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Table of Contents

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The unique relationship between research and practice is appreciated, recognizing the mutual benefit to those educators who conduct the research and seek out evidence-based practice and those educators whose responsibility it is to carry out the mission of school districts in the education of children.

Without the support of AASA and Kenneth Mitchell, the *AASA Journal of Scholarship and Practice* would not be possible.

A Transitional Moment in Contested Spaces

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We are in a transitional moment. Moving into 2021, after a year fraught with American loss of life and economic devastation for many, we await our vaccinations to stop a raging pandemic. After a contentious presidential election in a divided nation, many hope for movement towards unity.

Microcosms of our diverse communities, public schools are not immune to the social and political strife outside their doors. The conflicts infiltrate our systems from the school board meeting to the classroom, in contested spaces where educators contend with challenges to what is or is not taught: evolution, climate change, social justice, religion, and sexual development. The controversy is often the difference between the science of learning or accepted facts and confirmation bias, a tension exacerbated in the current transitional moment.

An underpinning of democracy, public schools are relied upon to provide factual and reliable content through evidence and objectivity. Perhaps more than ever before, the educator's mission to illuminate that which is empirical is being threatened. The leadership ideal that *veritas omnia vincit*—truth conquers all—is now met with political risk. Aside from having to muster the courage for this work, every district and school leader must master and model the skills for repudiating falsehoods, conspiracies, ignorance, and bigotry.

In *The Demon Haunted World: Science as a Candle in the Dark*, Carl Sagan wrote, "One of the saddest lessons of history is this: If we've been bamboozled long enough, we tend to reject any evidence of the bamboozle. We're no longer interested in finding out the truth. The bamboozle has captured us." Many emissaries of the truth, from Bruno and Copernicus to Darwin and Scopes—scientists and educators—condemned for seeking truth through inquiry, have been victimized by perpetrators of the bamboozle.

Along with renewed controversy about curricular veracity, the superintendent's responsibility to ensure student, staff, and community safety has become compromised when an "alternative truth" is an acceptable notion for some. Impeded by fogs of disinformation and blatant rejection of reputable science, superintendents are being whipsawed by requests to close or open schools, with or without

masks, fully or partially in person or remote, with parents and community members demanding personal liberties with assurances of health security.

In this contested moment of transition, superintendents strive to maintain academic integrity founded on truth to prepare students for life's apolitical realities. This issue is dedicated to helping with that work by examining the topics of superintendent transition; underrepresentation—gender and race; school board-superintendent relationships; and the superintendent's engagement of stakeholders.

Our contributors have examined the following:

- How do outgoing and incoming superintendents collaborate during the transition to ensure organizational continuity?

- How well are Latina superintendents represented in our nation's schools? Where are they most accepted and why?

- What are the most important leadership traits that superintendents and school board presidents seek in each other?

- How does superintendent "talk" relate to the effectiveness of their leadership and the engagement of stakeholders?

These questions, central to each of the studies in the issue, reflect themes of relationships and communication, elements connected to effective leadership in any moment of transition and strife.

References

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Latina Female Superintendents Securing Positions in Small Rural School Districts

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Abstract

Underrepresentation of women in the position of school superintendent has been identified as an equity issue in the field of education. National demographics show that approximately 73% of school superintendents are male as compared to only 27% female. Of these female superintendents, Latina and nonwhite female superintendents make up a small percentage of this group (Kominiak, 2016) and scarce in the literature. This research study revealed that Latina superintendents were attracted to small rural districts with a familial environment with high levels of parental and community involvement. They shared the perspective that small rural communities seemed to be more receptive to having a Latina superintendent than larger, more urban school districts. Gender discrimination occurred in some, but not all participant cases.

Key Words

superintendents, rural districts, Latinas, leadership, rural school settings, securing positions, hiring Latina superintendents

Women in the United States have struggled with gender inequality throughout the history of the United States. This is evident in the number of women who hold leadership positions, such as school superintendents (Robinson, Shakeshaft, Grogan & Newcomb, 2017; Maranto, Carroll, Cheng, & Teodoro, 2018). Published studies clearly indicate that women superintendents of schools are in the minority (Glass, 2000; Kominiak, 2016; Superville, 2017). Although there has been some progress in representation of women superintendents in recent years, they still make up only 27% of school superintendents (Kominiak, 2016) overall, and their tenure is 1.2 years shorter than most superintendents who are male (Bryant, 2018).

Aside from a few studies documenting the numbers and administrative positions attained by Latinas, limited research is available concerning other aspects of this specific group's experiences in educational administration (Brunner, 1999). Research on Latina superintendents remains scarce in the literature (Mendez-Morse, 2000). Mendez-Morse (2000) explains the lack of Latina superintendents does not mean they do not exist. Rather, "it indicates exclusion and negates the contributions of Latina leaders" (p. 584).

In 2008, women earned more degrees than males within each racial/ethnic group; however, women are not equally represented in the male-dominated roles of school administration (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2010, p. vi; Bryant, 2018). Women are enrolled in educational leadership courses and superintendent certification programs, yet they are not equally represented in public school leadership. This could also be attributed to a form of bias as men move from a principal to the superintendent more often than women

(Garn & Brown, 2008; Kominiak, 2016; Maranto, Carroll, Cheng, & Teodoro, 2018). This trend calls for the need to question why women do not hold more school superintendent positions than men (Brunner, 2000; Tallerico, 2000).

There is a shortage of research in the area of Latina school leaders, and an almost nonexistent body of research on Latina rural school district superintendents. In fact, as far back as 1991, only one case study about Latina superintendents had been published (Brunner, 2000). Since then, there has been very little change in the body of research about this topic (Manuel & Slate, 2003; Mendez-Morse, 2000; Quilantan & Menchaca-Ochoa, 2004; Franco, Ott, & Robles, 2011) with the exception of very few dissertation studies (Nieves, 2012; Sanchez-Portillo, 2012; Holguin, 2017).

This gap in the literature warrants a need for more research about the experiences of Latina superintendents and their tendency to choose to lead rural school districts. The more we know about the experiences of Latinas in leadership positions in education, the better. The cost of not knowing about these experiences is that we will never learn about the road they have taken—the smoother less easily traveled areas and the bumpy, difficult, and often treacherous parts. Young Latinas who aspire to be effective and transformative educational leaders will benefit from learning from their predecessors' stories as they have taken the road less traveled, yet we do not know much about their journeys.

In the 1980s, the Latino population was 14.5 million of the total US populations (National Center for Education Statistics, 2010) while in 2016, the Latino population had reached 57.5 million and were the second largest racial and ethnic group behind whites.

Moreover, Latinos of Mexican origin account for 36 million of the nation's Latinos population and have led the nation's demographic growth (Flores, 2017). Therefore, we also agree with Superville (2017) that when the majority of students that are served in a school district are Latinos, it is important that students see administrative leaders that reflect their own ethnic, racial, and/or gender group because this could inspire them to achieve high-level positions one day. We view this as an equity issue. The more exposure students of color have with successful adults who they can emulate, the more likely they will aspire to achieve academically, graduate, and then pursue higher education (Sanchez, Colon-Torres, Feuer, Roundfield, & Berardi, 2013; Figlio, 2017).

Thus, given the absence of research on Latina superintendents in rural schools, studies that describe their professional and lived experiences are extremely valuable. A study by Franco, Ott, & Robles (2011) illustrates self-reflective personal and professional leadership roots of Latina school leaders (p. 12). In their study, three Latina superintendents shared their stories about their childhoods, careers, and challenges they experienced along the way. Each participant discussed how their gender, culture, and search for quality education motivated them to succeed in their careers, stressing how their female identities were masked by their professional successes.

The superintendents in this study urged readers to follow their personal compasses and not to hesitate in demonstrating their leadership capacity (Franco et al., 2011). We believe that sharing the stories of Latina school leaders can lend confidence and provide important information for Latinas who aspire to become school superintendents. Their stories can help them to navigate the traditionally male-dominated school superintendent position.

Research Design
Purpose of the study

At the time this research took place, we noticed a trend in job procurement of Latina superintendents in our region. Most were securing positions in small rural school districts. We wanted to learn why that was the case. This question prompted us to draft a purpose for this research. The purpose of this study was to hear the stories of Latina superintendents in the Rio Grande Valley (RGV) in south Texas, who have secured superintendent positions in rural schools with high percentages of Latino students.

Specifically, we wanted to know why the superintendents in this study chose to apply in small, rural districts rather than larger, urban districts. The following questions guided our study:

1. Why did the Latina superintendents in this study decide to seek a superintendent position at a small, rural school district, rather than a larger district?

2. To what extent have the Latina superintendents in this study felt they have experienced discrimination?

Theoretical framework

This qualitative study drew from three theoretical orientations (Patton, 1990) including Latina/o critical race theory (LatCrit), *testimonios*, and constructivism. *LatCrit* is an approach to understand how Latinas have been marginalized, yet resilient, and oppressed, yet successful despite inequities they have confronted (Delgado-Bernal, Burciaga, & Carmona, 2012). *Testimonios* is another aspect of critical race theory and focuses on stories that are seldom expressed or captured (Yosso, Villalpando, Delgado-Bernal, & Solorzano, 2001).

These stories and experiences, or *testimonios,* are the voices of the struggles, pain, sacrifices, silencing, and marginalization that Latinas have encountered (Anzaldua, 1990; Guajardo, Guajardo, & Casaperalta, 2008; Latina Feminist Group, 2001; Lopez & Davalos, 2009). Finally, a *constructivist* framework aims to discover and describe ontological and epistemological lived experiences (Creswell, 2003, 2007). Creswell (2003, 2007) posits that the constructivist philosophical assumption is closest aligned for qualitative research, which aims to construct realities based on the participants' experiences, or ontology. aims to discover and describe ontological and epistemological lived experiences.

Methodology
We employed a case study methodological approach for this study. The case study methodological approach involves the study of an issue through specific cases and emphasizes exploration and description. Case studies (Yin, 2009) arise out of the desire to understand complex social phenomena. Skrla (2000) emphasizes "particularization" as opposed to generalization as an objective ideal as this type of qualitative research enables the readers to appreciate the uniqueness and complexity of a case (p. 301). Given the purpose of this study and the research questions that guided us, qualitative case study methodology was optimal in bringing light to the experiences of these Latina rural school district superintendents.

Purposeful sampling was used to select three case study participants. All were Latina superintendents who were currently employed by a rural school district in the RGV. Surveys, semi-structured interviews (see Appendix A), participant observations, and document analyses were used to develop a thick

description of multiple cases (Creswell, 2007; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Geertz, 1973).

The interviews offered opportunities for participants to tell their stories, or *testimonios.* They were audio-recorded, transcribed, and analyzed for emergent codes and themes. In addition, a brief electronic survey was developed and emailed to the participants in order to collect their schools' demographic data. Participant observation data and documents provided contextual information that was used to describe the three school districts. These multiple sources of data were coded and used to craft ethnographic portraits of each participant. Triangulation by method and member checks were conducted in order to achieve trustworthiness of these data (Creswell, 2007; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

The following pseudonyms were used to describe school districts and participants: 1) Palm Valley School District led by Ms. Monica Sanchez, 2) South Lakes School District led by Ms. Juanita Martinez, and 3) Twin Springs Independent School District led by Ms. Sonia Tello. In this study, rural districts had an enrollment of less than 300 students.

Data Analysis
In order to capture the participants' experiences as Latina school superintendents, we coded the data sets manually and used the constant comparative method (CCM) to compare data sets (Miles, Huberman & Saldana, 2014). We compared the participants' responses to the interview questions individually and collectively. This process of review, analysis, and comparison was done systematically with interview transcripts, participant-observation notes, and document analysis data sets to capture the essence of differences and similarities among the participants. The constant comparative method complimented

data triangulation to ensure data collection, review, and coding were streamlined and systematic. Several themes emerged in these data.

An example of the data analysis process for an emergent theme titled Familial Work Environment is below (see Figure 1).

