

Superintendent Stress: Identifying the Causes and Learning to Cope

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Abstract

The superintendent position comes with a variety of challenges that may have devastating effects on the superintendent and his or her family. This quantitative study surveyed superintendents across a rural state in the Midwest and examined the perceived stressors that superintendents and their families encountered and what coping methods they used to alleviate that stress. The study also examined if any demographic differences contributed to higher or lower levels of stress. The study found a lack of camaraderie and peer-to-peer support in the superintendent profession. Although the stress is high for many superintendents, some have found a method for coping with the stressors of the position.

Key Words

superintendent stress, coping with stress, rural school leadership

As the role of the superintendent continues to evolve and the demands of the position continue to grow, understanding how stress develops in the workplace and what superintendents do to alleviate the negative effects of stress is vital to the retention of superintendents and maintaining healthy relationships with their families, particularly in rural schools.

Although many studies have been conducted with a wide range of findings, job-related stress continues to be a major hurdle for many educators and finding ways to alleviate this problem has gained recent attention in the work-life movement (Mahfouz, 2018; Platsidou & Agaliotis, 2008; Wells & Klocko, 2018). When stress and burnout are not addressed, there is a wide range of negative consequences that may take place. Platsidou and Agaliotis (2008) claim that stress and burnout “have been linked to dissatisfaction with the job and to negative personal and professional consequences (i.e. depression, impaired occupational functioning), not only for the teachers themselves but also their families, students and schools” (p. 61).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to identify the causes of perceived superintendent stress and to determine how superintendents are learning to cope with this stress. With stress being evoked from so many areas, it is vital for superintendents to address stress and its negative consequences on their health and on the wellbeing of their families, as well as finding ways to successfully regulate and cope with stress.

This study has the potential to provide superintendents with information that would allow them to stay in the educational system

and avoid the pitfalls and the burnout that so many professional educators face. It also has the potential to provide superintendents the opportunity to understand the negative effects that stress has on their personal wellbeing, career, and family.

Research Questions

The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. Which of the following aspects of the superintendency do public school superintendents perceive to cause the most stress to themselves?
 - a. High self-expectations
 - b. Evening activities
 - c. Increased paperwork and reporting
 - d. Collective bargaining
 - e. Role ambiguity
 - f. Constraints of board policy

2. Which of the following aspects of the superintendency do public school superintendents perceive to cause the most stress to their spouse (if applicable) and children (if applicable)?
 - a. Spillover
 - b. Consequence on spouse or significant other
 - c. Consequence on children
 - d. Consequence on extended family
 - e. Led to demise of a relationship

3. What differences exist in public school superintendents’ perception of stress based on their demographics of age, school size, and years as superintendent?

4. What are the coping methods that public school superintendents use to alleviate stress for themselves?

Significance of the Study

As health care costs continue to increase and the need for decreased expenses in all educational settings becomes the focus of many state and federal programs, states are turning to employee wellness as an answer for some of these reductions. With more than 200 billion dollars lost to absenteeism, decreased productivity, employee turnover, workers' compensation, medical insurance increases, and other stress-related expenses (Maxon, 1999), it is vital that employers focus on ways to eliminate stress in their workplace. Schulte et al. (2015) gave more information on the devastating effects that are taking place by stating, "the direct and indirect costs of chronic disease exceed one-trillion dollars annually" (p. 31). By 2050, chronic disease will be a six-trillion-dollar plight in the United States (Schulte et al. 2015).

Spillover Theory

The spillover theory states that a worker's experiences on the job will often carry over into his or her non-work experiences, including marriage, family relations, and lifestyle choices (Crouter, Huston, & Robbins, 1983; Larson, Wilson, & Beley, 1994; Piotrkowski, 1979; Pleck, Staines, & Lang, 1980; Rousseau, 1978; Staines, 1980). This "spillover" can often permeate into the superintendents' personal lives, leaving mental and emotional needs that are not addressed (Crouter et al. 1983; Larson et al. 1994; Piotrkowski, 1979; Pleck et al., 1980; Rousseau, 1978; Staines, 1980). Chang, McDonald, and Burton (2010) explained, "Affective well-being likely prompts employees' proclivity to cross the boundary between work and non-work activities, causing the issue of work-family spillover" (p. 503).

Population

The population included all K-12 public education superintendents in a rural state in the Midwest. Email addresses were obtained from the superintendents' list server hosted by the state's department of education. There are 244 districts being led by 240 superintendents, and all superintendents were invited to complete the survey.

