to focus primarily on evidence that PPP candidates were prepared to perform in the workplace, with documented evidence of what graduates know and are able to do (Shipman, Queen, & Peel, 2013). The ELCC standards were revised again in 2011, with a yet increasing focus on instructional leadership and changing perceptions of leadership.

The role of the principal as instructional leader was sometimes narrowly interpreted in the 90s as a didactic, all-knowing leadership role (Smith & Piele, 2007) instead of a collaborative leadership role of facilitating instructional improvement (Kaser & Habert, 2009; Knight, 2011).

As Smith and Piele (2007) noted, "today's conceptions of instructional leadership are much more complex than earlier versions" (p. 218). For example, concepts of transformational leadership (Day & Leithwood, 2007; Hallinger, 1992) and principal advocacy leadership or leadership for social justice (Anderson, 2009; Papa & English, 2011) have increasingly been used to further describe the principal's role in instructional improvement. Fullan (2014) now even calls for principals to move beyond working with individual teachers and focus on groups of teachers to further leverage instructional involvement.

These evolving views of the characteristics and responsibilities of principals are reflected in both the ELCC standards and the Texas SBEC standards, which divide the principal's responsibility into areas of school-community, instructional, and administrative leadership. PPPs have to respond to the changing nature of the principalship, by staying attuned to changes in accreditation standards, certification standards, and pragmatically, market demand.

## Methods, Data Sources, Analysis

This exploratory study followed a two-phase format. During the first phase, the researchers developed a survey designed to capture Texas superintendents' perspectives related to the efficacy of principal preparation, online learning and training, and related hiring practices. During the second phase, follow up telephone interviews were conducted with a stratified random sample of superintendents to explore in depth their perspectives and to cross-check the survey responses.

## Instrumentation

The survey was piloted with a convenience sample of superintendents, who were asked to talk through their thinking while completing the survey so the researchers could listen for any areas of difficulty or confusion and ensure alignment between the researcher's intent and superintendents' understanding. The revised survey was delivered via e-mail through www.SurveyMonkey.com to all the superintendents of districts and charter schools in Texas, using information publicly available in the AskTED (Texas Education Directory) data portal.

## Survey sample

Of the 1112 emails sent, 67 bounced back as undeliverable, and 106 (N=106) were completed and returned, for a response rate of 10.1%. Though the response rate was low, the respondents did represent a diverse sample based on gender, school size, and years of experience as a superintendent, as indicated in Table 1.

Table 1

*Superintendent Respondent Characteristics*

| Gender | | Experience | | School Size | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 77% | Male | 38% | 0-5 | 34% | A |
| 23% | Female | 28% | 6-10 | 23% | AA |
| | | 23% | 11-15 | 19% | AAA |
| | | 11% | 16+ | 10% | AAAA |
| | | | | 6% | AAAAA |
| | | | | 4% | AAAAAA |
| | | | | 4% | Charter |

The characteristics of the respondents closely align to the characteristics of Texas superintendents.

## Interview sample

Utilizing simple stratified randomization of the samples (Lund Research) of the respondent demographic variables of School Size, Years in Role, and Gender, a second select sample of five superintendents was constructed. These five superintendents represented three males and two females; had one, two, five, ten, and 21 years of experience in the role; and represented AA, AAA, AAAA, and AAAA schools in terms of size, generally reflecting the overall survey sample.

## Data Analysis

Though the overall survey was part of a larger and separate study, the data pertinent to this study derive from a single question from the superintendent survey; namely, "Please list three (3) primary professional characteristics

you look for when screening/interviewing applicants for administrative positions."

Respondents were presented three blanks in which to type responses, with no ranking or ordering of responses. Though more difficult to analyze (Shuman & Presser, 1996), the question was deliberately open-ended and intended to generate unfiltered responses and to leverage the "nonreactivity" described by Iyengar (1996). Utilizing a general inductive approach (Thomas, 2006), the purpose of which "is to allow research findings to emerge from the frequent, dominant, or significant themes inherent in raw data" (p. 238), the researchers collapsed the individual survey responses into generalized categories.

The 318 individual responses (106 respondents @3 responses each) were organized into a frame of 18 categories that developed from the actual words chosen by the superintendents, reflecting common language and terminology. Since the respondents were not asked to rank the characteristics, no consideration was given to the order the characteristics were listed within the survey itself.

The original intent was to compare the common response categories to the ELCC and SBEC standards, but anticipating equivocal results, a second step in the exploratory process was formulated. Noting that in addition to the opinions solicited in the original survey, a number of demographic data points about the responding superintendents themselves were also collected, the second phase of the exploration concerning the relationship between market demand and PPP curriculum/standards alignment was constructed.

The members of that sample were invited to participate in extended phone/Skype interviews where they were asked to provide in-depth, unguided explanations of their own selection of the three primary characteristics sought when screening administrative candidates.

The interviews were unstructured, and consisted of only two questions: 1) What professional characteristics do you seek in principal candidates? and 2) How do you determine if the candidates have those characteristics? Of specific interest was the qualitative comparison between the superintendents' own selections and those of the larger sample. Using open and axial coding (Merriam, 2009), the interview responses were spiraled into the survey results.

## Results
### Standards review
The first product of the investigation was a crosswalk aligning the ELCC standards with the SBEC competencies (Appendix A). The crosswalk was originally developed through the work of the researcher's principal preparation program to facilitate program design and course alignment to the standards. Because each descriptor for each standard is so dense, direct correlation was difficult; hence, the two sets of standards are loosely coupled. Yet, the crosswalk provides a concise overview for those unfamiliar with either of the sets of standards.

### Survey responses
The researchers then coded the 318 responses from the survey bank, collapsing them into the 18 categories represented in Figure 1 using a general inductive approach (Thomas, 2006). Due to both the language used by the superintendents and the density of the standards, the 18 categories were not directly relatable to the crosswalk. As anticipated, many of the categories were non-specific, reflecting

the words the superintendents provided in the open responses.

For example, the largest single category, representing 48 responses, was "knowledge;" and of those 48, 43 responses specifically used the single word "knowledge." With no context in which to situate each superintendent's conceptualization of knowledge, that category cannot be correlated to either set of standards, since each descriptor within each standard represents some form of knowledge.

Additionally, due to the generalized terminology utilized by the superintendents, some categories may or may not have overlapping meanings (i.e. communication skills and collaborative skills or attitude and personality). The potential ambiguity necessitated phase 2 of this study, the follow up interviews.