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┌─────────────────────────┐      ┌─────────────────────────┐      ┌─────────────────────────┐
│  Participant Responses  │      │         Codes           │      │         Theme           │
│ Value all people; Serve │ ===> │ Professional family;    │ ===> │ Familial Work           │
│ as role models; Students│      │ Service to community;   │      │ Environment             │
│ & Community; Connect with│     │ Impact on lives; Open   │      │                         │
│ people; Career          │      │ communication; Treat    │      │                         │
│ Preparedness; and       │      │ like family; and Work   │      │                         │
│ Listening skills        │      │ politics                │      │                         │
└─────────────────────────┘      └─────────────────────────┘      └─────────────────────────┘
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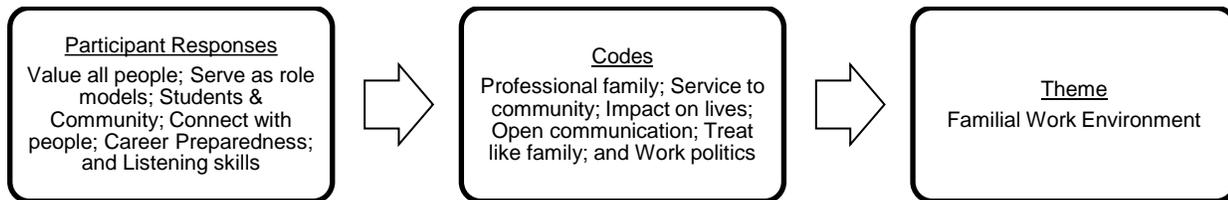
Figure 1. Example of data analysis process.

Interview questions generated considerable self-reflection among the women regarding the types of events in their life journeys that impacted them and influenced their decision to become educational leaders. Inevitably they recognized that supportive relationships with their respective family members, mentors, and community members were critical in their ascent to the superintendency. In order to organize the data in a way that was manageable and coherent, we crafted ethnographic portraits of each

participant that reflected their experiences as Latina superintendents in their own words. This manner of data display allowed their *testimonios* to be heard and analyzed through a cultural lens.

Results

Four general themes emerged from the data including: extended parental support, familial work environment, networks, and versatility (see Figure 2). We will expand on each theme in what follows.

Question Stems	Family and Personal Backgrounds	Personal and Professional values and beliefs	Educational Leadership	Gender, Race & Discrimination
Participant Responses⌄	No question about attending college; Raised in the Rio Grande Valley; Parents are college Graduates and assisted financially; Parental role models; Parents demonstrated commitment & dedication; and Community service	Value all people; Be role models; Attend student/ community events; Connect with people; Career preparedness; and Listening skills	Others helped in school and on the job; Support; Guidance; Communication with school board; Spend time at campuses; Work with community; and Rural schools are "hubs" and "hearts" of the community	Learning as a result of "wearing many hats"; Problem-solving skills; Communication with stakeholders; good-old-boys games; jeopardizing ethics; own apprehensions of professional abilities as a woman; and Always considering what is best for students
Codes⌄	Parental foundation; Small communities; Support; Guidance High expectations; Advocacy; Dedication	Professional family; Impact on lives; Open communication; Treat like family; work politics	Support; Mentors; Visibility; Opportunities; Communication; Leadership; Contribution of knowledge; Shared power; Community priorities	Ethics; Problem-solvers; Communication; Politics; self-perception
Themes⌄	Extended Parental Support	Familial Work Environment	Networks	Versatility

Figure 2. Summary of thematic codes and emergent themes.

Participants in this study expressed the common experience of having parental expectations for educational advancement. This was true regardless of the level of parental education. Family support was apparent as parents perpetuated the belief in the power of education. Both of Ms. Tello's parents were educators in a small rural district. Her father was a superintendent for a few years as well. She attributed her parents' support as being critical to her success. "I learned from my parents to work hard, to fight for what is right as an educator, and to be an advocate. We have to mold these kids, so our jobs are so crucial."

Ms. Sanchez added that her parents, who did not go beyond the 6th grade in Mexican schools and were migrant farm workers, motivated her to excel: "They always pushed us; we had to have a better education than they did, so we could be better off and have a good life ... They were always good role models of dedication, hard work, and commitment."

By contrast, Ms. Martinez's family was well-educated. Her paternal grandfather had a bachelor's degree; her mother had a master's degree, and her father served in the military and

later held a prominent government job. She explained that her parents expected her to excel in school. "My family was educated. The expectation was there, and it was just a matter of time before I did the same ... they nurtured me. I had the support systems, and I'm very blessed to have that."

The experience of having extended parental support among these Latina superintendents is consistent with research that shows Latino parents have a strong desire for their children to succeed. Latino parents are their children's strongest advocates (García, Scribner, & Cuellar, 2009; Rodriguez-Brown, 2009). At times, they feel limited by the support they can provide their children with homework. Parents tend to check to see that homework is complete and submitted, even though they cannot assist them. They tend to be more involved with their children's academic work at home rather than at school (Walker, Ice, Hoover-Dempsey, & Sandler, 2011).

Familial Work Environment
We discovered that the women in this study chose to work in rural school communities because they had more opportunities for personal communication with parents, a stronger sense of family among the community, and opportunities to advocate for their schools and communities. Ms. Sanchez explained, " ... you don't connect as much [with families] in larger schools." This community connection, in her opinion, was "more attractive to females than males."

Numerous examples of fostering a familial working environment were observed and described. For example, Ms. Tello shared her *testimonio* about a day when a student's father came into her office when his wife was diagnosed with cancer, and he didn't know where to turn for help. She brought this to the

attention of the board which resulted in the entire community pulling together to raise funds to offset the costs of medical bills for his wife's treatments and medication.

This type of familial environment where families strive to help one another during hard times is culturally consistent with Latino customs and with rural school research indicating that educators and students in rural schools tend to practice and observe values within and outside of the school environment (Cooley & Floyd, 2013).

Ms. Tello described them as "hubs" for families during good and bad times. She also offered family support in several other ways that contributed to this familial work environment such as establishing a make-shift library outside her office where students could pick up free books and a "caring closet" for gently-used coats and clothes for families in need.

Ms. Sanchez, likewise, described rural schools as being the "heart" of the community. Rural school research indicates that small rural districts foster community pride and identity, often through facilitating social activities in the rural community, such as social and cultural events, recreation, continuing education opportunities, and emergency shelters (Cooley & Floyd, 2013).

Community pride was evident in our observations at the school and in documents such as flyers, posters, and other signage at the schools. Although most of the people in the community were bilingual in these three districts, many parents spoke only Spanish, so all three Latina superintendents required all oral and written communication to parents and guardians to be delivered in English and in Spanish. We observed that Latino parents and community members had a strong presence in

school activities such as pep rallies, movie nights, Spanish-English holiday programs, and other family-oriented programs. It was evident that they were part of the school district family. Speaking in Spanish was not viewed negatively or deficiently. In fact, it was viewed as a strength and an asset.

It was also common practice for these superintendents to greet parents and community members, with whom they had established strong relationships, to be were greeted in traditional Latino ways that you would greet a family member—*con abrazo y beso* (with a hug and a kiss on the cheek).

These Latina superintendents claimed to know most of the students, and they knew who their parents were. In Ms. Martinez's district, every student, staff, and faculty member could expect a birthday card with a handwritten message from her every year. Ms. Sanchez and Ms. Tello shared that they fostered a sense of *familia* with food as well. It was customary to serve traditional desserts at morning and/or afternoon events, such as *pan dulce y café*. These practices contributed to a nurturing, safe, and culturally compatible school environment in all three districts.

Networks

Networks are critical for supporting aspiring women leaders. Mentoring of women for the superintendent position has been attributed as promoting confidence, empathy, trustworthiness, encouragement, active listening, and integrity.

These characteristics contribute to the success of women in leadership positions; consequently, many female superintendents seek support systems after securing superintendent positions (Goffney &

Edmonson, 2012). The Latina superintendents in this study identified several sources of support through their professional networks which seemed to originate with professional relationships with university professors/mentors. Networks also included former principals who they had worked when they were teachers; a collaborative group of Latina leaders established by the regional service center; and other superintendents who they met through professional organizations at conferences or professional development workshops.

Ms. Tello expressed that one of her former university professors continues to mentor her regarding school finances, an area where she admitted to needing further support. Ms. Sanchez attributed her motivation and attainment of the superintendency to a mentor she has had since she was a principal. She especially appreciated that her mentor often motivated her, reminded her of her aspirations, and pushed her to advance professionally.

This finding supports the literature that contends mentors enable female superintendents to network with others in similar positions, sharing common experiences and professional capabilities, which enable them to record success within their area (Goffney & Edmonson, 2012). Quilantan and Menchaca-Ochoa (2004) found that Latina superintendents who were mentored and interacted with other professionals were successful in their career mobility. Specific professional opportunities, often afforded through mentor and network relationships, were also sources of support for participants. These networks and opportunities fostered confidence in their leadership capabilities, empowering and fueling their drive toward innovative and effective educational leadership.

Versatility

The participants of this study demonstrated versatility in their respective roles. That is, in their personal journeys to the superintendency, they often took on multiple roles "wearing many hats" as needed, given modest school budgets and a lack of personnel. In addition, they all faced challenges with community members battling female stereotypes and handling small town political issues.

Versatility was crucial to their success as educational leaders. They continued to be present and visible at campus events and accessible to students, staff members, and parents. They found it was important to listen to the needs of the community. The participants exhibited perseverance to remaining goal oriented.

The participants were versatile in both their personal and professional lives. Ms. Sanchez exhibited versatility as early as fourteen years when she would migrate to northern states with her family to seek fieldwork as migrant farmworkers. She worked hard, learned English as a second language, and succeeded academically in school, as it was expected.

Ms. Martinez stated that she had to juggle many roles. In addition to her role as a superintendent, she was working on a doctoral degree, taking care of her family, and dealing with gender bias and sexual harassment issues. Her versatility enabled her to juggle multiple roles and to be successful despite confronting numerous challenges.

Despite the challenges any superintendent confronts, these Latinas exhibited grit and were consistently goal-oriented. Latinas have learned to practice versatility and to practice authenticity by creating environments in which they embrace and use their strengths and experiences to be successful (Ruiz-Williams, 2015).

Discussion

One of our initial motivations for this research was to explore factors contributing to the low rate of Latina superintendents. To this end, Ms. Sanchez added that a large contributor to the acceptance of female superintendents is situation-oriented, "I came to a district where females held this position in the past, so it depends on the community and whether they believe a woman can also do these jobs."

She also shared that being a superintendent requires physical fitness and spiritual virtues and explained that she begins each day with prayer, asking God for guidance and strength to succeed. Ms. Sanchez also expressed that fear can discourage women from educational leadership positions and stressed that mentors are critical in "pushing" them to persevere in reaching their goals.

In order to respond to the lack of Latina superintendents, Ms. Sanchez said she makes it a personal mission to empower women to become leaders. This includes motivating women to continue their education, setting high expectations, and setting definitive goals to achieve a clear vision and purpose for attaining leadership positions. Ms. Sanchez does this in order to increase the number of female superintendents so that they can be equitable to the number of male superintendents.

Ms. Martinez, like Ms. Sanchez, motivates and follows-up with staff members to increase educational attainment. While conducting observations, one of the researchers saw Martinez in a school hallway having a conversation with one of the teachers at her district about her career goals resulting in the teacher's decision to pursue a master's degree.

The fact Martinez knew the teacher by name, interest, and goal demonstrates her intentions to empower her peers. In contrast to Ms. Sanchez, Ms. Martinez stated the chief reason women are underrepresented in the superintendent position was due to "the good old boy's network- some females learn to play the game and they will do whatever to stay there."

In order to continue advocacy for female leadership empowerment, Ms. Martinez demands young girls be educated in these opportunities. She feels the Hispanic culture favors males in terms of their options and possibilities, whereas expectations for females are limited and directed mainly by their patriarchs. Ms. Martinez is a proponent of gender equity and continues to nurture leadership in young females within her district.

Advocacy is also embodied by Ms. Tello. In fact, she was the co-founder of a regional collaborative network for female superintendents initiated two years ago. There was a need to provide female superintendents in the Rio Grande Valley with a venue to share best practices, discuss common goals, and network. She also felt sometimes women are not perceived as independent; therefore, some believe women need males to guide them in personal and professional endeavors.