Instrumentation

The survey was developed by studying the survey instrument designed by Dr. Tim Peterson and adapted with his permission. Dr. Peterson utilized survey items that were based on a list of stress-related factors established by Kowalski (1999). A panel of four superintendents also helped develop relevant questions for the survey. The survey instrument (Appendix A) contained 30 items that enabled participating superintendents to share their opinions regarding stress and strategies for coping with stress.

Research Limitations

There are research limitations to this study. First, the design of this study may be an overly simple view of reality. The results of the survey were analyzed as a whole and do not have real significance on their own. The researchers in this study assumed the superintendents would answer truthfully. Moreover, this study was completed with a defined population and not a population sample. Findings should not be generalized to non-respondents in the defined population or to superintendents in other states. Another limitation pertains to the difficulty of determining the extent to which stress is attributable to a position (as opposed to individual and environmental variables).

Data Collection

Once IRB approval was granted, an email containing the cover letter explained the

purpose of the study as well as containing a link to the online survey, was sent to all public school superintendents in a Midwest state in October 2017. A follow-up email was sent approximately two weeks later. Data collection ended approximately four weeks following the initial email was sent. The Department of Education in the Midwestern state in this study provided the list of emails for all superintendents, yet all responses were anonymous. Following the data collection, a panel of superintendents met to discuss the findings of the study.

Data Analysis

A quantitative analysis was used in this study, and the analysis was completed by the researchers in this study. The analysis used percentages, means, and standard deviations, where a $p < .05$ was used as the level of statistical significance.

A focus group consisting of five superintendents who had not taken the survey met to discuss the findings of the survey as well as to give input in regard to perceived stress and the coping methods used. Convenience sampling was used to identify the five superintendents in the focus group.

There were a number of topics discussed during the session, but a few of the main stressors focused on the legislative concerns in the state as well as increased paperwork and deadlines, management of staff and athletics. One superintendent reported, “I had a stroke last year that I attribute to the stress of the job. Another superintendent stated, “Mine is often self-induced. I want the greatest school I can have, and I often sacrifice other things in that pursuit. I have to get better at balancing my life.

Another stated, “We need to have ways to deal with stress or else we can’t stay in the

job for long. I ran a half marathon my second year on the job.

Demographics

The web-based survey was sent to superintendents at 244 public schools across a rural state in the Midwest. A total of 109 respondents started the survey. Out of the total number of respondents, 102 individuals completed the entire survey for a 45% response rate.

The participants in the survey were split unevenly between male and female with predominately male responses ($n=83$, 80.58%) respondents. Sixty percent of female superintendents responded compared to 40% of male superintendents.

A majority of the participants reported their marital status as married ($n=93$, 91.18%) and the minority of the sample reporting in committed relationships ($n=1$, 0.98%). A majority of the participants reported they had been in their relationship for 10+ years ($n=86$, 83.50%) and the minority of the sample reporting was not applicable ($n=6$, 5.83%). The majority of respondents reported that they had not been divorced ($n=81$, 79.41%) and 21 responded that they had been divorced (20.59%). The majority of the respondents were between the ages of 41 and 54 (44.66%), 42 were 55 or older (40.78%), 15 were between the ages of 30 and 40 (14.56%) and there were no respondents under the age of 30.

The majority of participants reported the size of their district to be less than 500 students in their district ($n=66$, 64.71%), while 21 reported that they had 501 to 1000 students in their district (20.59%), and 15 reported that their district student population was more than 1000 students (14.71%). Table 1 presents the number and percentage of participants according to district student enrollment.

Table 1

Size of District

Size of District	<i>n</i>	<i>Valid Percent</i>
Less than 500 Students	66	64.71
501 to 1000 Students	21	20.59
More than 1000 Students	15	14.71

The majority of respondents reported that there were no children living at home ($n=49$, 48.04%), while the minority of the sample was reported as having 4 or more

children ($n=4$, 3.92%). Table 2 presents the number and percentage of participants according to the number of children living at home.

Table 2

Children at Home

Children at Home	<i>n</i>	<i>Valid Percent</i>
No Children	49	48.04
1-2 Children	31	30.39
3-4 Children	18	17.65
More than 4 Children	4	3.92

Findings

Superintendent and family stress

The survey consisted of seven Likert scale questions which rated the factors that lead to superintendent and family stress. The next two questions of the survey asked a question regarding the health-related illnesses that superintendents currently have or have had in the past. The second section of the survey asked nine questions that rated the coping methods used to reduce stress for superintendents and their families. The last question of this section was an open-ended question regarding hobbies in which they participate.