**Figure 1. Principal Characteristics Identified by Superintendents**
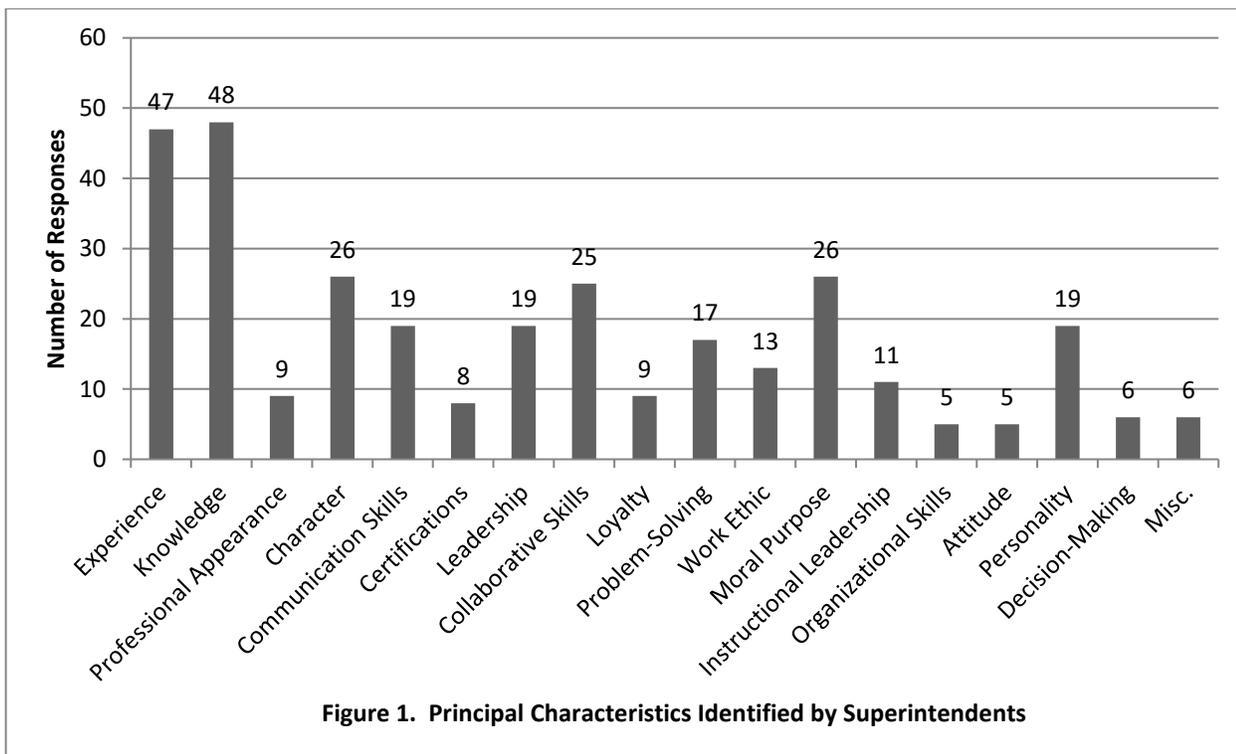
Figure 1. Principal characteristics identified by superintendents.

### Interview responses

Five superintendents were asked to participate in a follow up interview, and all five accepted. Their interview responses were recorded and transcribed by the researchers. Individual sentences, phrases, text fragments, and words were then coded into categories (Merriam, 2009).

Mirroring the survey responses, the most common desirable principal characteristic that emerged from the interviews was "knowledge." In fact, all five superintendents used that word explicitly, with two following up with working definitions of knowledge. One superintendent related knowledge specifically

to public relations, instruction, and planning, noting that these were "non-negotiable" skills.

Another superintendent stretched the knowledge concept further, remarking that, "as fast as educational changes are taking place, it's important for principals to have good fundamental knowledge about everything: curriculum, finance evaluations, special education, and to also read and stay on top of changes."

Finally, a small-school superintendent emphasized the importance of the principal's wide-ranging knowledge, commenting that "in a little school like mine, I must have principals who have a variety of skills and aren't dependent on experts in different areas."

If this broad concept of 'knowledge' is considered a tangible and/or measurable aspect of a principal candidate, the rest of the desired characteristics the superintendents mentioned might be considered more intangible, dispositional type characteristics, including character, drive, personality, trustworthiness, and 'fit.'

To illustrate, one superintendent highlighted the need to know that potential principals are "well-grounded, non-adversarial, and can play well with others." Another noted, "In a candidate, I try to decide if I would be able to trust them—and trust their love for children and always be ready to do whatever is in their best interest." A final superintendent commented about the need for 'fit' among principals in the district, balancing the individual with the team.

This superintendent wants "healthy competition" between principals, while "still working together toward common district goals," noting that "it's like a family—brothers might fight each other and call names, but nobody else better try that!"

When asked how they determined whether a principal candidate possessed the desired characteristics, all five of the superintendents offered two options: administrative work history (no mention of work history related to teaching) or more generalized impressions garnered from references and common acquaintances. Comments included:

- "Honestly, when I need a principal, I usually just ask around among people I know."
- "I ask other people who have interviewed them to share impressions—and not just specific answers to questions, but how they felt about them."
- "For the one I've hired, I knew her and her work well."
- "I look for potential so they can contribute to the district's progress, but also for a record of achievement so that they can command respect and cooperation right away."
- "I'm interested in what their current colleagues, supervisors, and teachers think. People don't tend to change much in behavior or character when they change jobs."

## Conclusions and Implications
The purpose of this study was to investigate how market demand for principals, as determined by the preferred principal characteristics that hiring superintendents look for, aligns with the preparation standards established by accreditation and certification agencies and, by extension, to inform the work of the principal preparation program in terms of course and program design to prepare

candidates who are well-positioned to meet the expectations of all involved stakeholders.

The public school superintendents of Texas were surveyed to capture the top characteristics they look for when hiring a principal, and the primary desirable characteristic reported out was "knowledge" (followed closely by "experience"), representing 15% of the total responses.

While many of the respondents used the single word "knowledge," follow up interviews seemed to indicate that superintendents were using the term to reference many of the specialized skills that comprise the bulk of the ELCC and Texas Principal Standards, including specific skills related to curriculum, instruction, special programs, community relations, planning and evaluation, and other administrative tasks.

Based on the interviews, further investigation would likely indicate that other of characteristics from Figure 1 could be subsumed in the knowledge category, particularly the categories of instructional leadership, organizational skills, and certifications.

If the overall concept of "knowledge," and the specialized skills it represents, constitutes a first tier, a clear second tier of characteristics emerges when examining Figure 1.

The reported characteristics of character, moral purpose, and collaborative skills stand out, followed closely by personality, leadership, and communications skills. Taken together, these represent 42% of the total responses.

This second tier of characteristics represent soft skills or dispositional qualities inherent to the candidate, those some of these characteristics are reflected in the standards (e.g. both sets of standards specifically reference integrity, fairness, and ethics).

The follow up interviews reinforced the survey data but provided more insight into how superintendents expected the expressed characteristics to manifest in principal candidates: superintendents appear to rely heavily on personal impressions to determine whether or not candidates will "fit in" with the campus or district.

One important implication for preparation programs arises from noting what the superintendents did not say, rather than what they did say. In particular, none of them mentioned the importance of interview performance, work samples, portfolios, test scores, or other metrics candidates expect to be important when entering the job market.

Personal impressions, positive references, and an overall notion of "fit" are what land new principals jobs. Accordingly, preparation programs must emphasize the soft skills, focus on interpersonal skills, and reinforce the importance of networking.

Overall, the data indicate that, whether intentional or not, superintendents hew somewhat closely to both the content and intent of the standards, through emphasis on both hard and soft skills. Most principal preparation programs likely focus on both types of skills but lean to the knowledge-based skills. Superintendents likely lean to the soft skills, so some disparity exists, but it is a bridgeable divide.