In pursuance of strengthening the number of females in the school superintendency, Ms. Tello believes women must serve as role models to their peers and voice their stories in venues such as graduate classes or superintendent certification courses. She has done this herself in hopes of motivating women to take on school leadership roles.

Next, was the desire to understand the extent of why Hispanic women are more likely to secure positions in small rural school districts. Research indicates that in rural schools, the number of minority members outweigh those found in urban schools; amazingly, 45.8% of minority groups were employed by rural school districts, while only 23.7% were reported for urban district schools (Carter, Glass & Hord, 2013). Participants were attracted to rural schools in small communities because superintendents have opportunities to build strong relationships with families. Superintendents are more visible and involved, "wearing many hats" in their role and gaining much learning and knowledge about leadership.

As far as rural schools specific to South Texas, participants shared that rural schools are "warm and caring communities" and this was an important consideration for the Latina superintendents in this study. As Cooley & Floyd (2013) report, rural schools are major contributors to social activities such as recreation, cultural and civic events in the community, continuing education for continuing education, providing shelter in case of disasters or emergencies. These types of services provided by rural schools are a source of pride to community members in rural areas.

Finally, we explored discrimination issues these women may have experienced. Ms. Sanchez reported she had not felt discrimination in any fashion. She was confident it was only a matter of time before the number of female superintendents was equal to that of males. In addition, she shared, "nowadays it is not uncommon for females to be superintendents."

Ms. Sanchez felt gender discrimination was not a factor since the job responsibilities among all superintendents are the same. Ms. Tello's sentiments regarding discrimination echoed the latter. She shared, "actually my

journey was a lot quicker than males in this position. A lot of the male superintendents are older and did a lot of time before becoming superintendents. This community was just ready for a female leader."

Ms. Martinez, on the other hand, offered a different perspective. She shared experiences of gender bias due to the "good old boy networks" as well as sexual harassment by males towards her. In addition, she alluded to discrimination by sharing, rural communities still have "that male-dominated mentality." When asked about gender differences regarding leadership, she responded, "men would have compromised; they have less to lose."

Conclusion

Nationally, female administrators seem to have more success in attaining the position of superintendent in rural areas compared to those in urban schools. Statistics show 24% of superintendent positions are held by women. In 2010, 55% of those women were employed in rural areas (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). Despite this progress, difficulties for women achieving superintendent level administrative positions remain.

A new trend has emerged in this region, where Latinas have successfully obtained superintendent positions and positively impacted small rural communities and schools. The *testimonios* that these Latina superintendents provided generated a shared experience that all preferred to lead small rural districts as they were attracted to fostering a familial atmosphere in their schools and being part of a warm and caring community. All were originally from small rural communities themselves and benefitted from having a kind of insider perspective and understanding of how small rural school districts and communities typically function.

As Latinas, they understood the importance of respecting and preserving Mexican American cultural and linguistic customs and practices in the daily lives of students at their schools. They sought support from professional networks and from their parents, even as adults. Finally, they all exhibited a willingness to work hard and weave in and out of various roles and responsibilities in their daily professional lives, "wearing many hats" as Ms. Tello expressed.

Clearly, there is a need for further research about female attainment of superintendent positions in US schools in general, and more specifically, within racial and minority groups, such as Latinas. Although this research is limited to three participants in South Texas, we learned about critical concerns they faced. As the three participants articulated, some communities were ready for a female superintendent and believed they could do an excellent job in leading the district. Yet, these Latina superintendents still struggle with some level of gender discrimination or implicit bias, as one participant experienced with "the good old boy networks."

As a society, it is essential that we embrace the capacity and potential women offer to leadership in our public schools. We leave this study with further questions for future research. Would the dispositions that these Latina superintendents display factor into their success in a larger, urban setting with similar demographics but at a larger scale? Would they be as successful there? What kinds of supports would be required?

We contend that future research on motivation, self-efficacy, and perseverance of female superintendents needs to be conducted with larger samples in rural school and urban

school settings. It is important to provide opportunities to untap the leadership potential of all credentialed candidates of school superintendents regardless of race or gender.

Author Biographies

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Appendix A

Guided Interview Protocol

1. Please share your family or personal background.

2. What is the highest level of education attained by your parents?

3. In terms of your background, what values and beliefs shaped who you are today both personally and professionally?

4. When did you realize you wanted to become an educational leader?

5. What was the event or moment that triggered this decision?

6. Describe in detail how you began your journey towards the superintendency.

7. Describe how you secured your current superintendency, including any challenges.

8. What barriers, if any, have you experienced during your educational leadership journey due to our gender?

9. What barriers, if any, have you experienced during your educational leadership journey due to your race?

10. What types of discrimination, if any, have you experienced in your educational leadership journey?

Superintendents' Perceptions of the Assistance Provided by Their Predecessors During A Change in Leadership

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Abstract

This study involving superintendents from four states sought to identify the nature and quality of help provided by outgoing superintendents to their successors, and to capture data regarding differences in the helpfulness of that support, depending on whether the superintendent moved to a new superintendency, retired from the position, or was nonrenewed or terminated. The findings indicate that one third of successor superintendents have a strongly favorable view of the helpfulness of their predecessor. Internally-promoted successor superintendents viewed the helpfulness of their successor significantly more favorably than successor superintendents employed from outside the district. Fellow superintendents, administrative assistants, and district administrators were viewed as a much greater source of support than predecessor superintendents.

Key Words

superintendents, transition, leadership succession, change in leadership, mentoring, superintendent shortage

The need for individuals to fill superintendent positions in the coming years is substantial. A 2003 survey of nearly 2,000 superintendents found that most respondents agreed that the nation was facing a shortage of applicants for the superintendency (L. D. Fusarelli et al., 2003). In a 2015 study, almost one-third of superintendents stated that they planned to retire within five years (Finnan et al., 2015). With well over 13,000 school districts in the U.S. (*NCES Digest of Education Statistics*, 2012), this represents well in excess of 4,000 superintendent vacancies in this period. The shortage of school leaders has been identified as a problem that is global in nature (Ryan & Gallo, 2011).

A great deal of trust is placed in school district superintendents to provide overall leadership for the organization. The effects of the position are not always readily measurable, and many scholars have brought attention to the complexities and stresses of the position (Bird & Wang, 2013; Bjork & Keedy, 2002; Brunner, 2002; Cuban, 2001; L. D. Fusarelli et al., 2002; Glasman & Fuller, 2002; Grissom & Andersen, 2012; Grissom & Mitani, 2016; Hart et al., 2019; Kowalski & Glass, 2002; Leithwood et al., 1999; Petersen & Fusarelli, 2008; Petersen & Short, 2001; Riley et al., 2002; Thompson & Holt, 2016; Webner et al., 2017). Observers generally agree that the position is a critical one in influencing the culture, policy agenda, strategic decision-making, and overall leadership of school districts.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to obtain information about the nature and extent of assistance provided by superintendents to their successors, and to better understand differences in the helpfulness of that support depending on whether the superintendent moved to a new superintendency, retired from the position, or was nonrenewed or terminated.

The study also sought to identify potential differences in transition experiences related to gender and the size and location of the district. Lastly, the study sought to gain insight into the perceived value of other sources of assistance during the transition to a new superintendency.

Significance of the Study

Given the importance and influence of the position, it stands to reason that the transition from one superintendent to the next merits thoughtful consideration. This study's findings can be expected to contribute to our understanding of the perceived effectiveness of predecessors' efforts to effect a favorable transition.

It is not unusual for a change in leadership at the top to result in a loss of support for previous programs and initiatives to create organizational space for the initiatives promoted by a new leader (Alsbury, 2008a, 2008b; Lechasseur, 2017).

A lack of continuity in leadership can result in a high organizational cost, as districts experience both the abandonment of initiatives associated with a predecessor and the whipsawing effect produced through a successor's arrival (Schwanenberger et al., 2020). Hart and colleagues (Hart et al., 2019) argue that "the superintendency is increasingly viewed as a temporary position, with boards of education and superintendents expecting a lack of longevity among superintendents" (Hart et al., 2019, p. 4). Charan's observations about corporate leadership are also applicable to school district leadership. He noted that "the result of poor succession planning is often poor performance, which translates into higher

turnover and corporate instability" (2005, p. 74).

Review of Literature
Lack of attention to transition planning
Evidence demonstrates that succession planning, particularly at the level of the superintendent, is an area in which most school districts have room for improvement. Deliberate succession planning is not uncommon in fields such as business and health care, but such planning in the field of education is largely centered on the principalship and district administrative positions (Domenech, 2016; B. C. Fusarelli et al., 2018), not the superintendency. It has been argued that "Many organizations do a decent job nurturing middle managers, but meaningful leadership development stops well below the apex" (Charan, 2005, p. 75).

A recent study funded by the Wallace Foundation indicated that only around 10% of large school districts have any form of succession planning (Domenech, 2016). Therefore, systematic efforts to create succession plans or succession management processes do not appear to be undertaken on a widespread basis by school districts. There is even less evidence of such efforts related to the superintendency. The study of superintendents' efforts to provide for an effective transition between superintendents is quite limited.

Superintendents' role in successful transition
Though the transition process can take a variety of shapes, there are two primary ways in which superintendents can play a role in contributing to a successful transition. The first is through their role in advising and assisting the board through the process of conducting a search and selecting the next superintendent. The second is through their role in communicating with and assisting their successor.

Advising and assisting the board
In general, though there may be rare exceptions to this practice, superintendents exercise authority over planning and preparing for the succession of principals and other district administrators. Such efforts may occur through listing known leadership needs, identifying specific potential candidates for future openings, offering encouragement or leadership-development training to aspiring leaders, or assigning mentors to individuals with leadership potential. In contrast, superintendents typically exercise no such authority over planning and preparing for their own succession.

Ultimately, for very sound reasons, the authority for hiring superintendents rests with the governing board. Superintendents may be consulted about such decisions, and in some cases, they may have a role in advising the board. It is not unusual for superintendents to groom a potential successor in the hopes that this will bring a sense of stability and continuity (Bradley, 2016), but such preparations provide no guarantee that one's protégé will ultimately be the individual selected by the board to lead the district.

Historically, such "sponsored mobility" (Ortiz, 2000, p. 559) has served to perpetuate White male dominance of the profession, as predecessors have tended to groom internal successors most similar to themselves (Dedrick et al., 2016).

Nationally, three-fourths of superintendents are male (Maranto et al., 2018), and the overwhelming majority of superintendents, even those serving in regions with large populations of students of color, are

white. School boards, which in some cases may be more representative of the community than the superintendent, may be in a better position to alter the superintendency as a "gendered profession" (Maranto et al., 2018, p. 12).

Often, notes Dan Domenech, executive director of the American Association of School Administrators, when a superintendent vacancy occurs, even when an internal candidate is seen as a viable prospect for the position, "school boards feel obliged to undertake a formal search to assure the community it has considered other candidates and has concluded no one out there is better than the homegrown product (2016, p. 40).

Communicating with and assisting one's successor

There appears to have been little research related to superintendents' efforts to assist with the transition of their successor. Although Kasper (1997) proposed varied approaches to transition planning based on the specific circumstances in a district, there is no model in widespread use to guide superintendents in preparing for a district's transition to a new superintendent; in fact, such a model may be impractical because of the diverse circumstances that influence the succession process in districts that are in highly varied settings.

The authors of this manuscript recall mentoring a number of new superintendents and advising them to spend much more time listening and learning in the first year, as opposed to speaking and explaining. As a staff and community get to know a new superintendent, their initial observations and conclusions about the superintendent's character will greatly influence a community's receptiveness toward the new leader. What staff and community members invariably want

to see is a leader who listens, who is intent on understanding the full breadth and depth of challenges and concerns from varying perspectives, and who is deliberate in making judgments about the nature of the organization's needs. Superintendents new to a district need to have the opportunity to understand the history of the district, and, often, the best person to provide that history may be one's predecessor in the role (Dedrick et al., 2016). Lytle advocates "taking time to learn the context before starting to act" (2009, p. 9). Keeping a focus on district goals that preceded the transition process may provide a way to reduce fear and anxiety (Finger, 2016).