Perceived superintendent stressors

Research question one asked which aspects of the superintendency do public school superintendents perceive to cause the most stress to themselves. This section of survey questions asked participants what level of consequence they felt was appropriate for each question. Participants answered each question on a five-point Likert scale (1=*Having no Consequence*; 5=*Having major Consequences*). The scale was interpreted as follows: 1.0-1.5 *No Consequence*; 1.6-2.4 *Minimal Consequences*; 2.5-3.2 *Average Consequences*; 3.3-4.2 *Moderate Consequence*; 4.3 to 5.0 *Major Consequences*.

The top two factors that superintendents identified as the most stressful were high self-expectations ($M = 3.97$, $SD = 0.92$) and evening activities ($M = 3.89$, $SD = 0.90$). Both were perceived as average consequences. The least important factors that superintendents identified were role ambiguity ($M = 2.57$, $SD = 1.17$) and constraints of board policy ($M = 2.29$, $SD = 0.95$). Both were perceived as minimal consequences. Table 3 depicts the composite mean of job-related duties that cause stress.

Superintendents also feel an increase in paperwork and reporting ($M = 3.82$, $SD = 0.83$) was attributed to increases in stress. An increase in paperwork and reporting were also referenced in the open-ended responses as well as the focus group as being associated with increases in stress.

Regarding the open-ended responses that superintendents feel are the greatest stressors, the most frequent responses ($n = 24$) were categorized as budget concerns. Superintendents ($n = 19$) also indicated state and federal changes and paperwork as another stressor. The third most frequently identified stressor ($n = 15$) was the school board of education concerns or micromanagement.

Table 3

Job-related Duties that Cause Stress

Factor	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
High self-expectations	109	3.97	0.92
Evening activities	109	3.89	0.90
Increased paperwork and reporting	109	3.82	0.83
Collective bargaining	109	2.59	0.91
Role ambiguity	109	2.57	1.17
Constraints of board policy	109	2.29	0.95

Question 29 was an open-ended question asking what the superintendent saw as the greatest stressor. The superintendent focus group also found these changes stressful.

One superintendent stated, “There is more paperwork and reporting than there was in the past. Compared to the past, paperwork was a zero compared to ... I can’t even explain how much paperwork there is, especially over the summer.

The third most frequently identified aspect ($n = 7$) was legislative concerns and the lack of support that the legislation shows education. The superintendent focus group also discussed the negative effect that the legislature is having on schools: “When dealing with the legislature, you are just dealing with the unknown. They are making policy when they don’t even understand education.”

Perceived family consequences of stress

Research question two asked what level stress has had an impact on the superintendents’ family. This section of survey questions asked participants what level of consequence they felt stress had on their family.

Participants answered each question on a five-point Likert scale (1=*Having no Consequence*; 5=*Having major Consequences*). The scale was interpreted as follows: 1.0-1.5 *No Consequence*; 1.6-2.4 *Minimal Consequences*; 2.5-3.2 *Average Consequences*; 3.3-4.2 *Moderate Consequence*; 4.3 to 5.0 *Major Consequences*.

The top two factors that superintendents identified as the most significant outcomes of job stress spilled over to family life ($M = 3.40$, $SD = 1.05$) which superintendents perceived as having average consequences, and consequence

on a spouse or significant other ($M = 3.12$, $SD = 1.19$). The least important factors that superintendents identified as outcomes were consequences on extended family ($M = 2.27$,

$SD = 1.18$) and led to demise of a relationship ($M = 1.96$, $SD = 1.23$). Table 4 depicts the composite mean of the impact of stress on the family.

Table 4

Impact of Stress on the Family

Factor	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Spillover	104	3.40	1.05
Consequence on spouse or significant other	109	3.12	1.19
Consequence on children	108	2.87	1.13
Consequence on extended family	104	2.27	1.18
Led to demise of a relationship	106	1.96	1.23

Demographic impact on perceived stress

A one-way ANOVA was conducted to determine if there was a significant difference in superintendent stress based on their demographics of marital status, and years in a relationship. There was no significant difference based on years in a relationship or the marital status. An independent sample t-test was conducted to determine the effect of gender on perceived stressors. There was no significant difference found for superintendents based on gender.

There was a significant difference based on the size of the school and the stress that budget constraints have on superintendents, $F(2, 99) = 4.63$, $p = .010$, based on the size of school district. School superintendents in districts with fewer than 500 students felt more stress ($M = 4.63$) than districts with more than 1,000 students ($M = 2.95$). Table 5 depicts the difference of perceived stressors for superintendents between the size of the school and budget constraints. The three remaining

stress factors proved to be significantly insignificant, yet many superintendents

believed they would be considered as stress inducers.