## Author Biographies

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# Appendix A

# Standards Crosswalk

| ELCC Standard | Texas/SBEC Competency |
|---|---|
| **Standard 1:** Candidates who complete the program are educational leaders who have the knowledge and ability to promote the success of all students by facilitating the development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship of a school or district vision of learning supported by the school community. | **Competency 001:** The principal knows how to shape campus culture by facilitating the development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship of a vision of learning that is shared and supported by the school community. |
| **Standard 4:** Candidates who complete the program are educational leaders with the knowledge and ability to promote the success of all students by collaborating with families and other community members, responding to diverse community interests and needs, and mobilizing community resources. | **Competency 002:** The principal knows how to communicate and collaborate with all members of the school community, respond to diverse interests and needs, and mobilize resources to promote school success. |
| **Standard 5**: Candidates who complete the program are educational leaders who have the knowledge and ability to promote the success of all students by acting with integrity, fairness, and in an ethical manner. | **Competency 003:** The principal knows how to act with integrity, fairness, and in an ethical and legal manner. |
| **Standard 2:** Candidates who complete the program are educational leaders who have knowledge and ability to promote the success of all students by promoting a positive school culture, providing and effective instructional program, applying best practices to student learning. | **Competency 004:** The principal knows how to facilitate the design and implementation of curricula and strategic plans that enhance teaching and learning; ensure alignment of curriculum, instruction, resources and assessments to measure student performance. |
| | **Competency 005:** The principal knows how to advocate, nurture, and sustain an instructional program and a campus culture that are conducive to student learning and staff professional growth. |
| NA | **Competency 006:** The principal knows how to implement a staff evaluation and development system to improve the performance of all staff members, select and implement appropriate models for supervision and staff development, and apply legal requirements for personnel management. |
| NA | **Competency 007:** The principal knows how to apply organizational, decision-making, and problem solving skills to ensure an effective learning environment. |
| **Standard 3:** Candidates who complete the program are educational leaders who have the knowledge and ability to promote the success of all students by managing the organization, operations, and resources in a way that promotes a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment. | **Competency 008:** The principal knows how to apply effective leadership and management in relation to campus budgeting, personnel, resource utilization, financial management, and technology use. |
| | **Competency 009:** The principal knows how to apply principles of leadership and management to the campus physical plant and support systems to ensure a safe and effective learning environment. |
| **Standard 6:** Candidates who complete the program are educational leaders who have the knowledge and ability to promote the success of all students by understanding, responding to, and influencing the larger political, social, economic, legal, and cultural context. | **NA** |
| **Standard 7:** The internship provides significant opportunities for candidates to synthesize and apply the knowledge and practice and develop the skills identified in Standards 1-6 through substantial, sustained, standards-based work in real settings, planned and guided cooperatively by the institution and school district personnel for graduate credit. | **Competencies 001-009** |

**Research Article**＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿＿

# Factors Influencing Rural Superintendent Tenure in a Midwestern State

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## Abstract

The position of superintendent has long been characterized by high rates of turnover. The purpose of this study was to examine the factors that influence the anticipated length of service of the current superintendents in a Midwestern state. It examined superintendent responses to determine trends affecting length of tenure. The findings of this study showed a disconnect in superintendent recognition of the most challenging aspect of the position. While current superintendents overwhelmingly recognize the importance of relationships, they tend to put less effort into strengthening their relationship with the local school board. As such, deterioration of that relationship leads to the most frequently reported rationale for superintendent departure from a district. Additionally, the study determined that the most significant factor that would convince young superintendents to remain with a school district is offering an increase in compensation. Some turnover is expected given the age of many superintendents as they ascend to the position, but with an influx of young district leaders it is crucial that school boards offer assistance monetarily and through training and recognition of the importance of relationship to successful district tenure.

## Key Words

superintendent tenure; rural leadership; relationships with school board members

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One hundred years ago the *Journal of Education* noted, "There is nothing more professional in American education than the administration of school systems" (p. 695). To this day the office of superintendent in the public school system is viewed as both crucial and pivotal to the success of both students and communities. "Superintendents know they can change the trajectory of children's lives, alter the behavior of organizations, and expand the possibilities of whole communities" (Houston, 2001, p. 428). "The public school superintendency is a critically important leadership position" (Boyland, 2013, p. 87). Given the importance of the position, it is not surprising that with it comes intense pressure and difficulty. As such, the office of superintendent in the public school system is characterized by high stress and frequent turnover (Hawk, 2011, p. 364).

According to the *2016 American Association of School Administrators Superintendent Salary & Benefits Study*, half of the superintendents served in their present position from one to five years and a quarter of superintendents served from six to ten years (Domenech, 2017). In the state of South Dakota that figure has topped the national average each of the past two years.

According to figures compiled by Rob Monson, School Administrators of South Dakota Executive Director, 23% of public school districts in South Dakota hired a new superintendent in 2013, while in 2014 that figure topped 25%. These figures reflect school district change in superintendents through retirement as well as those individuals either leaving the state, leaving the profession, or leaving a district and taking a superintendent position with another school district within the state of South Dakota.

The tenure of a superintendent has an important direct connection to students, teachers, policies, and achievement. Alsbury (2008) contended that frequent turnover in the superintendent position, "can impede the attainment of positive school reform" (p. 205). The effects are especially pronounced in rural districts. Alsbury (2008) stated,

> In districts of 500 or fewer, often the superintendent acts as the principal of a single K–12 school, and thus would have a more direct connection to the classroom level, and more potential for a direct influence on student achievement changes. (p. 210)

The American Association of School Administrators (AASA) has studied superintendent turnover since the 1920s. These studies paint a bleak picture regarding consistency of leadership in educational systems across demographics and regional differences. The AASA recognizes that the average length of service is lowest in the largest and smallest districts nationwide (Dlugosh, 1995). According to the South Dakota 2013 Fall Enrollment Census data, only 23 districts had 1,000 students or more. In contrast, more than 100 districts had fewer than 500 students, with 25 districts serving between 500 and 999 students (*Student Membership Reports*, 2014).

Given these demographics, it is clearly important that the factors that lead to higher rates of turnover, especially in rural areas, be studied. In order to have a more clear understanding of direction, to correct any deficiencies, and to prepare the next generation of school leaders, it must first be understood which factors may affect superintendent length of service. The purpose of the study was to examine the factors that influence the length of

service of the current superintendents in the state of South Dakota.

## Statement of the Problem

While the pinnacle of the educational administrative track, the superintendency has long been a position of shortened tenure (Yee & Cubin, 1996). While it is an area that reporters have documented and discussed for over a century, little research has been undertaken to determine the cause (Waters & Marzano, 2007). Some recent studies have been conducted that examine superintendent turnover on the east coast, west coast, and south central United States (Boyland, 2013; Johnson, Huffman, Madden, & Shope, 2011; Keedy, 2007; Trevino, 2008; Wolverton, 2002). No recent studies have been directly focused in South Dakota.

Being at the top of the organization, many superintendents have arrived at their position following years of teaching and filling lower level administrative positions (Haar & Robicheau, 2007). Often, by the time individuals arrive at this pinnacle of the administrative pyramid they are advancing in age. According to data collected by the School Administrators of South Dakota, the average age of superintendents in the state hovers just over 52.

> Half of the superintendents said they did not plan to be on the job by the end of five years. This corresponds with the modal age of the superintendent at between 56 and 60 and the tenuous nature of the job. So, should things not work out, retirement becomes a viable option. (Domenech, 2010, p. 47)

Increasingly however, individuals filling the mid-level administrative roles are not attempting to seek to fill this top administrative role when it becomes available (Boyland, 2013).

## Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the factors that influence the length of service of the current superintendents in the state of South Dakota. It examined rural South Dakota school superintendent responses to questions to determine trends affecting length of tenure. Factors affecting superintendent tenure in the state of South Dakota included the importance of personal characteristics, rewarding and challenging aspects of the superintendency, the rationale for superintendent departure, and the feasibility of incentives directed at increasing superintendent tenure. The study also examined the differences in superintendent responses based upon demographic factors.

In addition to analyzing the overall perceptions of superintendents, the study sought to determine potential areas to aide in the preparation of new school leaders and serves as a guide for the local school board to recognize characteristics of potential leaders and what they as a body can do to increase the longevity of the superintendent position.