It is highly unlikely that individuals who are new to a superintendency will show much interest in being instructed by their predecessor in how to be a superintendent, particularly when they already have experience in the role. Hearn (2019) studied superintendent predecessor-to-successor transition practices at Christian schools in the U.S., in part focusing on whether or not predecessors devoted time to training successors. Hearn found that successors somewhat resented receiving training from predecessors, in that this possibly signaled that the successors were not adequately trained before assuming the new role. A fundamental concern of a superintendent new to a position is to be seen as competent and adequately prepared for the position.

Once in a position, one's professional network can be a source of support. Dias (2019) conducted qualitative case study research examining the career pathways of female superintendents. This research revealed the importance of informal mentors and networking during the transition to a new position. In a rare example of a lengthy period of mentoring for new superintendents, Gildea (2012) studied six first-year superintendents,

half of which were internal hires, and half of which were external hires. Two of the three participants hired from outside the district had the opportunity to shadow their predecessors for an extended period of time, and both credited this opportunity with helping them to create connections to the community and the district. Consequently, five of the six participants had the opportunity to learn from their predecessors (either by working under the supervision of their predecessor or by shadowing the predecessor).

Assistance with the transition to a superintendency may be a more critical need in rural districts than in those located in or near metropolitan areas. Rural districts are generally smaller, which means they are less likely to have district-level administrative positions where candidates can gain experience in those responsibilities associated with the superintendency.

Moreover, rural district superintendents are more likely to be in need of support in transitioning to a new position, as, according to Grissom and Andersen, "rural districts have less success in hiring experienced superintendents than their more urban counterparts when turnover occurs" (2012, p. 1173).

Limited research has been conducted in recent years regarding the areas in which superintendents new to a position need information and support. One area where a small amount of research has been conducted has to do with aspiring and novice superintendents. Gandhi (2019) studied the experiences of five superintendents transitioning to their first superintendency. Challenges common to all five superintendents included board-superintendent relations, change management, and personnel issues. Burmeister (2018) interviewed six practicing

rural superintendents regarding the steps which aspiring rural superintendents can take to best prepare for the position. This research highlighted the importance of being the right person for a specific position and of having a grounding in areas including school finance, human resources, and relationships with the board.

Research Questions

This study sought to address the following questions:

1. Do superintendents view their predecessor as a source of assistance in their transition to a new superintendency, and do those views vary in relation to the superintendent's reason for leaving the position?
2. Do superintendents' views of the assistance provided by their predecessor vary by gender, location or size of district, and the previous position held by the successor?
3. In what areas do departing superintendents tend to advise and assist their successor?
4. How does the support from predecessors compare with the support of others?
5. In relation to other priorities, how high of a priority are board relationships during the transition to a new position??

Instrumentation

With the assistance of professional membership associations in four states, a 25-question survey was distributed to all superintendents in these states. This survey was developed as a collaborative effort of the authors, all of whom had served as superintendents in at least one of the states where the survey was administered. The survey collected demographic information, as well as information related to the

superintendent's level of experience overall, in the superintendency, and in the current position. Superintendents were asked to report on the size and location (urban, rural, suburban) of their current district. An email explained the scope and purpose of the study and included a link to the online survey. A follow-up email was sent approximately two weeks later.

Sample

Responses were received from 240 superintendents in the states of Arizona, Kansas, Minnesota, and Washington during the fall and winter of 2019. The number of responses represents 28% of the school districts in the states surveyed. Seventy eight percent of respondents were male, and 22% were female. Participants largely represented rural school districts, with rural superintendents making up 71% of the sample, suburban superintendents comprising 23%, and urban superintendents making up 6% of the sample.

The largest percentage of participants reported the size of their district to be less than 1,000 students in their district (n=93, 38.8%), with the next largest group reporting enrollment of 1,000 – 4,999 (n=83, 34.58%). Districts of 5,000 – 9,999 (n=33, 13.75%), 10,000 – 19,999 (n=20, 8.33%), and 20,000 or more students (n=11, 4.58%) made up the

remainder of the sample. Nearly one-half (n=115, 47.91%) plan to retire from the superintendency within five years.

Findings
Research Question 1
Do superintendents view their predecessor as a source of assistance in their transition to a new superintendency, and do those views vary in relation to the superintendent's reason for leaving the position?

Question 16 asked participants to rate, on a scale of 0 ("Not at all helpful") to 10 ("Extremely helpful") the extent to which one's predecessor was helpful in assisting with the transition to one's current role. The mean overall rating of the helpfulness of the predecessor was 4.71. One-third of respondents (n=80) reported that their predecessor was very helpful (reflecting a rating of 8-10) during the transition, while 41% of respondents (n=98) reported that their predecessor was very unhelpful (reflecting a rating of 0-3). Notably, one in five respondents (n=48) rated the helpfulness of their predecessor as "0," which suggests an extreme absence of cooperation on the part of the predecessor.

Table 1 summarizes the overall ratings of predecessors' helpfulness.

Table 1

Overall Ratings of the Helpfulness of Predecessors

Rating	n	Percent
0-2	98	40.83%
3-7	62	25.83%
8-10	80	33.33%

There were marked differences in the perceived helpfulness of predecessors on the reason the predecessor left the position. Table 2 includes information about differences between respondents' ratings of the helpfulness of their predecessor based on the reason for the predecessor's departure.

Table 2

Ratings of Predecessors' Helpfulness, Based on Predecessors' Reason for Leaving The Position

Reason	n	M	SD
Retirement from the superintendency	132	6.23	3.54
Accepted another superintendency	7	4.16	3.19
Nonrenewal or termination of contract	54	1.57	2.13
Other	17	3.88	3.98

A one-way ANOVA was conducted to determine if there was a significant difference in a predecessor's perceived helpfulness based on a superintendent's reason for leaving. There was a significant difference in the perceived level of helpfulness from one's predecessor, $F (2, 220) = 41.421$, $p = .000$, based on the predecessor's reason for leaving the position. Predecessors who retired from the position were perceived as most helpful (M=6.23). Although not rated as favorably, superintendents who accepted another superintendency were rated higher (M=4.16) than superintendents whose contracts were nonrenewed or terminated (M=1.57).

Research Question 2

Do superintendents' views of the assistance provided by their predecessor vary by gender, location or size of district, and the previous position held by the successor?

The responses to Question 16 were analyzed to determine if there were differences in responses based on the variables in Research Question 2. Table 3 includes information about the gender of participants and their ratings of the helpfulness of their predecessor. Although males rated the predecessor's helpfulness slightly higher, an independent samples t-test revealed that this difference was not statistically significant.

Table 3

Ratings of Predecessor's Help Based on Successor's Gender

Gender	n	M	SD
Female	52	4.54	3.578
Male	186	4.75	3.798

Table 4 includes information about the size of districts and superintendents' ratings of the helpfulness of their predecessor. Although the largest districts rated the predecessor's helpfulness slightly higher, a one-way ANOVA established that there was not a significant difference in the perceived helpfulness of a predecessor based on the size of the district.

Table 4

Ratings of Predecessor's Help Based on District Size

Size of district	n	M	SD
Under 1,000	93	4.35	3.732
1,000 - 4,999	83	4.63	3.695
5,000 - 9,999	32	5.59	3.706
10,000 - 19,999	20	4.25	3.932
20,000 or more	11	6.73	3.580

Table 5 includes information about the location of districts and superintendents' ratings of the helpfulness of their predecessor. A one-way ANOVA established that there was not a significant difference in the perceived helpfulness of a predecessor based on the location of the district.

Table 5

Ratings of Predecessor's Help Based on District Location

Location of district	n	M	SD
Rural	171	4.61	3.672
Suburban	54	5.07	3.855
Urban	14	4.64	4.343

Table 6 includes information about the superintendents' prior positions and their ratings of the helpfulness of their predecessor. A one-way ANOVA established that there was not a significant difference in the perceived helpfulness of a predecessor based on their previous position.

Table 6

Ratings of Predecessor's Help Based on Successor's Prior Position

Prior position	n	M	SD
as a district administrator in another district	41	4.41	3.605
as a district administrator in my current district	36	6.11	3.616
as a principal in another district	49	4.06	3.738
as a principal in my current district	28	5.71	3.895
as a superintendent in another district	68	4.47	3.605
other position	17	3.71	4.043

However, when responses were grouped as internal or external successors, differences emerge. Table 7 compares the ratings of predecessors based on whether the successor was hired from within the district or outside the district.

Table 7

Ratings of Predecessor's Help Based on Whether Successor Was an Internal or External Candidate

Size of district	n	M	SD
Internal	64	5.94	3.716
External	158	4.33	3.628

A one-way ANOVA was conducted to determine if there was a significant difference in a predecessor's perceived helpfulness based on whether the successor was hired from within the district or outside the district. There was a significant difference in the perceived level of helpfulness from one's predecessor, $F(1, 220) = 8.827$, $p = .003$, depending on whether the new superintendent was a newcomer. Successors who were promoted internally viewed their predecessor as more helpful than not (M=5.94). Superintendents who were newcomers to the district rated their predecessors as less helpful (M=4.33).

Research Question 3
In what areas do departing superintendents tend to advise and assist their successor?

Participants were asked to respond to question 17, "In what areas did your predecessor provide insights and/or advice." Respondents were able to select one or more of seven items, along with indicating "other." Table 8 includes information about participants' responses.

Table 8

Areas in Which the Predecessor Provided Insights and/or Advice

Size of district	Percentage	Count
Personnel	54.58%	131
Board relationships	51.67%	124
Potential or ongoing legal action	33.33%	80
District goals and strategic objectives	24.58%	59
Initiatives related to curriculum, instruction, and assessment	23.33%	56
Other	22.92%	55
Upcoming elections	16.67%	40
School improvement plans	12.50%	30

As indicated, over half of the participants responded that the predecessor provided information about issues related to personnel and board relationships. Less than one in four were reported to provide information about matters related to curriculum, instruction, and assessment or school improvement plans.

Research Question 4

How does the support from predecessor superintendents compare with the support of others?

In question 19, participants were asked to "Please indicate the usefulness of the support that you received from the following positions when you transitioned to your current position." Eight positions were provided, and, for each group, superintendents were asked to indicate whether the support received was "Extremely useful," "Moderately useful," or "Not at all useful." Responses to this question are summarized in Table 9.

Table 9

Usefulness of the Support Received from Identified Positions

Position	Extremely useful		Moderately useful		Not at all useful	
	Percent	Count	Percent	Count	Percent	Count
Administrative Assistant(s)	61.26%	136	31.98%	71	6.76%	15
Fellow Superintendents	56.65%	132	38.20%	89	5.15%	12
District Administrator(s)	46.80%	95	45.81%	93	7.39%	15
Board Members	35.32%	83	56.60%	133	8.09%	19
Previous Superintendent	29.91%	64	35.98%	77	34.11%	73
Teachers	23.48%	54	59.57%	137	16.96%	39
Students	11.11%	21	58.20%	110	30.69%	58
Business Leaders	10.66%	21	52.28%	103	37.06%	73

Table 10 summarizes this same information as shown in Table 9 by combining the number of "Extremely useful" and "Moderately useful" responses. As indicated, the usefulness of the support provided by one's predecessor ranks near the bottom of this list, with respondents indicating that more useful support was received from fellow superintendents, administrative assistants, district administrators, board members, teachers, and students.

Table 10

Usefulness of the Support Received from Identified Positions, Combining "Extremely useful" and "Moderately useful" Responses

Position	Percent
Fellow Superintendents	94.85%
Administrative Assistant(s)	93.24%
District Administrator(s)	92.61%
Board Members	91.91%
Teachers	83.04%
Students	69.31%
Previous Superintendent	65.89%
Business Leaders	62.94%

Research Question 5:
In relation to other priorities, how high of a priority are board relationships during the transition to a new position?

Question 23 asked participating superintendents to indicate, "In relation to other priorities, how high of a priority were board relationships when you first transitioned to your current position?" As indicated in Table 11, 59% of responding superintendents indicated that these relationships were a much higher priority than other relationships.