Table 5

Stress Factors and Size of School

Factor	<i>M</i> <500	<i>M</i> 501-1000	<i>M</i> >1000	<i>F</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
Budget Constraints	2.95 ^C	3.13 ^C	4.63 ^A	4.788	2, 99	.010*
Increased amounts of paperwork and reporting	4.11	4.00	3.64	2.570	2, 99	.082
Collective bargaining	2.68	2.68	2.50	.174	2, 99	.841
Lack of support from the board of education	2.53	2.71	2.55	.141	2, 99	.869

*Denotes significant statistical difference

A=<500

B=501-1000

C=>1000

There was a significant difference based on the age of the superintendent and the stress that accountability changes at the state and federal level has on superintendents, $F(2, 98) = 3.941$, $p = .023$, based on the age of the superintendent. School district superintendents that were over the age of 55 felt less stress

when dealing with accountability changes at the state and federal level ($M = 2.93$) compared to 30 to 40-year olds ($M = 4.37$). Table 6 depicts the composite mean of perceived stressors for superintendents between age groups.

Table 6

Stress Factors and Age

Factor	<i>M</i> 30-40	<i>M</i> 41-54	<i>M</i> 55+	<i>F</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
Accountability changes at the state and federal level	2.93 ^C	3.12	4.37 ^A	3.941	2, 98	.023*
Special education issues	2.25	3.63	3.73	2.784	2, 99	.067
Role Ambiguity	2.80	2.34	2.74	0.331	2, 100	.719
Micromanagement from the board of education	3.15	2.77	2.95	0.102	2, 99	.903

*Denotes significant statistical difference

A=30-40

B=41-54

C=55+

A one-way ANOVA was also conducted to determine if superintendents perceive stressors differently based on the number of children that were living at home. There was a significant difference based on the number of children living at home when looking at increased amounts of paperwork and reporting, $F(3, 98) = 4.02, p = .024$. Superintendents with no children felt increases in paperwork and reporting, increased stress ($M = 4.02$), while superintendents with 3-4 children at home felt significantly less stress in regard to paperwork and reporting ($M = 3.39$).

There was also a significant difference based on the stress reported for lack of support from the board of education, $F(3, 98) = 2.96, p = .048$. Superintendents with no children felt increased stress ($M = 2.96$) from the lack of support from the board of education, while superintendents with 3 to 4 children felt less stress ($M = 2.00$). The results indicate that the number of children living at home is a factor in the perceived stressors of superintendents. Table 7 depicts the composite mean of perceived stressors for superintendents and the number of children living at home.

Table 7

Stress Factors and Children Living at Home

Factor	<i>M</i> <i>0</i>	<i>M</i> <i>1-2</i>	<i>M</i> <i>3-4</i>	<i>M</i> <i>5+</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
Increased amounts of paperwork	4.02 ^C	3.84	3.39 ^A	4.00	2.840	3, 98	.024*
Lack of support from the board of education	2.96 ^C	2.58	2.00 ^A	3.00	2.449	3, 98	.048*
Lack of public support	3.25	3.39	2.72	2.25	2.424	3, 97	.070
Micromanagement	3.18	2.93	2.78	3.50	.496	3, 97	.686

*Denotes significant statistical difference

A=0

B=1-2

C=3-4

D=5+

Coping Results

There were relatively even responses from how many alcoholic drinks per week were consumed. Thirty-five reported that they had between 1-3 alcoholic drinks per week (33.98%), while 29 reported between 4-6

(28.16%), 16 reported 7 or more drinks (15.53%), and 23 reported that they did not consume alcohol (22.33%). Table 8 presents the number and percentage of participants according to alcoholic drinks consumed per week.

Table 8

Alcohol Drinks Consumed Per Week

Alcohol Consumed	<i>n</i>	<i>Valid Percent</i>
1-3	35	33.98
4-6	29	28.16
7+	16	15.53
I Do Not Drink	23	22.33

The majority of participants ($n=93$, 92.08%) responded that they did not smoke or use tobacco, while 8 responded that they did smoke

or use tobacco (7.92%). Table 9 presents the number and percentage of participants according to tobacco use.

Table 9

Tobacco Use

Tobacco Use	<i>n</i>	<i>Valid Percent</i>
Yes	8	7.92
No	93	92.08

Superintendent coping methods

The top two subfactors that superintendents perceived as most useful to alleviate stress were humor ($M = 3.59$, $SD = 1.02$) and small, daily to-do lists ($M = 3.50$, $SD = 1.04$). The least

important subfactors that participants identified were taking time off ($M = 2.15$, $SD = 0.90$) and talking with a supervisor ($M = 2.04$, $SD = 0.92$). Table 10 depicts the composite mean of coping methods for superintendents.