### Research Questions

Six research questions guided this study:

1. How important do superintendents consider the selected qualities of successful superintendents?

2. How important do superintendents consider the selected rewarding aspects of the superintendency?

3. How important do superintendents consider the selected challenging aspects of the superintendency?

4. How important do superintendents consider the selected perceived rationale for superintendent departure?

5. To what extent do superintendents agree regarding the feasibility of convincing superintendents to stay in their current position?

6. What differences are there in superintendents' perceptions regarding expected tenure based on the following demographic variables?
   a. Gender
   b. Age
   c. Salary
   d. Education
   e. Size of District
   f. Job Satisfaction
   g. Superintendent Experience

## Review of the Related Literature

The position of superintendent has been essential and challenging for generations. Reports from the *Journal of Education* in June 1914 recognized the importance of the district leader, as well as outlined the difficulties and public vilification each individual received without regard to the decisions that were made.

Yaffe (2015) recounted ways in which modern technology has improved the ability to communicate valuable information yet has also increased the ease and frequency with which the abilities of the superintendent can be publicly questioned. The pressure has increased as the duties have multiplied, especially for those holding the position of superintendent in rural districts.

In rural districts the superintendent often maintains responsibility for multiple roles. The added functions increase the tension

and difficulties that lead to additional stress and pressure. "The challenge and reality of juggling two positions at once left most of the administrators in the study with eroded enthusiasm as they were divided among a myriad of tasks, activities, and competing interests" (McGuire, 1994, p. 31).

The added stress and responsibilities directly lead to increased turnover and the movement of superintendents to larger districts with increased professional opportunity and additional compensation.

The challenges faced by superintendents have made it difficult to recruit highly qualified individuals to fill the role of district leader. Lamkin (2006) noted,

> Fewer candidates find attractive the role of school superintendent, and many school administrators now wait until the end of their careers before they venture into the superintendency. Further, many "middle managers" among public school administrators – for example, principals, curriculum directors, and associate superintendents – see vividly the daily stresses and difficulties in the role of superintendent and choose consciously to avoid those problems by not advancing their careers into the superintendency. (p. 17)

The implications of the choice to avoid the ascension to superintendent requires intensive training on the part of those individuals willing to fill the void. Ellis (2016) states, "The challenge remains how to best

make sure those filling positions as superintendents are prepared to maximize such potential impact once in the position" (p. 35). The local school board must also recognize the challenges faced by the superintendent and be willing to work closely with the individual to ensure success for the entire district.

### Changing demands

The office of the superintendent in a public school district is a position requiring intensive education and training. Boyland (2013) noted in her research that, "Superintendents are charged with setting the district's vision, developing capacity for quality teaching and learning, initiating and implementing policies, building relationships between constituency groups, and appropriately allocating resources" (p. 87). Boyland continued to note that, "As the district's school improvement leader, the superintendent is also expected to be a constructive and productive agent of change" (Boyland, 2013, p. 87).

### Impact on districts

At the time when a superintendent vacates a position, whether it be voluntary or involuntary, it has an impact on the entire district. The difficulty carries beyond the superintendent and permeates the community: "Superintendent transitions, even under the best circumstances, bring uncertainty to organizations that require stability to thrive" (Cook, 2006, p. 14).

The problems exacerbate when moving into the larger context of the community. Short tenures create a public perception of increased instability, lowered morale, a loss of organizational direction and 'vision,' and a general sense by the staff of 'here we go again,' that the district will undergo yet another round of short-lived programs and policies. (Yee & Cuban, 1996, p. 616)

Change takes time to implement as well. "Stability is important," said Paul D. Houston, past executive director for the American Association of School Administrators. "If you are a district that is impatient, nobody is going to be there to see things change. By the time you are ready to bear fruit, there's no tree left" (Brodie, 2008, p. 4). The impact is felt strongly by the staff of the district.

The impact is felt all the way through to the students in the classrooms of our schools. Forner, Bierlein-Palmer, and Reeves (2012) noted that successful superintendents are hands-on regarding the instruction and monitoring of student academic performance.

The engaged superintendent will also be able to implement programs that encourage student success (p. 11). "More recent research examining the effects of superintendent leadership on student achievement found a positive correlation between longer superintendent tenures and higher student-test scores" (Kamrath & Brunner, 2014, p. 435). Sparks (2012) explained, "Stability at the central office has been linked to a greater likelihood of success for new education initiatives, which typically take five to seven years to mature" (p. 19).

## Methodology and Procedures

This study utilized a superintendent online survey developed by the researcher as shown in Appendix A. The survey contained questions similar to surveys discovered during the literature review.

The population of the study included the superintendents of the 127 school districts in the state of South Dakota that service populations of fewer than 1,000 students.

These superintendents were identified as the population because the primary researcher was a superintendent of a district in South Dakota with fewer than 1,000 students. Survey responses were received from 103 (81.1%) of current superintendents from qualifying districts. The researcher examined the responses for demographic groupings as well as for overall perceptions regarding the research questions. The data were examined utilizing means and standard deviations to determine the importance that superintendent respondents ascribe to the selected qualities of successful superintendents.

The researcher utilized means and standard deviations to determine the importance of both rewarding and challenging aspects of the superintendency from the perspective of superintendents.

The researcher examined the respondent data and conducted a series of one-way analyses of variance to determine differences in superintendent perceptions regarding numerous demographic variables.

## Limitations and Delimitations

Several factors may affect the interpretation and generalizability of the results of this study.

1. The study was limited to the superintendents of K-12 public school districts within the state of South Dakota. Results should not be generalized to states with a vastly different makeup of rural, suburban, and urban districts.

2. The primary researcher was a member of the group of 151 public school superintendents being studied. This relationship could impact data in ways that cannot be determined.

3. The respondents were answering a survey generated by the researcher. This is a delimiter of the study, as a different survey tool may find different results.

## Findings

The findings of each analysis are detailed within this next section. Each survey question was established on a Likert scale with a score of 1 identified as *Not at all important* and a score of 5 identified as *Very important*. Statistically significance was identified at the $p < 0.05$ level.

### Qualities of successful superintendents

Research question one determined the extent to which current superintendents rated the importance of personal qualities held by successful superintendents. The data depicted in Table 1 indicate that superintendents find most of the character qualities to be either important or essential to the success of a district superintendent.

Table 1

*Important Qualities of Successful Superintendents*

| Factors | Mean | Standard Deviation |
|---|---|---|
| Leadership | 4.670 | 0.493 |
| Approachable | 4.631 | 0.560 |
| Personable | 4.621 | 0.544 |
| Relational | 4.602 | 0.583 |
| Verbal Communicator | 4.583 | 0.586 |
| Student-Centered | 4.505 | 0.684 |
| Thick Skin | 4.427 | 0.680 |
| Flexible | 4.427 | 0.636 |
| Educator | 4.301 | 0.725 |
| Community Focused | 4.272 | 0.703 |
| Visionary | 4.243 | 0.693 |
| Written Communicator | 4.078 | 0.725 |
| Unyielding | 2.903 | 1.133 |

## Rewarding aspects of the superintendency

Research question two determined the extent to which current superintendents rated the importance of rewarding aspects of the position of district superintendent. Table 2 depicts that the one essential rewarding aspect of the superintendency as reported by existing superintendents of districts that service 1000 students or less in the state of South Dakota was that of helping students succeed ($M = 4.81$, $SD = .40$).