Table 11

Relative Priority of Board Relationships to Other Priorities During Transition

Relative priority	Percentage	Count
Much higher than other priorities	59.00%	141
About the same as other priorities	35.98%	86
Much lower than other priorities	5.02%	12

Discussion

The data and findings from this study point to the following conclusions regarding superintendent transitions:

1. Overall, superintendents are not viewed by their successors as a significant source of support and assistance. A large majority of successor superintendents have an unfavorable view of the helpfulness of their predecessor. Just 33% of superintendents gave their predecessor a rating of 8, 9, or 10 in assisting them with the transition to their current role. Participants in the study reported that 22.5% of the predecessor superintendents were nonrenewed or terminated, and these superintendents were rated as very unhelpful (M=1.57).

2. It is entirely possible that, having fallen out of favor with the governing board, these superintendents may have been instructed not to communicate with their successor. Predecessors who left the position to move to another superintendency were also not viewed as particularly helpful (M=4.16). The only group of superintendents with a moderately favorable rating were those who retired from the superintendency (M=6.23).

3. There appears to be little difference in the perceived helpfulness of the predecessor superintendent based on the successor's gender, or on the size or location of the district.

4. Superintendents leaving a position appear more likely to feel an obligation to assist with their successor's transition when that successor is an internal candidate. It stands to reason that predecessors would be more invested in individuals that they have helped to groom or mentor. Internally-promoted successor superintendents viewed the helpfulness of their successor significantly more favorably (M=5.94) than successor superintendents employed from outside the district (M=4.33).

5. Predecessors appear to see issues related to personnel and board relationships as of significant importance during a transition, as a majority of successor superintendents identified these as areas in which the predecessor provided insights or advice. Also, for the majority of successors, board relationships were a much higher priority than competing priorities.

6. Fellow superintendents, administrative assistants, and district administrators were viewed as a much greater source of support than predecessor superintendents.

Implications for Practice

A number of implications are suggested by this study.

First, professional associations may be able to play a critical role in providing training sessions or seminars for superintendents who are retiring or moving to another superintendency. These could provide a forum for discussing strategies to assist successors and bring attention to the importance of superintendent transitions. Given the high percentage of superintendents expected to retire in the next five years (the expectation of 48% of the participants in this study), it appears likely that such discussions would be well-received by the field.

Second, the establishment of informal mentoring relationships for superintendents new to a district, an area, or a state may help to build on a relationship which is already perceived to be beneficial. In this study, successor superintendents rated the support of their fellow superintendents quite high. Professional associations may be in a position to capitalize on the credibility in these relationships to provide support and mentoring.

Third, even though this study does not offer significant evidence that outgoing superintendents are seen as especially helpful to their successors, they nonetheless do have an important role to play. Rather than attempting to single-handedly assist their successor, outgoing superintendents could endeavor to build a network of support intended to engage a representative group of district administrators, administrative assistants, board members, principals, and teachers in a transition team.

Such a team could develop brief descriptions of schools, departments, and programs throughout the district, create a calendar of significant annual events, and summarize major challenges the district is expected to face. By creating a collective picture of the district that reflects diverse perspectives, this may help to reduce the one-upmanship that can be expected during superintendent transitions.

Recommendations for Future Research

There are some limitations to this study that suggest future research. This study sought information from those on the receiving end of assistance. As a result, it may have failed to capture forms of assistance that did not involve direct communication between the predecessor and successor. For instance, in some cases, predecessors may have requested specific

forms of assistance from neighboring superintendents, district staff, or community leaders that contributed to a more successful transition, but that was unknown to the successor. Consequently, future studies that capture the views of both predecessors and successors could shed light on practices that are meaningful and productive.

Another limitation of this study was that the gender of successor superintendents was identified, but not the gender of predecessors. It may be helpful in future work to examine whether there are significant differences in the four different gender-related transitions that are possible (female-female, female-male, male-male, and male-female).

A sizable percentage of the participants in this study (N=103, 42.92%) had been in their positions for over five years. Since memory can fade over time, it may be helpful to focus attention on the transition experience in the first year or two so that those experiences are captured while they are still fresh in the minds of predecessors and successors.

Research that closely examines transitions involving both internal and external successors could help to identify effective practices under each scenario. Such research could also help to increase our understanding of practices related to the promotion of individuals from underrepresented groups to the superintendency.

One of the suggestions made above was for training sessions or seminars for superintendents who are retiring or moving to another superintendency. Research that examines the impact of such trainings or seminars on the transition experience could help to assess any benefits of such efforts and to determine how they can be improved.

Concluding Remarks

Scholars including Alsbury (2003) have pointed out that superintendent transitions can produce a lack of continuity in district goals and poor outcomes for the entire organization. Although leaving a position is a career move that all superintendents will experience at some time, this transition has received too little attention by both practitioners and scholars. Considering the changes now underway in the makeup of district leadership, this is an area of practice that would benefit from greater attention by both scholars and practitioners.

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Research Article_____

Leadership Traits of Superintendents in a Rural, Midwest State: Perceptions of School Board Presidents and Superintendents

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Abstract

Perhaps no relationship is as crucial for practicing superintendents as the relationship with their school board presidents. This study examined which leadership traits of superintendents were most important according to superintendents and school board presidents in a rural state in the Midwest. A researcher-developed survey studied how important each of eight traits were to the two groups on a Likert scale, as well as how both groups ranked the eight traits. Both groups found trustworthiness and communication competence to be most important, and intelligence to be the least important of the eight traits in this study. The traits in the middle varied in importance depending upon which group was ranking them and on the size of the school districts.

Key Words

leadership traits, superintendents, school board presidents, rural schools, board relations, trait theory, trustworthiness, communication competence

Introduction

Whether leaders are made or born is a question that has been debated for more than a century (Hoffman et al., 2011; Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1991; Northouse, 2016; Zaccaro et al, 2018). The most famous leaders in history are known for the traits that define them, and great leaders appear to have greatness within them. Kirkpatrick and Locke state that "regardless of whether leaders are born or made or some combination of both, it is unequivocally clear that leaders are not like other people" (p. 59).

While leaders stand apart from followers in the political and business worlds, the same can be said for leaders in education. Forner, Bierlein-Palmer, and Reeves (2012) found that successful superintendents were unique among educators, and that rural superintendents were unique among their peers working in dissimilar contexts (p. 12). In education leadership, different types of leaders are found in different situational contexts (Bredeson et al., 2011; Copeland, 2013; Forner et al., 2012; Lamkin, 2006; Preston & Barnes, 2017).

Purpose of the Study

Superintendents answer to a variety of stakeholders, arguably none with more significance than the school board. A strong relationship between the superintendent and the school board president is essential (Petersen & Short, 2002; Richard & Kruse, 2008; Weiss, Templeton, Thompson, & Tremont, 2015). While the relationship itself is important, a sub context is the individual differences that make up who the superintendent is and the parity between the perceptions of board presidents and superintendents regarding which leadership traits are important.

The need for this study is in identifying which traits make up rural superintendents in the Midwest, and which traits are most important for superintendents to possess. The nuances of context also matter in the respect that expectations can vary between different types of schools, small, large, rural or urban. This study can inform superintendent practice and aid superintendents in being mindful of information that is essential to finding the right fit in seeking employment, as well as which strengths to focus on for greater success.

Review of Selected Literature

The literature review is broken up into two sections: leadership trait framework and context of rural superintendency.

1. Leadership Trait Framework

Trait theory provides a theoretical framework for this study. While no leadership model is perfect, the trait approach to leadership is the approach that focuses most heavily on the makeup of the leader.

Hoffman, Woehr, Maldagen-Youngjohn and Lyons (2011) point to an evolution in the trait approach, "recent conceptual models have expanded their treatment beyond traditional, trait-like individual differences to include proximal, malleable individual differences … lending credence to the hypothesis that to some extent, leaders are born, not made" (p. 365).

The application of trait approach in this study focuses on who the leader is and how his or her own differences impact leadership. As Northouse (2016) points out, the trait approach to leadership is the only approach that focuses solely on the makeup of the leader (p. 30).

Trait theory dominated the study of leadership prior to the mid-twentieth century. While dozens of leadership theories have been studied since that time, each one has its

strengths and its shortcomings. Stogdill (1948) suggested that people who are leaders in one situation may not be leaders in another situation (p. 70). Zaccaro (2007) explains how Stogdill's (1948) work and later that of Mann (1959) led researchers to eschew trait-based leadership approaches, only to have researchers like Kenny and Zaccaro (1983) and Lord, De Vader, and Alliger (1986) come back to trait theory.

Recognizing that leaders are unique is essential to understanding how leadership works, but it seems that context also matters. Zaccaro (2007) points out that "the situation is critical in explaining variance in leadership behavior; however, it may not be as critical in explaining differences between leaders and nonleaders" (p. 8). Situations and context matter, yet modern trait theory recognizes that there is something special about effective leaders, that they are somehow different from others.

The renewed interest that the trait approach has seen since the 1980s recognizes what makes leaders special, while also considering the complexity of leadership. Zaccaro (2007) explains that some leadership qualities are heritable and do not change much over the life of the leader, while others are more state-like and evolve through maturation and experience (p. 9). While certain traits make leaders unique, it seems leadership can be developed, and the trait-approach is compatible with recognizing the importance of situational context.

Two of Stogdill's (1948) summations were particularly telling on how situation impacts leadership.

The first is that knowledge is particularly important in identifying leaders in a given situation, that a leader's emergence in

that context is dependent on his or her specific knowledge in that situation (p. 47).

The second is that leaders emerge when their competencies match the goals and activities of the group (p. 66).

People follow leaders who are competent in their field. Professional competence is an example of a trait that is related to a more foundational trait, like intelligence. A leader's professional competence, in contrast to a trait like intelligence, can change over time as task knowledge increases.

Zaccaro, Green, Dubrow, and Kolze (2018) differentiated between foundational leadership traits and more malleable and specific leadership competencies. They go on to explain that the foundational traits, which are more universal across situations, predispose a person to leadership potential, and that specific leadership capacities suit leaders for leadership in more specific situations (p. 7). Professional competence is such a trait.

Leaders emerge in large part because followers are drawn to leaders who possess the right foundational traits for leadership, but within specific contexts leaders must distinguish themselves within their given field with their professional competence.

Professional competence impacts how and why people follow leaders for a couple of reasons. One of the reasons that leaders with high levels of professional competence draw followers is because of the relationship between professional competence and another trait, trustworthiness. Trusting a leader is more than believing that a leader has the will to do what is right, it is also believing that the leader has the ability to do what needs to be done

(Hoffman, et al., 2011; Kouzes & Posner, 2002; Kramer 2011). Trust is also about competence. Followers must believe that their leaders are capable within their field, that they will have not only the will, but also the competence necessary for the job.

Context of rural superintendent leadership
Zacarro et al. (2018) explain how leadership traits can be classified into two types, foundational traits, which are primarily heritable traits and are causal precursors to the second type, leadership capacities, which are associated with leadership outcomes and are individual differences that are more mutable and can be developed (pp. 6-7). Zaccaro et al. (2018) leadership capacities align with Hoffman et al. (2011) distal individual differences. Both authors separate the traits that support leader emergence and leader success across situations from those that vary by situation. That distinction, first uncovered by Stogdill (1948) and Mann (1959) and later explained by the likes of Kirkpatrick and Locke (1991), Lord et al. (1986), and Zaccaro et al. (2000), lends itself to an argument to view leadership trait research through the lens of context.

In order to accurately address what it is that makes leaders unique and what it is that makes leaders effective in varying situations, the context of leadership must be part of the conversation. A significant part of what makes a leader in a given situation is what makes that leader emerge as a leader in a broader sense as well; both parts are integral pieces to the leadership puzzle.

Taking what is known about leadership context from Hoffman et al. (2011), Kirkpatrick and Lock (1991) and Zaccaro et al. (2018) and applying it to superintendent leadership, it can be assumed that some leadership traits will be somewhat universal to superintendents across situations, and some individual differences would be more prominent among school leaders in a particular context. Rural education is different from education in urban and suburban settings, and rural education leadership presents its own unique leadership context (Bredeson et al., 2011; Forner, Bierlein-Palmer, & Reeves, 2012; Preston & Barnes, 2017).

The literature indicates that there are layers of context that impact leadership in different situations. For example, Lamkin (2006) found that many of the challenges faced by rural superintendents in her study were not completely unique to the rural superintendency, but rather five challenging areas were universal to "the role of the superintendent in general and to challenges based on the changing field of education rather than to challenges based solely on the rural environment of the work of rural superintendents" (p. 19).