Table 10

Coping Methods

Factor	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Humor	103	3.59	1.02
To-do lists	102	3.50	1.04
Get up and move	103	3.49	0.98
Regular breaks	104	2.28	1.11
Time off	103	2.15	0.90
Talk with supervisor	103	2.04	0.92

The top two subfactors that superintendents perceived as the most useful people to go to alleviate stress were family ($M = 3.54$, $SD = 1.11$) and peers ($M = 3.20$, $SD = 0.92$). The least important subfactors that

participants identified were church ($M = 2.54$, $SD = 1.13$) and talking with a counselor ($M = 1.29$, $SD = 0.62$). Table 11 depicts the composite mean of people superintendents turn to for help.

Table 11

People Superintendents Turn to for Help

Factor	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Family	103	3.54	1.11
Peers	103	3.20	0.92
Nobody	99	2.79	1.35
Friends	103	2.62	1.27
Church	103	2.54	1.13
Counselor	102	1.29	0.62

Research question four determined which coping methods used to alleviate stress for superintendents. Regarding the coping methods superintendents use to alleviate stress, the most frequent response ($n = 17$) was relying on a peer group to cope with stress. The focus group stated, “Networking is key. Grabbing a peer and going and having a beer is essential. Superintendents ($n = 15$) indicated exercise as the method they used to alleviate stress.

The third most frequently identified alleviator of stress ($n = 10$) was relying on their family and adding family time to their daily lives. One participant of the focus group stated, “Finding a balance is important. As I get older, I go when I need to go. If my kid is playing a basketball game at 2:00 on a Friday, I am going. They are my priority. Question 30 was an open-ended question asking what the superintendent saw as the greatest method to alleviate stress.

Focus group

A focus group consisting of five superintendents who had not taken the survey met to discuss the findings of the survey as well as to give input in regard to perceived stress and the coping methods used. There were a number of topics discussed during the session, but a few of the main stressors focused on the legislative concerns in the state as well as increased paperwork and deadlines, management of staff and athletics.

One superintendent reported, “Had a stroke last year that I attribute to the stress of the job. Another superintendent stated, “Mine is often self-induced. I want the greatest school I can have, and I often sacrifice other things in that pursuit. I have to get better at balancing my life. Another stated, “We need to have ways to deal with stress or else we can’t stay in the job for long. I ran a half marathon my second year on the job. I knew I had three

choices: 1. Quit my job, 2. Plan to die young, or 3. Figure out a way to deal with the stress. Running the half marathon was my way of choosing #3.

The mental health of students was also a topic that received a large amount of attention during the focus group. Superintendents in the group felt that many of the mental health issues that schools are seeing are due to the increased demands on students by their schools, teachers, and parents. This stress “ultimately puts pressure on students, which can increase mental health issues. One superintendent stated, “There is more paperwork and reporting than there was in the past. This stress filters down through schools, staff, and eventually reaches the students. One member of the focus group went on to explain “parents and activities put pressure on kids that can lead to mental issues.”

Other superintendents found spending quality time with family was the key to alleviating stress and creating a positive work-to-life balance: “Time with family and allowing myself to take time away. Finding that balance improves relationships at home. Open communication at home can be vital to finding ways to alleviate stress and creating a healthy work-life balance. “My wife telling me to pull my head out of my rear end! You have to have someone that you love to understand (the time commitment), but at the same time not accept it.”

Discussion

This study has examined what superintendents perceive is causing stress for themselves and their families, as well as if any certain demographic characteristic is at more risk for increased levels of stress. The study also brought to light the coping methods they use to alleviate that stress. One superintendent reported, “one of the most effective tools I have

found is connecting with peers in the same position and visiting about how they are handling the stress. As the role of the educational leader changes, so too must their ability to stay connected and supported in this high-stress career (Daresh, 2002).

Although stress has negative effects on superintendents, the data shows in this study that most superintendents are under mild amounts of stress. Most of the superintendents have found ways to manage the stress that their position creates. The open-ended responses also show that superintendents rely heavily on exercise and their peers to alleviate work-related stress. Most superintendents discussed finding balance in their lives but did not say how they achieved this balance.

There are a number of superintendents who found the superintendent position very stressful. Holton, Barry, and Chaney (2016) stated, “35% (employees) say that their job is harming their physical or emotional well-being” (p. 300). After analyzing the data, it is apparent that there are superintendents in need of assistance, guidance, or maybe just someone they rely upon. It is easy for superintendents to become isolated from others because of their position, but it is a necessity that they find an outlet for their concerns and issues.