Table 2

*Rewarding Aspects of the Superintendency*

| Aspects | Mean | Standard Deviation |
|---------|------|--------------------|
| Helping students succeed | 4.806 | 0.3975 |
| Helping staff achieve their goals | 4.330 | 0.7056 |
| Making decisions | 3.971 | 0.8455 |
| Diversity of daily tasks | 3.874 | 0.7881 |
| Community visibility | 3.796 | 0.8785 |
| Compensation (salary & benefits) | 3.563 | 0.9668 |
| Meeting state standards | 3.272 | 1.0590 |
| Prestige | 2.757 | 1.0798 |

## Challenging aspects of the superintendency

Research question three determined the extent to which current superintendents rated the most challenging aspects of the position of district superintendent. Each survey question was established on a Likert scale with a score of one identified as *Not at all challenging* and a score of five identified as *Very challenging*. Superintendent respondents closely ranked four definitive challenges, while a fifth qualified in the category as well as shown on Table 3.

Table 3

*Challenging Aspects of the Superintendency*

| Challenge faced | Mean | Standard Deviation |
|---|---|---|
| Lack of family time | 3.874 | 0.9669 |
| Meeting budgetary constraints | 3.864 | 1.0669 |
| Navigating politics | 3.816 | 0.9367 |
| Lack of personal time | 3.806 | 1.0484 |
| Making difficult decisions | 3.631 | 1.1114 |
| Making personnel decisions | 3.544 | 1.0551 |
| Being on display | 3.437 | 0.9869 |
| Board relations | 3.117 | 1.0874 |

**Rationale for departure**
Research question four determined the extent to which current superintendents perceive are important factors and rationale for the departure of the position of district superintendent. The responses are delineated in Table 4, with only board relations (*M* = 4.29, *SD*=1.03) and better professional opportunity (*M* = 3.69, *SD* = 1.42) ranking in the range of important definitive factors leading to superintendent departure from a district.

Table 4

*Importance of Perceived Rationale for Departure from a District*

| Reason for departure | Means | Standard Deviation |
|---|---|---|
| Board Relations | 4.291 | 1.0255 |
| Better professional opportunity | 3.689 | 1.4213 |
| Compensation | 3.330 | 1.3090 |
| Pressure / Workload | 3.320 | 1.3152 |
| Geography | 2.786 | 1.5571 |

## Convincing reasons to stay

Research question five determined the extent to which current superintendents perceive are important factors and rationale for convincing the district superintendent to remain in the current position. The data collected regarding the three factors that could convince superintendents to remain are represented in Table 5.

Table 5

*Factors That Could Convince Superintendents to Remain*

| Factor | Means | Standard Deviations |
|---|---|---|
| Compensation | 3.806 | 1.2131 |
| Improved board relations | 3.408 | 1.3243 |
| Workload relief | 3.010 | 1.2947 |

Based on the statistical analysis the following 12 research findings emerged:

1. The researcher noted that respondents were primarily in agreement regarding the important qualities of successful superintendents.

2. All of the qualities presented, with one exception, were noted as important with a mean score of greater than 4.00 on a five-point scale and a standard deviation of less than 0.73.

3. When examining the rewarding aspects of the superintendency, the researcher noted that respondents most strongly identified with qualities pertaining to assisting others. The data collected regarding assisting students and staff both had means greater than 4.00 on a five-point scale and a standard deviation of less than 0.71.

4. Given a list of potential challenging aspects of the superintendency, respondents ranked board relations as the least challenging aspect of the position.

5. The researcher noted that board relations was the most significant reason given regarding rationale for superintendent departure, receiving a mean score of 4.29 on a five-point scale and a standard deviation of 1.03.

6. Respondents noted an increase in compensation as being the most convincing rationale for a district to be able to retain the current superintendent.

7. Statistically significant differences were noted in years of superintendent experience regarding rationale for departure. Respondents with the most experience were significantly less likely than those with less experience to leave based upon compensation and better professional opportunity. No significant differences were found for convincing rationale to stay regarding the level of experience.

8. Statistically significant differences were noted in level of superintendent education regarding both rationale for departure as well as convincing rationale to stay. Those with doctoral degrees were significantly less likely to leave based on the pressure and work load, and likewise less likely to stay if offered a lessened work load.

9. Statistically significant differences were noted in level of superintendent job satisfaction regarding both rationale for departure as well as convincing rationale to stay.

10. Respondents reporting the highest satisfaction levels were significantly less likely than those with average satisfaction to leave based on compensation and geographic location. Respondents with the lowest levels of job satisfaction were significantly more likely than those with the highest satisfaction to report improved board relations as a rationale to stay.

11. The most variability and statistically significant differences occurred when comparing groups by age regarding both rationale for departure as well as convincing rationale to stay.

12. No statistically significant difference was noted among the demographic variables of gender, salary level, or district size for either rationale for departure or convincing rationale to stay.

## Discussion

The superintendent position, especially in rural districts, affords the individual a myriad of both challenges and opportunities.  As stated by Garn (2003), superintendents in rural districts are more likely to serve in a dual capacity (filling additional administrative roles or teaching), and they are also more likely to relocate to a rural district with similar student populations.

However, relationships with students and constituents are also more likely to occur on deeper levels in rural settings.  When discussing successful rural superintendents, Chance (1992) stated, "Respondents mentioned 'open communication' as the key to their longevity.  In their relationships with the board, the superintendents said they had congenial, understanding board members who let the administrators run the school" (p. 477).

Superintendent respondents overwhelmingly recognized the importance of relationship and service to others.  When ranking the importance of various qualities of successful superintendents, the relational and service aspects were most clearly defined as being essential to success.  Superintendents who desire to see others succeed are themselves recognized as having achieved success.  The value of the superintendent is therefore defined in the level of service they give to others.

In order to be successful, relationships must be developed amongst students, staff, parents, community members, and the board.

Unfortunately, superintendent respondents significantly ranked the issue of board relationships as the least challenging aspect of the position.  Given the myriad tasks required of rural superintendents, anything determined to be not challenging will receive minimal effort, as the multitude of daily tasks and recognized challenges receive the bulk of the superintendent's available time and resources.  This can lead to a break down in the most essential relational aspect of the position.

When the relationship between the board and superintendent is compromised or breached in a negative way, it is likely that the superintendent will seek employment elsewhere.

However, superintendents in this study perceived that board relations are the least challenging aspect of the position.

One interpretation of this contradiction is that there may be a disconnect between a superintendent's perception of the quality of his or her relationship with school board member and the perception of the quality of this same relationship from the perspective of the school board member.

This is significant because it may provide a deeper understanding into the complex relationships between superintendents and school board members.

The collapse or disintegration of the board relationship with the superintendent consequently leads respondents of all gender, ages, salary levels, degrees obtained, levels of experience, professional level, or job satisfaction to terminate employment.

The oldest and most experienced superintendents in rural districts in South Dakota are not likely to be swayed by any

rationale regarding seeking employment elsewhere including compensation, preferred geographical location, intense pressure and workload, or better professional opportunities. The one exception that can cause the oldest and most experienced superintendents to seek employment elsewhere or retire early is the breakdown in the board relationship.

Being at the pinnacle of the K-12 education system, individuals that hold the superintendent position are not likely to be able to utilize educational degrees or experience to leverage greater compensation or a lessened work load, especially in rural districts. Therefore, younger superintendents may be more likely to seek employment opportunities that significantly increase their compensation or hold the promise of a professional increase through servicing a larger number of students. While not driven by personal prestige, the compensation difference and ability to focus on the task of being a superintendent may lead both young and those with less than doctoral degrees to pursue employment in other districts.

Given the increased levels of turnover in the superintendent position in South Dakota over the past two years, we can expect to see high levels for several years to come. As younger superintendents with less experience fill positions in rural districts, it will likely lead to continued increased turnover not only through retirement of older and experienced superintendents, but also through the churn of younger, less experienced superintendents transitioning to higher paying districts offering better professional opportunities. The rural districts often benefit from passionate educators with fresh ideas; however, as the superintendents mature and grow, they are more likely to leave the rural districts to receive more compensation and a smaller work load

regarding the various duties performed in the rural districts.