Methodology
The methodology section is divided into two sections: population and sample, and research design.

Population and sample
The sample included 88 respondents from 144 school districts, 27 school board presidents and 61 superintendents. There were 150 school districts in the state, and the survey was sent to every public school district minus the district for which the researcher is the superintendent and the five school districts represented in the pilot study. For the purpose of this study, schools in this state were divided into three groups, small enrollment (K-12 enrollment below 500), medium enrollment (K-12 enrollment between 500 and 999), and large enrollment (K-12 enrollment of 1000 or more). The three separate groups were established by the researcher and the pilot study group. Surveys were sent to school board presidents

and superintendents of public school districts in the state. The researcher utilized the entire sample of 88 respondents for the Likert scale ratings of the 24 leadership trait dimensions. Some respondents did not rank the traits one through eight for the last question on the survey, so those responses were removed from the study of the ranked traits. For the second part of research questions one and two, as well as the MANOVA conducted for research question three, the sample included 54 superintendents and 22 school board presidents, or a total sample of 76.

Research design
The survey was a cross-sectional survey in which the researcher collected data during a two-month window of time in one school year. The data were analyzed quantitatively using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). The researcher was able to determine how each leadership trait was rated by superintendents compared to school board presidents and differences between each group.

Data analysis
Research question one was: Which leadership traits of a superintendent are most important according to superintendents in a rural state in the Midwest? This question was answered using descriptive statistics. Twenty-four of the thirty-one questions on the survey were questions that asked the respondents to state their agreement on the importance of three different dimensions of each leadership trait using a Likert scale. Means were used to analyze the importance of each multi-dimensional leadership trait individually.

Taking a different approach, the final question on the survey asked respondents to rank each of the leadership traits in order of importance, with one being the most important and eight being the least important among the eight traits. Mean, median, mode, and

percentages were used to analyze the importance of each trait in relation to the others and to compile a rank order of importance among the eight traits.

Research question two was: Which leadership traits of a superintendent are most important according to school board presidents in a rural state in the Midwest? This question was answered in the same way as research question number one.

Research question three was: To what extent do position and school enrollment influence differences in perceptions of superintendent leadership traits in a rural state in the Midwest? The researcher conducted a two-way multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) to analyze research question three. It answered whether school district size impacts the perceptions of school board presidents versus superintendents. The two-way MANOVA also provided analysis on the main effect of each independent variable, allowing a look at how school district size impacts perceptions, regardless of position, as well as how position impacts perceptions, regardless of school district size.

Findings
Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the importance of each of the eight leadership traits according to superintendents. Each trait was analyzed in depth by three questions that were designed to investigate a different dimension of the trait, presented on a 5-point Likert scale, with 1 being not at all important and 5 being extremely important.

Trustworthiness and communication competence emerged as being rated most consistently towards extremely important, as evidenced by the fact that all three of the dimensions of each trait were clustered towards the top of the list. *Trustworthiness, perceived*

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as a person of integrity had the highest mean among all of the trait dimensions (*M* = 4.74, *SD* = .444), tied with *confidence, being calm when confronted with problems* (*M* = 4.74, *SD* = .444). *Trustworthiness, perceived as a person of high moral character* was the next highest trait dimension (*M* = 4.70, *SD* = .495), and *trustworthiness, perceived as a person whom others can believe* displayed the sixth highest

mean out of the 24 dimensions (*M* = 4.67, *SD* = .507). Intelligence was clearly the lowest trait, with two dimensions in the bottom four and all three dimensions falling within the lower nine.

Table 1 displays means and standard deviations of leadership trait dimensions as rated by superintendents.

Table 1

Means and Standard Deviations (Superintendent Responses)

Trait Question	Min.	Max.	Mean	Standard Deviation	Variance
Confidence Calm	4	5	4.74	.444	.197
Trustworthiness Integrity	4	5	4.74	.444	.197
Trustworthiness Character	3	5	4.70	.495	.245
Initiative Work Ethic	4	5	4.69	.467	.218
Communication Proficient Skills	3	5	4.69	.534	.285
Trustworthiness Believable	3	5	4.67	.507	.257
Communication Knowledge, Awareness	2	5	4.67	.569	.324
Initiative Drive	4	5	4.64	.484	.234
Communication Appropriate for Context	3	5	4.59	.528	.279
Leadership Motivation Desire to Influence	3	5	4.57	.590	.349
Professional Competence Capable	3	5	4.57	.562	.315
Leadership Motivation Responsibility	3	5	4.57	.562	.315
Professional Competence Knowledge	3	5	4.52	.536	.287
Initiative Determination	3	5	4.51	.536	.287
Confidence Belief in Own Abilities	3	5	4.51	.622	.387
Intelligence Reasoning	3	5	4.48	.536	.287
Problem Solving Able to Identify Problems	3	5	4.43	.562	.315
Confidence Self-assured, Decisions	3	5	4.43	.559	.313
Problem Solving Existing Resources	3	5	4.41	.559	.313
Professional Competence School Finance	3	5	4.30	.558	.311
Intelligence Perceptive	3	5	4.15	.543	.295
Leadership Motivation Prefer Leader Role	1	5	4.15	.910	.828
Problem Solving Creative	3	5	4.13	.695	.483
Intelligence IQ	1	5	3.05	1.056	1.114

The final question on the survey asked respondents to rank the eight leadership traits one through eight, with one being the most important and eight being the least important. Whether taking the aggregate of the dimensions of the traits or analyzing the traits as a whole through ranking, trustworthiness ($M = 2.95$, SD = 2.352) and communication competence ($M = 3.31$, $SD = 2.093$) were still the top traits according to superintendents, and intelligence was the least important trait ranked ($M = 6.13$, $SD = 2.100$). Table 2 displays the mean, median, and mode of the trait rankings according to superintendents.

Table 2

Mean, Median, Mode of Trait Rankins (Superintendent Responses)

Trait	Mean	Median	Mode	Min.	Max.	Standard Deviation
Trustworthiness	2.95	2.00	1	1	8	2.352
Communication Competence	3.31	3.00	2	1	8	2.093
Professional Competence	3.89	4.00	3	1	8	2.157
Problem Solving Ability	4.02	4.00	3	1	8	1.665
Leadership Motivation	4.51	4.00	4	1	8	2.243
Confidence	4.87	5.00	6	1	8	2.125
Initiative	5.95	5.00	5	1	8	1.938
Intelligence	6.13	7.00	8	1	8	2.100

Table 3 displays the percentage of respondents who ranked each trait first or second, in the upper half of traits, in the lower half of traits, or seventh or eighth.

Table 3

Trait Ranking Percentages (Superintendent Responses)

Trait	1st	1st or 2nd	Upper Half	Lower Half	7th or 8th	Last
Trustworthiness	38.2%	60.0%	76.4%	23.6%	12.7%	9.1%
Communication Competence	20.0%	47.3%	74.5%	25.5%	14.6%	5.5%
Professional Competence	16.4%	30.9%	63.6%	36.4%	14.6%	5.5%
Leadership Motivation	9.1%	25.5%	56.4%	53.6%	27.3%	10.9%
Confidence	7.3%	27.3%	41.8%	58.2%	25.5%	16.4%
Problem Solving Ability	3.7%	20.4%	61.1%	38.9%	7.4%	1.9%
Initiative	3.6%	18.2%	32.7%	67.3%	23.7%	7.3%
Intelligence	3.6%	9.1%	21.8%	78.2%	58.1%	34.5%

Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the importance of each of the eight leadership traits according to school board presidents. Each trait was analyzed using three questions designed to flesh out a different dimension of the trait, presented on a 5-point Likert scale, with 1 being not at all important and 5 being extremely important. Trustworthiness was the trait most represented towards the top of the list for trait dimensions, as it was with the superintendent responses;

however, communication competence was a close second. C*onfidence, being calm when confronted with problems* was the top-rated trait dimension ($M = 4.74$, $SD = .444$). *Trustworthiness, perceived as a person whom others can believe* was the top dimension of trustworthiness among school board presidents and the third dimension overall among the 24 ($M = 4.78$, $SD = .424$). Table 4 displays means and standard deviations of leadership trait dimensions as rated by school board presidents.

Table 4

Means and Standard Deviations (Board President Responses)

Trait Question	Min.	Max.	Mean	Standard Deviation	Variance
Confidence Calm	4	5	4.85	.362	.131
Communication Knowledge and Awareness	4	5	4.81	.396	.157
Trustworthiness Believable	4	5	4.78	.424	.197
Initiative Work Ethic	3	5	4.78	.506	.256
Communication Proficient Skills	4	5	4.78	.424	.179
Trustworthiness Character	4	5	4.74	.447	.199
Leadership Motivation Responsibility	4	5	4.67	.480	.231
Initiative Drive	4	5	4.67	.480	.231
Trustworthiness Integrity	4	5	4.67	.480	.231
Leadership Motivation Desire to Influence	4	5	4.63	.492	.242
Professional Competence Perceived as Capable	4	5	4.59	.501	.251
Confidence Belief in Own Abilities	3	5	4.56	.577	.333
Communication Appropriate for Context	4	5	4.56	.506	.256
Problem Solving Utilizing Existing Resources	3	5	4.52	.580	.336
Confidence Self-assured Regarding Decisions	3	5	4.52	.580	.336
Professional Competence Knowledge	3	5	4.48	.643	.413
Initiative Determination	3	5	4.48	.580	.336
Intelligence Reasoning	3	5	4.44	.577	.333
Professional Competence School Finance	3	5	4.37	.792	.627
Leadership Motivation Prefer Leadership Role	1	5	4.30	.869	.755
Intelligence Perceptive	3	5	4.30	.869	.755
Problem Solving Creative	3	5	4.26	.594	.353
Problem Solving Able to Identify Problems	3	5	4.15	.602	.362
Intelligence IQ	1	5	3.15	1.134	1.285

The final question on the survey asked respondents to rank the eight leadership traits one through eight. Trustworthiness ($M = 3.41$, $SD = 2.594$) and communication competence ($M = 3.65$, $SD = 2.405$) were the top two ranked traits according to school board presidents, which is similar to the results indicated by the mean ratings of the aggregate trait dimensions on a Likert scale. Table 5 displays the mean, median, and mode of the trait rankings according to school board presidents.

Table 5

Mean, Median, Mode of Trait Rankins (Board President Responses)

Trait	Mean	Median	Mode	Min.	Max.	Standard Deviation
Trustworthiness	3.41	2.50	1	1	8	2.594
Communication Competence	3.65	3.00	1	1	8	2.405
Professional Competence	3.96	3.00	2	1	8	2.421
Leadership Motivation	4.13	4.00	2	1	8	2.160
Problem Solving Ability	4.74	5.00	5	2	8	1.685
Initiative	5.09	6.00	6	2	8	2.091
Confidence	5.65	6.00	6	2	8	1.695
Intelligence	5.91	7.00	8	1	8	2.334

The ranking of traits by school board presidents produced similar results to the analysis of the aggregate ratings of the trait dimensions, but some differences did emerge. Trustworthiness and communication competence were again the top two traits among school board presidents. Trustworthiness was ranked first at 36.4%, while 50.0% ranked the trait as first or second. 72.7% ranked trustworthiness in the upper half. Communication competence was ranked first by 26.1% of respondents, second by 43.5%, and 60.9% of school board presidents ranked the trait in the upper half. Only 13% of school board presidents ranked professional competence as the most important trait, but 33.5% of respondents ranked it as the second highest trait. Professional competence was ranked either one or two (43.5%) and in the upper half (60.9%) by identical percentages as communication competence. Table 6 displays the percentage of respondents who ranked each trait first or second, in the upper half of traits, in the lower half of traits, or seventh or eighth.