When trying to achieve that work-to-life balance, this study showed most superintendents turn to their peers for support. Data or other researchers have revealed that most who are struggling with stress or difficult times at work will turn to their professional colleagues for support. Finding those support groups is key to overcoming stress. This type of support can be provided by friendship, peer relations, or family services such as marital enrichment or therapy (Larson, Wilson, & Beley, 2001).

Most superintendents expressed using exercise as a tool to alleviate stress. Superintendents consistently stated that daily exercise was a key to alleviating stress and that without exercise, finding the balance between life and work would be difficult: “Exercise. After one extremely stressful meeting last year, I took two hours of personal time to go workout on my bike during the school day. I came back with a very different physical feel and mental outlook.”

Although much of the results found in this survey would be considered minimal or irrelevant, the open-ended responses and the focus group paint a different picture. Most superintendents reported that they feel that their stress is a day-to-day issue.

Some days might have very little stress, while others would be deemed extremely stressful. There were inconsistencies throughout the open-ended responses that make me question if superintendents are just too proud to admit that they are struggling with stress or possibly just internalizing the stress and in return, creating more health-related issues. Finding ways to control the external factors that are causing stress for

superintendents and increasing work requirements needs to be addressed at the state and federal levels.

It is easy to look at a study of this nature and come away from it with the idea that the superintendent position is a pretty easy job. Unfortunately, some superintendents may be their own worst enemies.

The message is clear that superintendents are frustrated with demands of the superintendent position, yet when asked in a survey, superintendents tended to minimize their struggles. When we are struggling with issues, superintendents turn toward peers and run away from certified mental health professionals.

As one of the superintendents in this rural state in the Midwest, I believe it is up to us to find ways that we can not only support one another but to encourage each other to get professional help when it is needed. It is the responsibility of the 240 superintendents in the state to create opportunities and support systems for all the superintendents in the state where guidance and support can be offered.

Conclusions

The following conclusions emerged from the findings of the research:

1. Superintendents place a high level of expectations on themselves that directly relates to perceived increased stress for their positions.
2. Smaller school district superintendents see budget constraints as a source of perceived stress.
3. Family and peer support are vital for stress reduction for public school superintendents.
4. Superintendents with 3 to 4 children perceive a larger increase in stress caused by an increase of paperwork and reporting than do superintendents with no children.
5. Superintendents with 3 to 4 children perceive a larger increase in stress caused by the lack of support from the board of education than do superintendents with no children.
6. An increase in paperwork and reporting is seen as a cause of stress for most superintendents.
7. Most superintendents seem to have a positive work-to-life balance while others need assistance.

8. A thirty-to forty-year old perceives less stress regarding accountability changes at the state and federal level when compared to a superintendent who is 55 years old and older.
9. Using humor is a coping method that superintendents use to alleviate stress.
10. Controlling the external factors that are causing stress for superintendents and increasing work requirements needs to be addressed at the state and federal levels.

This research demonstrated that superintendents feel a mild amount of stress by the stressors with average consequences to themselves and their families. The data analysis showed the number of children living at home, age of the superintendent may have mild effects on perceived stress, but the open-ended responses show budgets and the lack of funding for public schools and working and dealing with the board of education can create stress for superintendents.

This study identified the frequency of using pre-identified coping mechanisms. Creating a network of peers where the superintendent can find camaraderie, support, and friendship is vital to the success alleviating stress.

Finding a healthy work-to-life balance is also important for the well-being of the superintendent and their family.

Most of the superintendents have stated they have found balance in their work and life, but there is an underlying message in the results. Programming and interventions need to be implemented to keep our leaders healthy and able to perform at high levels. Stress is a part of every job and finding how to balance the negative effects is essential.

Recommendations for Further Study

The researchers recommend that further research is conducted on critical aspects of work-related stress. More specifically, human differences (such as preexisting conditions, stress tolerance, and job satisfaction), differences in actual roles (board expectations, level of personal authority, support staff, and scope of responsibilities), and differences in district climate and culture (normative expectations, established practices). These variables may have influenced perceptions.

Author Biographies

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Appendix A

Superintendent Survey Instrument

Please answer each question to the best of your ability. This study will help determine the effects that stress has on public school superintendents and their families and what coping methods are most successful.