## Conclusions
The data analysis and findings of the study present the following conclusions:

1. Relationships are perceived as the driving force behind success in the superintendent position. The qualities closely linked to relationship were ranked among the most crucial qualities of successful superintendents. The only essential rewarding aspect of the superintendent position was relational in helping students to succeed, closely followed by helping staff achieve their goals.

2. Superintendents believe board relations to be the least challenging aspect of the position. As such, it is a low priority since it is deemed less important and not as difficult as the myriad other daily tasks facing rural superintendents.

3. The lapse of board relations is the primary rationale leading to superintendent departure. Even superintendents in the oldest age bracket, and therefore closest to retirement, are likely to consider a lapse in board relations as a valid rationale for departure.

4. The youngest and least experienced superintendents, most likely supporting young families and positioning themselves professionally are most driven by compensation and better professional opportunities, and therefore more likely to leave rural schools for larger districts.

## Recommendations for Practice

The following recommendations for practice emerged based upon the results of this study. Nearly one-half of the respondents had fewer than five years of experience. Nearly one-third of respondents were less than 45 years old and nearly two-thirds of respondents were serving their first district as superintendent. The researchers in this study anticipate witnessing a continued high rate of turnover amongst rural districts in the state of South Dakota unless the following issues are addressed:

1. Superintendent compensation must be addressed in the rural districts. Both groups of the youngest respondents were statistically significantly more likely to stay in their current position if offered additional compensation.

2. Superintendents and school boards must actively pursue ways to strengthen and deepen their relationship.

3. Training of superintendents must include recognition of the importance of relationship as a driving factor of the position. While human relations courses are required for administrative certification, there needs to be a focus on productive strategies to address and mitigate difficult circumstances, while also recognizing conflict management as an integral skill.

### Author Biographies

Shawn Yates is superintendent of Ada-Borup Public Schools in Ada, MN. Previous experience includes service as a teacher, coach, principal, and superintendent. He serves on multiple state association leadership committees and was appointed to the Minnesota Board of Social Work in 2017. He is passionate about education, the importance of relationships, innovations in PreK-12 education, and mentoring. He maintains a blog linking pop culture with education and is active on Twitter at @DrSWYates. E-mail: shawny@ada.k12.mn.us


David De Jong is an assistant professor in the division of educational leadership at the University of South Dakota School of Education. He teaches graduate online and hybrid courses and chairs doctoral dissertation committees. In May of 2017, he was awarded the University of South Dakota School of Education Teaching in Excellence award. Previous experience includes service as a teacher, coach, principal, and superintendent. His research production includes nine peer-reviewed journal publications, one report, and seven peer-reviewed presentations at national conferences. His research agenda includes four topics: educational leadership, innovations in PreK-12 education, mentoring, and innovations in technology for teaching in PreK-20 education. E-mail: David.DeJong@usd.edu

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# APPENDIX A

Superintendent Survey

**Superintendent Survey**

## Demographic Information

| Gender? | - Male<br>- Female |
|---|---|
| Age? | - 30-44<br>- 45-59<br>- 60+ |
| Current Salary (Administrative Salary – NOT including additional duties)? | - $50,000 - $64,999<br>- $65,000 - $79,999<br>- $80,000 - $94,999<br>- $95,000+ |
| Highest Completed Educational Degree? | - Bachelors<br>- Masters<br>- Specialist<br>- Doctorate |
| Size of Current District? | - 0 – 350 students<br>- 351 – 700 students<br>- 701 – 1,000 students<br>- 1,001+ students |

## Personal Information

| How many years have you been a superintendent (total number of years throughout your career)? | - 1 – 5 years<br>- 6 – 10 years<br>- 11 – 14 years<br>- 15+ years |
|---|---|
| Number of schools you have served as superintendent (total throughout your career)? | - 1 school<br>- 2 schools<br>- 3 schools<br>- 4 schools<br>- 5+ schools |
| How many years did you serve as superintendent at school 1? | - 1 – 4 years<br>- 5 – 9 years<br>- 10 – 14 years<br>- 15+ years |
| How many years did you serve as superintendent at school 2? | - 0 (N/A)<br>- 1 – 4 years<br>- 5 – 9 years<br>- 10 – 14 years<br>- 15+ years |
| How many years did you serve as superintendent at school 3? | - 0 (N/A)<br>- 1 – 4 years<br>- 5 – 9 years<br>- 10 – 14 years<br>- 15+ years |
| How many years did you serve as superintendent at school 4? | - 0 (N/A)<br>- 1 – 4 years<br>- 5 – 9 years<br>- 10 – 14 years<br>- 15+ years |

| | |
|---|---|
| Reasons for past departure from a district (Board Relations/Lack of Support)? | - Rank on a scale from 1 – 5 (1 = Not at all an important factor…5 = Very important factor) |
| Reasons for past departure from a district (Compensation)? | - Rank on a scale from 1 – 5 (1 = Not at all an important factor…5 = Very important factor) |
| Reasons for past departure from a district (Geographic Preference)? | - Rank on a scale from 1 – 5 (1 = Not at all an important factor…5 = Very important factor) |
| Reasons for past departure from a district (Pressure/Work Load Intensity)? | - Rank on a scale from 1 – 5 (1 = Not at all an important factor…5 = Very important factor) |
| Reasons for past departure from a district (Better Opportunity Elsewhere)? | - Rank on a scale from 1 – 5 (1 = Not at all an important factor…5 = Very important factor) |
| Age at which you first became a superintendent in South Dakota? | - Insert number here |
| Career Aspirations? | - Large district superintendent<br>- Small district superintendent<br>- Teacher in higher education<br>- Non-educational administrative position<br>- Other |
| Contract type currently held? | - Single year<br>- Multi-year (extending beyond May 2016)<br>- Multi-year (ending at the close of the current year) |
| Hired from? | - Promoted from within the district<br>- Came from out of district (previously in South Dakota)<br>- Came from out of district (previously out of state) |
| How many hours do you typically spend on your job? | - 20 – 39 hours<br>- 40 – 49 hours<br>- 50 – 59 hours<br>- 60+ hours |

**Job Satisfaction**

| | |
|---|---|
| How satisfied are you in your current position? | - Mostly satisfied<br>- Somewhat satisfied<br>- Neutral<br>- Somewhat dissatisfied<br>- Mostly dissatisfied |
| If possible, how long would you like to serve as superintendent at your current location? | - 1 - 3 years<br>- 4 – 6 years<br>- 7 – 9 years<br>- 10+ years |
| At what age do you intend to retire? | Insert age here |
| Do you intend to remain a superintendent until you retire? | - Yes<br>- No |
| What COULD cause you to leave your current position (Board Relations/Lack of Support)? | - Rank on a scale from 1 – 5 (1 = Not at all an important factor…5 = Very important factor) |
| What COULD cause you to leave your current position (Geographic Preference)? | - Rank on a scale from 1 – 5 (1 = Not at all an important factor…5 = Very important factor) |
| What COULD cause you to leave your current position (Pressure/Workload Intensity)? | - Rank on a scale from 1 – 5 (1 = Not at all an important factor…5 = Very important factor) |
| What COULD cause you to leave your current position (Better Opportunity Elsewhere)? | - Rank on a scale from 1 – 5 (1 = Not at all an important factor…5 = Very important factor) |

| What of the following would entice you to stay in your current position (Compensation Increase)? | - Rank on a scale from 1 – 5 (1 = Not at all an important factor…5 = Very important factor) |
|---|---|
| What of the following would entice you to stay in your current position? (Lighter Workload/More Assistance)? | - Rank on a scale from 1 – 5 (1 = Not at all an important factor…5 = Very important factor) |
| What of the following would entice you to stay in your current position? (Improved Board Relations)? | - Rank on a scale from 1 – 5 (1 = Not at all an important factor…5 = Very important factor) |
| How would you characterize the level of stress in your position as superintendent? | - No stress<br>- Little stress<br>- Moderate stress<br>- Considerable stress<br>- High stress |