Table 6

Trait Ranking Percentages (Board President Responses)

Trait	1st	1st or 2nd	Upper Half	Lower Half	7th or 8th	Last
Trustworthiness	36.4%	50.0%	72.7%	27.3%	22.7%	9.1%
Communication Competence	26.1%	43.5%	60.9%	39.1%	17.3%	4.3%
Professional Competence	13.0%	43.5%	60.9%	39.1%	21.7%	8.7%
Leadership Motivation	8.7%	21.7%	65.2%	34.8%	17.3%	13.0%
Intelligence	8.7%	13.0%	21.7%	78.3%	56.5%	34.8%
Initiative	0%	18.2%	36.4%	63.6%	22.7%	9.1%
Problem Solving Ability	0%	13.0%	43.5%	56.5%	17.3%	4.3%
Confidence	0%	4.3%	26.1%	73.9%	34.7%	13.0%

Research question three asked to what extent do position and school enrollment influence differences in perceptions of superintendent leadership traits in a rural state in the Midwest. A MANOVA was conducted to analyze the interactive effect of the independent variables, namely whether perceptions were impacted by enrollment, and whether superintendent and school board president's perceptions differed. The independent variables were role (superintendent or school board president) and enrollment (small, medium, and large). The dependent variables were the rankings of each of the eight leadership traits.

Looking at each of the predictors individually, role did not show a statistically significant main effect in the MANOVA, $F_{(8, 63)} = 0.938$, $p > .05$; Wilk's $\Lambda = .894$, partial $\eta^2 = .106$. Although not statistically significant, the main effect for role explained 10.6% of the variance, superintendents $N = 54$, school board presidents $N = 22$. The main effect for enrollment did not show statistically significant results, $F_{(16, 126)} = 0.992$, $p > .05$; Wilk's $\Lambda = .789$, partial $\eta^2 = .112$. Although not statistically significant, the main effect for enrollment explained 11.2% of the variance, small $N = 37$, medium $N = 22$, large $N = 14$. The MANOVA did not show a statistically significant interaction between role and enrollment, but the model did account for 13.1% of variance, $F_{(16, 126)} = 1.190$, $p > .05$; Wilk's $\Lambda = 0.755$, partial $\eta^2 = .131$. Without a statistically significant result, no further post hoc tests were conducted.

Conclusions

The data from this study led to the following conclusions:

1. Both superintendents and school board presidents in this rural, Midwestern state identified trustworthiness and communication competence as the most important leadership traits for superintendents to possess.

2. Both superintendents and school board presidents identified intelligence as the least important leadership trait among the eight traits studied.

3. When taking a multidimensional view of the eight leadership traits a nuanced vision of superintendent as leader begins to emerge, based on the interaction and interdependence of the leadership traits with one another.

Discussion

The big takeaway from this study is that these data begin to paint a picture of superintendents in a rural Midwestern state.

This study does not provide evidence on what the most effective superintendents are doing. Nor is it prescriptive, telling superintendents which leadership behaviors will endear them to their boards and provide long term job security.

What it does do, however, is provide two perspectives regarding which leadership traits are important in this rural, Midwestern state. It begins to inform the profession by painting the picture of what school board presidents value in a superintendent. It also paints the same picture from the perspective of other superintendents who are on the job every day, working within this context of a rural state in the Midwest.

For both superintendents and school board presidents, confidence was ranked low in order of importance among leadership traits. However, one dimension of this trait, *confidence, is calm when confronted with problems*, was the top-rated trait dimension among both superintendents and school board presidents. This disparity speaks to the interaction of the traits in the makeup of the whole leader. When taken within the totality of leadership trait dimensions that make up a leader, it helps to paint a picture of the ideal leader. Calm and collected in a crisis, trustworthy, competent in communication, this person can be believed and can deliver a message that people will follow. This is the man or woman that people want leading them.

Trustworthiness emerged as the most important trait to both superintendents and to school board presidents. When analyzing the individual dimensions of the trait, the data told a more nuanced story.

For superintendents, *trustworthiness, perceived as a person of integrity* was tied for the dimension rated most consistently as highly important, while *trustworthiness, perceived as a person of high moral character* was a close second.

For school board presidents, *trustworthiness, perceived as a person whom others can believe* was the most important dimension of trustworthiness. How school board presidents rated the importance of these trait dimensions may be telling in how they value the trait of communication competence, especially when viewed in light of how they ranked these traits as compared to superintendents.

A school board president's perception of a superintendent's trustworthiness may be dependent on the superintendent's communication competence. School board presidents ranked trustworthiness slightly higher than communication competence. Superintendents ranked trustworthiness higher than communication competence, whereas school board presidents seemed to value the two traits more closely to each other at the top of the list. It appears that school board presidents place more value on communication competence than do superintendents.

The ranking of intelligence as a leadership trait presents a paradox in this study when compared to past research, as it was the trait ranked the lowest among both superintendents and school board presidents.

The aggregate of leadership trait dimensions also pointed to intelligence being the least important trait in this study. Intelligence is typically one of the most consistently correlated traits to leadership emergence and success (Antonakis, 2011; Hoffman et al., 2011; Kickul and Neuman, 2000; Stogdill, 1948; Zacarro, 2007). But there may be a logical explanation.

First, all of these eight traits, including intelligence, were deemed important by the superintendents participating in the pilot study. The dimensions of *intelligence, has a high reasoning ability* and *intelligence, is highly perceptive* had mean ratings of 4.48 and 4.15 respectively, both falling between quite important and extremely important on the Likert scale. Judge, Colbert, and Ilies (2004) sum up why intelligence is so closely linked to leadership in stating that, "leaders are responsible for such tasks as developing strategies, solving problems, motivating employees, and monitoring the environment," all intellectual functions (p. 543). Intelligence is important to superintendents and school board presidents; it is just not the most important trait.

Superintendents and school board presidents both expressed that trustworthiness and communication competence were the most important traits for superintendents to possess. In this rural Midwestern state it is less about what a superintendent knows, and more about whether people know they can trust the superintendent. Bass (1981), Zacarro (2007), Zacarro et al. (2018) point to a curvilinear relationship between intelligence and

leadership, where individual subjects on either the very low or very high end of the intelligence spectrum struggle to find success in leadership tasks or in management positions. Northouse (2016) sums up this relationship in saying that if a leader's IQ differs too much from followers, the result can be counterproductive, as the leader struggles to connect with followers and to communicate ideas that are too advanced (p. 24).

There are a number of traits that a successful leader must have in his or her tool kit to be successful. Although intelligence consistently shows some of the greatest effect sizes across the body of research, it seems that there comes a point where the disparity between leader and follower intelligence brings diminishing returns. That point appears to be somewhere around the point when it negatively impacts other traits that a leader needs to be successful, like communication or even trustworthiness because the followers just cannot relate to this person.

The leadership traits ranked towards the top get noticed, as do those on the bottom, but the traits in the middle also have a story to tell. The difference in how school board presidents and superintendents ranked leadership traits like problem solving ability and professional competence is not surprising when one considers the difference in roles between a superintendent and a school board president.

Superintendents ranked problem-solving ability higher than did school board presidents. Superintendents solve problems on a daily basis, a role that their peers would recognize as being highly important. School board presidents do not get involved in the day-to-day activities in a school, but rather, they meet once or twice per month. Often times when a problem is brought to the board, it has been hashed through and is brought forward

with a recommendation by the superintendent. Conversely, school board presidents ranked professional competence higher than did superintendents, likely because superintendents are closer to the job and take for granted the level of expertise required to run a school district on a daily basis.

School board presidents typically have fulltime jobs outside of education, so their areas of competence are likely outside of education. School board presidents rely on superintendents to be their experts in the field. School board presidents value superintendents who know what they are doing.

Recommendations for Practice

While it is interesting to see which leadership traits are valued most by school board presidents and superintendents, one has to ask why it matters.

It matters because how people lead is driven by who they are. While a person does not change who he or she is, a person can strive to be his or her best self. That could also mean being his or her best self for a given situation. Human behavior and relationships are complex, and according to Zacarro et al. (2018) leadership is a complex mix of heritable foundational traits and more mutable leadership capacities that drive leaders' behavior in different situations.

Leaders may choose which tools to pull from their leadership toolboxes in a given context, or even in specific situations, regardless of whether those tools are traits that they were born with or capacities they have developed through years of experience. Neither a superintendent's possession of a given trait, nor the importance of that trait in a given situation is binary. Each leader possesses a number of different leadership traits to

varying degrees, and the combination of those traits, and how they align with the school board president's awareness of them, can predispose a leader to success in varying situations:

1. Superintendents have an opportunity be more self-aware and use that knowledge to inform their practice. Each leader possesses a certain combination of leadership traits, and superintendents can utilize that knowledge, coupled with their own self-awareness, to focus and prioritize their leadership efforts more appropriately.

2. Knowing that school board presidents value the same leadership traits in superintendents differently than superintendents do, superintendents can utilize that nuance to shift their approach to leadership in ways that will strengthen relationships with their school boards.

3. School board presidents can be more aware of the traits that superintendents value and then better understand what makes their own superintendents tick, meaning that school board presidents would be better equipped to work on improving the school board president superintendent relationship.

Recommendations for Further Study

The purpose of this study was to determine which leadership traits of a superintendent are most important according to superintendents and school board presidents in a rural state in the Midwest. This study also sought to link leadership of public school superintendents to the study of leadership in other areas, recognizing that while the context of school leadership in a rural state in the Midwest is unique in many ways, it is still leadership.

The results showed that some leadership traits are deemed important by both superintendents and school board presidents, but those results led to several other questions that should be investigated:

1. Although there was some variance in the level of importance among the eight traits studied, and the order of importance varied somewhat depending on the role and other demographics of the respondents, all eight traits were rated as important. Another study could be conducted on a larger number of traits to determine which traits are important among a broader range of leadership traits and perhaps if any other leadership traits exist that are perceived as equally important or even more important than the eight that were studied here.

2. This study was conducted in one rural state in the Midwest. A similar study could be conducted in other states to see if the results could be applied more broadly.

3. It is one thing to study which leadership traits are perceived to be important for superintendents to possess, but that study begs the question, which traits among these would be correlated with successful leadership in a given context. A study could be conducted in which the results of some measure of success are compared to the degree to which superintendents possess each of these eight traits. Which combination of these traits is correlated with given measures of success for public school superintendents?

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Self-reflections on the Amount of Superintendent Talk and Impact on Stakeholders from Wyoming Superintendents

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Abstract

The purpose of the current study was to gain the self-reflections from K-12 superintendents on their amount of oral language/talk to accomplish the work of the superintendency and the engagement of internal and external stakeholders. The focus of this study were superintendents in a rural, Western state. The response rate of the study was 63%. The results of this quantitative study were (a) superintendents talk over 74% of the time to accomplish the work of the superintendency, and (b) when engaging internal and external stakeholders, superintendents preferred working with internal groups versus external ones.

Key Words

Introduction

Forty-eight public school districts operated within the State of Wyoming in 2015-16 (NCES, 2015-16). The majority of Wyoming superintendents work in rural and town remote/distant settings as opposed to suburban or urban settings [95.9% of Wyoming Superintendents work in Rural: Remote/Distant/Fringe (58.4%) plus Town: Remote (37.5%) (NCES, 2015-16)] being more than 45 miles from cities of 50,000 people or more.

Within this context, Wyoming is a state of excellence in education in the Western United States. According to the 2018 Quality Counts rankings, Wyoming is the only state west of the states of Minnesota, Iowa, Missouri, Arkansas, and Louisiana with an overall state ranking above C and is ranked seventh nationally ("Quality Counts," 2018). Wyoming superintendents are vital contributors to this statewide success, often working as a "jack of all trades" (Lamkin, 2006, p. 21) in their rural communities.

Rural superintendents play a key leadership role within the community (Jenkins, 2007; Simpson, 2013) and statewide in education (Oakley, Watkins & Sheng, 2017); therefore, it is critical to look at their roles from more than one perspective. Björk, Kowalski, and Browne-Ferrigno (2014) provided five roles for looking at the superintendent in general as teacher-scholar, manager, democratic leader, applied social scientist, and communicator. Copeland (2013), in exploring the rural, Western superintendent, identified five core superintendent roles as manager, planner, listener, communicator, and community involvement.

Together, these ten roles provide a framework and context for understanding superintendent practice (Kowalski, 2013). Within this practice, Copeland (2013) stated that it was vital for rural superintendents to have "comprehensive communication skills" (p. 9), and Kowalski (2005) stated superintendents could not accomplish the work of the superintendency without using their talk.