Factors that lead to stress

1. *The stress created by my position has had consequences on my significant other and or spouse? 1 having no consequence and 5 having major consequences.*

1 2 3 4 5

2. *The stress created by my position has had consequences on my children? 1 having no consequence and 5 having major consequences.*

1 2 3 4 5

3. *The stress created by my position has had consequences on my extended family? 1 having no consequence and 5 having major consequences.*

1 2 3 4 5

4. *The stress created by my position has had consequences on my health? 1 having no consequence and 5 having major consequences.*

1 2 3 4 5

5. *Please rate how stressful each of the following factors is from no stress to very stressful.*

	Not stressful to very stressful				
Time commitment away from family	1	2	3	4	5
Evening activities	1	2	3	4	5
Accountability changes at the state and federal levels	1	2	3	4	5
Increased accountability for teachers and principals	1	2	3	4	5
Increased amounts of paperwork and reporting	1	2	3	4	5
Budget constraints	1	2	3	4	5
Lack of support from the public	1	2	3	4	5

Lack of support from the board of education	1	2	3	4	5
Micromanagement from the board of education	1	2	3	4	5
School improvement process	1	2	3	4	5
High self-expectations	1	2	3	4	5
Feeling of inadequacy	1	2	3	4	5
Fear of making mistakes	1	2	3	4	5
Role ambiguity	1	2	3	4	5
Collective bargaining	1	2	3	4	5
Increased number of meetings	1	2	3	4	5
Discipline issues with students and staff	1	2	3	4	5
Difficult parents	1	2	3	4	5
Difficult teachers or staff	1	2	3	4	5
Special education issues	1	2	3	4	5
Constraints of board policy	1	2	3	4	5

6. *To what extent did these stressors lead to the demise of a relationship with a significant other? **

1 2 3 4 5

7. *To what extent has stress kept you from going to work?*

1 2 3 4 5

Coping Methods of Stress

8. *The term “burnout” is “an intense reaction of anger, anxiety or tiredness,” and is often associated with stress. Has there been a time in your career that you felt burned out? Slide the ruler to the appropriate level. 1 never happened to 5 happening daily.*

1 2 3 4 5

9. The term "spillover" refers to bringing work-related issues or stress into your home life. Have there been times in your career where there was "spillover" from work to home? Slide the ruler to the appropriate level. 1 never happened to 5 happening daily.

1 2 3 4 5

10. When dealing with an insubordinate employee, what strategies do you use to control stress? Please mark the frequency of each coping method listed.

Establish boundaries	1	2	3	4	5
Deep breathing	1	2	3	4	5
Practice empathy	1	2	3	4	5
Look for humor in situation	1	2	3	4	5
Identify negative emotions	1	2	3	4	5

11. How do you reconnect with your family and cope with stress caused by the time commitments of your position? Please mark the frequency for each coping method listed.

Set aside leisure time	1	2	3	4	5
Plan family activities	1	2	3	4	5
Delegate responsibility	1	2	3	4	5
Eat healthy	1	2	3	4	5
Plan regular breaks	1	2	3	4	5
Meals with family	1	2	3	4	5
Take time off	1	2	3	4	5
Schedule Regular Exercise	1	2	3	4	5

12. Intrapersonal stress is stress that we place upon ourselves. What strategies are most successful for you when dealing with intrapersonal stress? Please mark the frequency for each coping method listed.

Set aside leisure time	1	2	3	4	5
Create small projects	1	2	3	4	5
Delegate responsibility	1	2	3	4	5
Eat healthy	1	2	3	4	5
Plan regular breaks	1	2	3	4	5

Prioritize dinner with family	1	2	3	4	5
Take time off or vacation	1	2	3	4	5
Regular exercise	1	2	3	4	5
Goal setting	1	2	3	4	5

13. Interpersonal stress is stress associated with dealing with others and trying to make them happy. What methods are most successful for you when dealing with interpersonal stress? Please mark the frequency for each coping method listed.

Establish boundaries	1	2	3	4	5
Deep breathing	1	2	3	4	5
Practice empathy	1	2	3	4	5
Look for humor in situation	1	2	3	4	5
Identify negative emotions	1	2	3	4	5
Delegate responsibility	1	2	3	4	5
Talk with supervisor	1	2	3	4	5

14. Environmental stress is stress caused by the work place environment. What strategies are most successful for you when dealing with environmental stress? Please mark the frequency for each coping method listed.