**Superintendency**

| Characteristics of Superintendents | - Rank the following qualities on a scale of 1 – 5 (1 = Not at all an important factor…5 = Very important factor)<br> o Thick Skin<br> o Personable<br> o Verbal Communicator<br> o Relational<br> o Leadership<br> o Visionary<br> o Educator<br> o Student-Centered<br> o Approachable<br> o Flexible<br> o Unyielding<br> o Written Communicator |
|---|---|
| Rewarding Aspects of the Superintendency | - Rank the following rewarding aspects on a scale of 1 – 5 (1 = Not at all an important factor…5 = Very important factor)<br> o Helping staff achieve their goals<br> o Helping students succeed<br> o Meeting state standards<br> o Making decisions<br> o Compensation (salary and benefits)<br> o Community visibility<br> o Prestige<br> o Diversity of daily tasks |
| Challenging Aspects of the Superintendency | - Rank the following challenging aspects faced by superintendents on a scale of 1 – 5 (1 = Not at all an important factor…5 = Very important factor)<br> o Navigating politics<br> o Being on display<br> o Lack of family time<br> o Lack of personal time<br> o Making difficult decisions<br> o Board relations<br> o Making personal decisions<br> o Meeting budgetary constraints |

# *Commitment and Common Sense*

Written by David Driscoll
Reviewed by Art Stellar

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**D**avid Driscoll is a former commissioner of education for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, and it is that state's reform agenda that is the focus of *Commitment and Common Sense.* Massachusetts is annually at or near the top of state educational outcomes and has become a model for state reform. Driscoll takes readers behind the scenes to share his version of the politics, including some unplanned moments, which shaped state education legislation and the subsequent support that made it a reality across the state.

During the process, few participants would likely have labeled the effort as "Commitment and Common Sense." Most historical accounts of educational reforms are written at a time when the original passion has been consumed by the effort. This account does not suffer from such restraints, although readers are exposed to a single perspective by one of the shapers of this period of reform in Massachusetts.

In that regard readers are also cautioned that this account does not describe the larger context of what was happening in education in Massachusetts or elsewhere, besides this specific reform focusing on improved outcomes on standardized tests.

Massachusetts could have changed the dynamics of the common testing frameworks with other alternatives, but anything outside the norm was ignored. Driscoll does not state why this occurred. There were rumblings from the teachers' unions and some college faculty as precursors to the "opt-out" movement, but such topics were overlooked in this volume. Being number one was a definite target and source of pride for politicians from local school committee members to the governors.

As a somewhat biographical essay, Driscoll starts by describing how he became an "Accidental Teacher" in Somerville, just outside of Boston, by taking an extra math course for teacher certification as job insurance and then working in an afternoon and summer youth program. That was all it took for him to be hooked on teaching or more specifically, the "pure joy in working with students." As he does at the end of every chapter, the author gives his reflections and lessons. To the point, he concludes that "l was basically on my own" as a new teacher with preservice courses, in-

service sessions, teacher guides, and supervisor visits being of limited value once he crossed over into a classroom.

During his early teaching career, Driscoll: "... often questioned the status quo while more experienced teachers shrugged it off. Some were content not to make waves; others just didn't seem to know any other way. In that sense, teachers in my earliest years were the same: they all adjusted to the illogical habits and practices of the district. For them, there was a comfort in the sameness of it all."

Driscoll learned a lot from normal procedures like the annual layoff notice to protect the district from overstaffing without abandoning his optimism.

Driscoll learned his first major real political lesson from a failed bond issue. As a young teacher, he joined the forces of young parents interested in building a new high school to replace an aging facility without modern so-called necessities. He felt he was "on the side of the angels" with a well-organized army of volunteers against a few conservatives with the slogan "When in doubt, vote 'no!'" With the benefit of hindsight, he realized that he and others had not been listening and that his opponents had some good points.

He also learned that things can later work out despite the anticipated disaster. A more profound learning was his conclusion that "You cannot avoid politics if you want positive change. Whether we like it or not, public education is dependent on the political process. It can be maddening as sometimes initiatives are approved based on emotions or questionable facts. Those of us who serve as leaders inside the system need to be active and vigilant?" Driscoll is more self-critical in this section than in describing his later assignments and years.

When Driscoll became a central office business manager, he was fortunate to have a superintendent who encouraged his growth by taking him to superintendents' meetings and generally exposing him to decisions usually reserved for the top job. Some of this may have had to do with the superintendent withdrawing from some of his duties and, thereby, turning over more responsibility to his mentee.

When the school budget was attacked by the city council, Driscoll turned into the main public advocate. This positioning led him to be the probable replacement when the superintendent announced his retirement. However, all his interviews did not go swimmingly. His friends and relatives did come through to lobby for his appointment.

The outgoing superintendent convinced the board to start the selection process in January with his retirement coming near the end of December. This arrangement favored Driscoll who was already on the payroll instead of adding another salary to the budget for six months. The budget problems did not disappear when he became superintendent, and he was compelled to recommend closing a school which took another budget cycle to be approved.

Advocating for increased budgets and for school closings eventually took a toll which manifested itself in pressure from a newly appointed board member. Driscoll later expresses regret that he did not actively head off this appointment.

Then on a whim he attended a Boston College basketball game where he encountered Peter Flynn who was executive director of the Massachusetts Association of School Administrators. Flynn talked with him about applying for the vacant deputy superintendent position at the Massachusetts Department of

Education. Driscoll applied and was appointed as deputy commissioner.

The Education Reform Act of 1993 had been passed; therefore, Driscoll would not be tarnished by working to pass the controversial reform legislation. He was, however, charged with its implementation. He recognized that superintendents had to be onboard and labored hard in that regard, which paid benefits later when he needed their support. He also became an ally with the state's most powerful politicians and leaders who mustered the votes for this important legislation and who desired that it fulfill its potential. Funding followed, which was a good thing, as the state supreme court ruled the prior system of funding schools to be unconstitutional.

One insight of this book is that a lot must happen after the legal battles to realize the intent of the law. The battle in Massachusetts over implementation cost two commissioners their jobs.

The state commissioner at the time was Robert Antonucci, who was strong on developing regulations that made sense for educators in the field, instead of the state bureaucrats who favored compliance. Small study grants were awarded to local groups of teachers to identify how to use the curricular frameworks in their districts, schools, and classrooms.

While the initial reaction to the new state requirements was positive, the shine wore off with the testing of new teachers — some teachers failed. With the new student assessments many students also failed. Resistance to the new standards and 'accountability' mounted.

Political elections can yield strange results, even when the candidate who you hope

wins is victorious. Governor Weld was viewed as a supporter of the higher educational standards. Upon his reelection there was a sigh of relief from educators.

That euphoria did not last long as Governor Weld appointed his 1990 gubernatorial opponent, John Silber, the president of Boston University as chairman of the state board of education. Silber demanded a whole new board and some other additional powers. He was even able to have his dean of the Boston University College of Education added to the state board, although he was not able to remove the student member from the board and was unable to complete the board with his appointees.

Silber was a disruptive force who challenged everything and nearly everybody, especially the state Commissioner of Education, Bob Antonucci. Silber drove him out..." John Silber wasted little time in taking control. He immediately announced that there would be a very comprehensive search for a new commissioner, but that he would be immediately recommending an acting commissioner.

It was Silber at his brilliant and diabolical best, He not only announced his unorthodox choice, but he declared that this person would not serve unless he received a unanimous vote of the board." His pick was Frank Haydu, a current member of the state board of education who was a successful financial agent.

Despite his service on the state board, Haydu had no experience as an educator or school administrator. According to Driscoll, Acting Commissioner Haydu had a habit of wandering into department meetings at random. On one such occasion he discovered an internal meeting when it was being proposed that the

"cut scores" for new teacher candidates be lowered to avoid massive failures.

Haydu could not wait to call Silber to stir him up and obtain the order to shut down the lowering of standards. The result was a total disaster with teachers failing across the state which precipitated attacks on colleges, school districts, teachers, unions, etc. The media had a field day. Very quickly, Haydu was viewed as the villain that no one wanted to rescue. Driscoll's account of the behind-the-scenes maneuvering to replace Haydu with Driscoll is well worth the read for superintendents.

The chapter on the selection process for the permanent commissioner of education will draw the interest of superintendents. A state board of education member resigns and becomes a candidate. The screening committee becomes stacked by Silber against Driscoll. The governor turned out not to be a fan of Driscoll, although Driscoll had thought he would be.

A decision by the state board would take six votes out of nine to name a commissioner. Several votes at 5 to 4 for Driscoll were not enough. The battle went on publicly for several weeks. There were small meetings before the meetings and meetings after the meetings.

Interestingly the student member's resolve and support for Driscoll almost cost him the job. The governor actively and openly engaged in lobbying for Jim Peyser, the former state board member who had resigned to apply for the commissioner's job.

After a series of private meetings with various individuals and groups, Charlie Baker, a future governor, laid out a solution for the current governor, Paul Cellucci.

This plan involved Cellucci asking for the chairman of the state board of education John Silber to resign to be replaced by Jim Peyser who would then recommend Driscoll for the commissioner's role. While the process went on for months, the solution was enacted in a manner of hours.

The next key question was whether Driscoll and Peyser could get along. The first board meeting did not go well until another board member took the two of them aside and told them to work out their differences BEFORE the board meetings.

Driscoll had hired an executive coach who eventually brought the two of them together in a workable compromise. Once these two gentlemen learned how to play nice, the implementation of the Education Reform Act moved forward in a steady fashion. According to Driscoll, "… education reform is about addition and multiplication, not subtraction and division."

Readers will not find much in the way of curriculum content or instructional methods. The emphasis is upon the process of political reform, rather than pedagogy. Driscoll also does not address the socioeconomic, gender, or racial gaps, which became obvious with the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) testing due to the Federal No Child Left Behind. The inequity of results would have been a fascinating addition as it would have exposed underperformance and what the state tried to do to encourage the closing of equity gaps.

The drama of educational politics makes for interesting reading. Driscoll's reflections provide some depth to the analysis for readers. His advice to other states is straightforward:

1. Find legislative and policy solutions for the controversial issues and stick with them.

2. Strike the grand bargain by providing tools and insisting upon accountability.

3. Find the balance between supporting the strengths of the system and making needed changes.

4. Encouraging input and focusing on students.

In the last chapter Driscoll speculates about what he envisions happening in education over the next five years. Somehow, he fails to mention that it took over 15 years for education reform to occur in Massachusetts.

Those who consider themselves to be educational reformers should read this book to gain more insights into the real and uneven process of reform. Superintendents and board members at both the state and local levels will find parallels with their own experiences and something upon which to reflect. Educational historians can add this book to their libraries.

Lastly, readers who enjoy good stories and biographies will find this piece to be worth reading.

## Reviewer Biography

Art Stellar is vice-president of the National Education Foundation and CyberLearning and a consultant for Cenergistic, an energy conservation company. In these roles he assists superintendents acquire and conserve funds and resources. Stellar has received three of AASA's top awards: "Distinguished Service Award," "Dr. Effie Jones Humanitarian Award" for promoting diversity and reducing equity gaps and "Leadership for Learning" for advancing student achievement and reducing gaps between student subgroups. He has served as superintendent for 25 years and became a life member of AASA in 1972. The Horace Mann League elected him president, as did ASCD and the North American Chapter of the International Society for Curriculum and Instruction. The New York State PTA elected him vice-president. E-mail: artstellar@yahoo.com

*Commitment and Common Sense* is written by David Driscoll. It is published by Harvard Education Press, Cambridge, MA, 2017, 209 pages, softcover, $30.

## Mission and Scope, Copyright, Privacy, Ethics, Upcoming Themes, Author Guidelines, Submissions, Publication Rates & Publication Timeline

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4.  Teacher Quality (e.g., hiring, assessment, evaluation, development, and compensation of teachers)
5.  School Administrator Quality (e.g., hiring, preparation, assessment, evaluation, development, and compensation of principals and other school administrators)
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11. School reform policies
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**Length of manuscripts should be as follows:** Research and evidence-based practice articles between 2,800 and 4,800 words; commentaries between 1,600 and 3,800 words; book and media reviews between 400 and 800 words. Articles, commentaries, book and media reviews, citations and references are to follow the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*, latest edition. Permission to use previously copyrighted materials is the responsibility of the author, not the *AASA Journal of Scholarship and Practice*.

**Cover page checklist:**
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9. e-mail address
10. 120-word abstract that conforms to APA style
11. six to eight key words that reflect the essence of the submission; and
12. 40-word biographical sketch
13. identify if the submission is to be considered original research, evidence-based practice article, commentary, or book review

**Please** do not submit with headers or footers with page numbers. Rather than use footnotes, it is preferred authors embed footnote content in the body of the article. Articles are to be submitted to the editor by e-mail as an electronic attachment in Microsoft Word, Times New Roman, 12 Font.

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## Book Review Guidelines
Book review guidelines should adhere to the author guidelines as found above. The format of the book review is to include the following:
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- Author
- Publisher, city, state, year, # of pages, price
- Name and affiliation of reviewer
- Contact information for reviewer: address, city, state, zip code, e-mail address, telephone and fax
- Reviewer biography
- Date of submission

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## Publication Timeline

| Issue | Deadline to Submit Articles | Notification to Authors of Editorial Review Board Decisions | To AASA for Formatting and Editing | Issue Available on AASA website |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Spring** | October 1 | January 1 | February 15 | April 1 |
| **Summer** | February 1 | April 1 | May 15 | July1 |
| **Fall** | May 1 | July 1 | August 15 | October 1 |
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Contributors will be notified of editorial board decisions within eight weeks of receipt of papers at the editorial office. Articles to be returned must be accompanied by a postage-paid, self-addressed envelope.

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✓ **Upcoming AASA Events**

**Legislative Advocacy Conference**, July 10-12, 2018, Hyatt Regency on Capitol Hill, Washington, DC

**Digital Consortium**, July 22-24, Charlotte, NC

**Principal Supervisor Academy**, July 23-27, CEL University of Washington, Alexandria Va.

**Urban Superintendents Academy**, kick-off Howard University, August 24-25, 2018, Alexandria, Va.; kick-off Univ. of Southern California, Oct. 5-6, 2018, Los Angles, Calif. See http://bit.ly/urbansupes

**AASA Aspiring Superintendents Academy** (R), July 2019-May 2020

**AASA National Superintendent Certification Program** (R) Midwest 2021 Cohort, Feb.11-13, 2019, Stephen Murley, Los Angeles, Calif.

**AASA 2019 National Conference on Education**, Feb. 14-16, 2019, Los Angeles, Calif.