Set aside leisure time	1	2	3	4	5
Create small, daily to-do lists	1	2	3	4	5
Delegate responsibility	1	2	3	4	5
Eat healthy	1	2	3	4	5
Plan regular breaks	1	2	3	4	5
Prioritize dinner with family	1	2	3	4	5
Take time off	1	2	3	4	5
Get up and move	1	2	3	4	5
Set realistic goals	1	2	3	4	5

15. *Who do you turn to when stressful situations arise? Please mark the frequency for each coping method listed.*

Family	1	2	3	4	5
Church	1	2	3	4	5
Peers	1	2	3	4	5
Counselor	1	2	3	4	5
Friends	1	2	3	4	5
Nobody	1	2	3	4	5

16. *What hobbies would you consider yourself an active participant?*

Your answer

Personal and Demographic Data

17. *What is your gender?*

Male

Female

18. *What is your marital status?*

Single

Married

Divorced

Committed Relationship

19. *How long have you been in your relationship?*

0-4 years

5-9 years

10+ years

Not Applicable

20. *Have you ever been divorced?*

Yes

No

21. *What is your age?*

Less than 30

30 to 40

41 to 54

55+

22. *How many alcoholic drinks do you have per week?*

1-3

4-6

7+

I do not drink

23. *Do you smoke or use tobacco?*

Yes

No

24. *How many children do you have living at home or under age 18?*

No children

1-2 children

3-4 children

More than 4

25. *What is the current size of your district?*

Less than 500 students

501 to 1000 students

More than 1000

26. *Is there any other information that we should know about stress on administrators?*

Your answer

27. *What is the greatest stressor that you see as a superintendent?*

Your answer

28. *What is the most effective coping strategy that you use as a superintendent?*

Your answer

New federal rules will damage school districts — ultimately harming the students they serve

written and published in *The Hill*

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Executive Director
AASA. The School Superintendents Association
Alexandria, VA

Last December The School Superintendents Association (AASA) and scores of superintendents from across the country weighed in on a U.S. Department of Homeland Security regulation that would change the definition of who is considered a “public charge” for immigration purposes. We opposed this regulation because we believed it would harm the students and families in the school districts we lead.

I was an immigrant child and I am deeply concerned that the regulation will put the health and well-being of millions of immigrant children at risk. We’re also worried that the regulation would place a financial strain on districts to provide wraparound services for children and families. The families would be too afraid to access traditional federal social welfare programs because of potential repercussions stemming from the regulation.

Despite our efforts, the regulation has become final. What’s more, it comes at a time when school districts are welcoming children back to school. Prior to the decision, district leaders reported that immigrant families were proactively opting out of receiving Medicaid services in schools and also participating in the school’s food programs (even though the meal programs are not impacted by the regulation).

We will continue to inform families that accessing school-based Medicaid or school breakfast and lunch programs will not hurt the family’s or their children’s ability to get green cards. We’re finding that many families are skeptical and would rather not associate with any of the federal programs.

While the final regulation specifically exempts children who access school-based Medicaid from being penalized by the regulation, we anticipate many families will refuse to allow the school to bill Medicaid for healthcare for children who are entitled to receive these services. These children qualify for special education and schools offer broader healthcare services to those with unmet health needs.

We are also deeply worried about the nutritional impact this policy will have on children. Thankfully, the regulation does not touch the free and reduced lunch program in schools, but it does impact the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), which provides food-purchasing assistance.

What happens to kids if their parents lose access to subsidies that enable them to buy food? Hungry children are less able to learn and are more likely to miss school due to illness, repeat a grade, receive special education services, and/or receive mental health services. Districts can assist students by sending food home or operating their own food banks, but this will tack on additional expenditures that many school systems cannot afford.

The last and most dramatic impact this regulation could have on children would be the loss of their home. The regulation states that reliance on Section 8 housing vouchers will be held against an adult who is applying for lawful permanent resident status. Children whose parents forego housing vouchers may no longer have a place to live. When a child becomes homeless, federal law requires that districts take steps to ensure educational stability, including transporting children from shelters and other temporary housing to school.

Beyond the trauma that becoming homeless can cause for a child, districts will have to find funding to meet the actions that federal mandates require for homeless children, placing yet another financial burden on districts.

This regulation can be summarized as deeply flawed policy that will exacerbate the needs of our nation's youngest and most vulnerable. This rule will have a devastating impact on the children that we educate and the school district budgets we manage. We encourage Congress to act quickly to block the regulation's implementation.

Editor's Note

This opinion piece was published on 9/14/19, 12:30 p.m. EDT by The Hill. The views expressed by contributors are their own and not the view of The Hill.

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

The *AASA Journal of Scholarship and Practice* is a refereed, blind-reviewed, quarterly journal with a focus on research and evidence-based practice that advance the profession of education administration.

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The **scope** for submissions focuses on the intersection of five factors of school and district administration: (a) administrators, (b) teachers, (c) students, (d) subject matter, and (e) settings. The Journal encourages submissions that focus on the intersection of factors a-e. The Journal discourages submissions that focus only on personal reflections and opinions.

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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*.

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