Relational leadership theory (Uhl-Bien, 2006) "focuses on communication as the medium in which all social constructions of leadership are continuously created and changed" (p. 665). Hackman and Johnson (2018) defined leadership as, "human communication that modifies the attitudes and behaviors of others in order to meet shared group goals and needs" (p. 11).

Holmes and Parker (2019) using the lens of Motivating Language Theory (Mayfield & Mayfield, 2018) determined that superintendents use their superintendent talk in terms of Motivating Language Intensity to positively impact principal outcomes in the form of communication satisfaction, and communication competence and positively impact school and district outcomes through their leader effectiveness.

Therefore, it seems that studying superintendents' talk may help us understand how superintendents accomplish the work of the position. The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of superintendents in Wyoming regarding their talk and its relationship to their stakeholders.

This survey research set out to answer the following research questions:

1. What is the percentage of time Wyoming superintendents spend talking to accomplish the work of the superintendency?

2. What are Wyoming superintendents' perceptions of their level of influence on various stakeholders based upon their superintendent talk?

Literature Review
Superintendent talk

A review of the research on superintendent talk focuses on communication competence (Kowalski, 2005, 2013) best practices (Callan & Levinson, 2011), and motivating language (Holmes & Parker, 2019; Williams, 2017).

The characteristics of communication competence espoused by Kowalski (2013) center around the multidirectional flow of communication, interpersonal exchanges of communication between stakeholders, relational and relation building exchanges of communication between stakeholders, and symmetrical communication exchanges benefiting all the parties involved.

Kowalski, Petersen and Fusarelli (2007, p. 88) go so far as to state, "Professionally and politically, *relational communication* [emphasis added by authors] has become normative for modern organizations." Copeland (2013) noted that if rural superintendents were not competent communicators this would assuredly negatively impact their success.

Examples of areas of emphasis for superintendents regarding best practices in communication include superintendent-board relations, community and stakeholder relations, instructional leadership and staff interactions, administrative and central office leadership, policy and political engagement, and crisis management communications (Callan & Levinson, 2011).

Houston and Eadie (2002) reported 25% of a superintendent's time should be devoted to

communication as part of maintaining healthy board-superintendent relations. However, Dan Novey, a longtime superintendent in North Carolina, indicated he spent over 60% of his time on communicating with board members and working to maintain healthy and positive relations (D. Novey, June 25, 2015, personal communication). Forner, Bierlein-Palmer, and Reeves (2012) found effective rural superintendents talked constantly about student achevement.

Motivating Language Theory (Holmes & Parker, 2017, 2018, 2019; Mayfield & Mayfield, 2018; Mayfield, Mayfield, & Kopf, 1995) focuses on the intentional and strategic use of leader oral language [combined with aligned leader actions] to influence and achieve employee and organizational goals and outcomes.

Williams (2017) in a study of the Triangle 5 superintendents in North Carolina found that superintendent motivating language positively influenced principal intent-to-stay (retention). When the Williams (2017) results are combined with Holmes and Parker (2019) results, it is evident that superintendent talk has a positive impact on principals across a variety of outcomes.

There is little in the research of superintendent communications specifically on superintendent talk as a medium for administrative practice (see Lowenhaupt, 2014) or the amount of time superintendents talk as a percentage of work thus the focus of Research Question 1.

Superintendent influence on stakeholders

Superintendents are instrumental in working with stakeholders and are often the "face and voice" of the district. Opfer and Denmark (2001) found that superintendents can influence

and mediate positive relationships between the school community and school boards.

Parent (2009) in discussing superintendent and school board communications stated:

> Knowing your school board members and their individual needs regarding communications is essential to making the whole system work smoothly. For some board members, it is necessary to "overcommunicate." Other board members may want to only know the basics. Understanding board members' individual needs is important way in which superintendents can keep board members in tune with district plans and initiatives and help everyone stay involved. p. 21

Harvey, Cambron-McCabe, Cunningham, and Koff (2013) stated as key for superintendents in working with district stakeholders, "you need to talk the local talk" (p. 272). Superintendents work with internal and external stakeholders on a wide variety of issues and topics ranging from board policy and district internal issues (Kowalski, 2013); to labor relations, community engagement, strategic planning, and parent issues (Callen & Levinson, 2011); as well as state and local items of concern and interest to local governments and political actors (Fowler, 2013).

Bagin (2009) held that superintendents who act as "ambassadors" for their districts and engage with local and state political leaders, as well as business leaders, build networks and assist in spreading influence on educational issues. Copeland (2013) stated that rural superintendents must be visible in the community and build releationships with stakeholders. Jenkins (2007) held that rural superintendents are leaders in the community and as such are constantly under the microscope. Given the leadership position of Wyoming education and the position of superintendents as leaders at the local level, it is important to gain additional understanding into their personal insights into working with internal and external stakeholders thus Research Question 2.

Thus, through the collection of data from practicing superintendents, the intent of this study is to gain further insight into the depth of superintendent talk and its relationship upon stakeholders as a select area of emphasis.

Methodology
An online survey was used to answer the research questions in this study. The online survey was constructed from select Motivating Language Toolbox (Holmes & Parker, 2018; Sharbrough, Simmons, & Cantril, 2006) items modified through a review of the literature. The online survey was administered with IRB approval provided by the University of Wyoming to public school superintendents identified by the Wyoming State Department of Education as leading one of the forty-eight school districts within the state.

Participants and setting
Superintendents in each district were contacted via publicly available email accounts and received an email invitation to participate in the study. Forty-seven of the 48 superintendents agreed to participate in the online survey with 30 of superintendents completing the survey leading to a 63% survey response rate.

In order to arrive at the 63% response rate, superintendents were sent one initial contact and three reminders with a financial incentive for participation in the study. The

demographic characteristics of the superintendents who participated in the study are provided in Table 1.

Table 1

Superintendent Demographics

Category	N	Percent
Gender		
Males	27	90
Females	3	10
Race		
White	28	93
Native American	1	3
Other	1	3
Age		
Below 36 - 45	6	20
46 - 55	14	47
56 – 65 Plus	10	33
Total Years as Supt.		
Less than 3	5	17
3 - 6	12	40
7 - 10	7	23
11 - 15	3	10
15 - Plus	3	10
Level of Education		
Masters	9	30
Ed. Specialist	13	43
Doctorate	8	27

The average superintendent tenure of the survey respondents was 6.8 years. The superintendents within the sample represented districts from across the state with 15 superintendents leading districts with a student population of 750 students or less (15 out of 22 superintendents at this level [68%]), seven superintendents leading districts with a student population between 751 and 1500 students (7 out of 11 superintendents at this level [64%]), and eight superintendents leading districts with student populations larger than 1501 students

(8 out of 15 superintendents at this level [53%]).

Data sources
The survey consisted of 29 items plus relevant demographic items. Twenty-one of the items came from the Motivating Language Best Practices Checklist (Mayfield & Mayfield, 2002) modified to fit the vernacular of K-12 superintendents and with the addition of a Likert response scale ranging from 1 (very untrue of me) to 7 (very true of me).

For example, a Meaning-making Language construct question, "Do I tell my workers stories about people who have been successful in the organization" (Mayfield & Mayfield, 2002, p. 93) was modified to "I tell my employees stories about people who have been successful in the district." There were no negatively worded items. The data for this study came from eight items resulting from modifications to the Motivating Language Toolbox (Holmes & Parker, 2018; Mayfield & Mayfield, 2018; Sharbrough, Simmons, & Cantril, 2006) based upon a review of the literature so that participants could additionally complete the items on a 7- point Likert scale [1 being the lowest] items or as sliding scale items ranging from 0 to 100 percent.

Three open-ended response items used to gather superintendent perceptions of their oral communication strengths, weaknesses, and inferences of what their principals might perceive as receivers of their superintendent talk. The internal consistency of the modified scale, measured using Cronbach's alpha for the scale in this study was .91.

Data analysis
The statistics utilized for this study are limited to a reporting of means to answer each of the research questions. SPSS version 21 was used for the analyses. The means and standard

deviations for the items from the ML Toolbox are reported by research question. Additionally, from three open-ended response items quotes were drawn to support the survey results whenever possible.

Results

The results of this study are reported by research question.

RQ 1—Percentage of time talking

Wyoming superintendents in this study reported using their talk an average of 74% of the time (M=73.6, SD=16.06) on a scale from 0 to 100 as the medium of administrative practice to accomplish the work of the superintendency. This result is consistent with the percentage of time [over 70% of the time] principals' talk during the workday as part of the medium of administrative practice (Gaziel, 1995; Holmes & Parker; 2018; Kmetz & Willower, 1982).

RQ 2—Stakeholder influence

Wyoming superintendents in this study prioritized their influence with district stakeholders on a Likert scale of 1 (not at all influential) to 5 (extremely influential) as school administrators (M=4.5, SD=.5), central office personnel (M=4.5, SD=.57), maintenance and operations personnel (M=4.2, SD=.71), school board members (M=4.1, SD=.68), teachers (M=3.9, SD=.73), community members (M=3.7, SD=.88), parents (M=3.6, SD=.82), and political leaders (M=3.1, SD=1.1).

In discussing positive superintendent talk strengths regarding influencing stakeholders, a Wyoming superintendent stated, "[I am] better at presenting than conversing. Better in meetings than one-on-one." Regarding improvements in superintendent talk, two Wyoming superintendents stated, "[I need] more time to present to more stakeholders," and "I need to continue working

on my knowledge of Wyoming Education Law and district policy, so I can share with others."

These samples of superintendent talk working and desiring to influence stakeholders are examples of leadership as defined by Hackman and Johnson (2018) and are further examples of how superintendent talk can support, guide, and contribute to the achievement of district outcomes consistent with the Motivating Langauge Theory outcome of leadership effectiveness (Holmes & Parker, 2017, 2018, 2019).

Discussion

This study set out to better understand superintendent talk from the reflections and internal perspectives of superintendents in a rural, Western state.

A key result of this study was that Wyoming superintendents spend over 74% of their time communicating orally to accomplish the work of the superintendency, which is on par with the results of seminal principal oral communication studies (Bredeson, 1987; Gaziel, 1995; Kmetz & Willower, 1982) [RQ1]. Restated, superintendent talk is the medium of superintendent administrative practice and is consistent with the Bezzina, Paletta, and Alimehmeti (2017), Holmes & Parker (2018), and Lowenhaupt (2014) declaration that principal talk is the medium of practice for principals.

It is unfathomable to see how a superintendent can accomplish the work of the superintendent position without talking and is now quantifiable with the 74% number possibly being too low as former superintendent Mike Escalante asserted that school superintendents spend over 90% of their time communicating orally (M. Escalante, February 26, 2011, personal communication).

Wyoming superintendents in this study demonstrated a clear preference in working with their administrative teams and internal educational stakeholders over members of the community, parents, and political leaders [RQ2].

This is an additional key insight and consistent with the Oakley, Watkins and Sheng (2017) conclusion that superintendents may struggle with political involvement, particularly those superintendents who have few prior administrative experiences before becoming a superintendent and those superintendents whose background is largely elementary school experience as opposed to high school experience.

Kowalski, Young, and Peterson (2013) reported (a) superintendents with a positive disposition to community interaction participate with the community at higher rates as opposed to those who do not; (b) if a superintendent believes that community involvement translates to higher student achievement, they will engage the community more often; and (c) rural superintendents have higher levels of community involvement than non-rural superintendents.

Finally, Fowler (2013) in discussing educational policy stated, "To a great extent school [and district] administration is achieved through talk: talk in meetings, talk in random hallway encounters, talk on the telephone, talk to the media, and talk on the grapevine" (p. 24). Thus, it is critical for superintendents to be able to understand their stakeholder audiences and overcome their internal levels of resistance in order to maximize their micro-political leadership and achieve their district goals and visions through their use of oral language [talk].

Limitations, Significance of the Study, and Future Research

While the focus of this research are the superintendents of a rural, Western state thus limiting the generalizability of the results to urban settings, the superintendents of this rural, Western state are leaders in the nation serving a state that is in the top-ten on many of the K-12 educational rankings. Additionally, the majority of superintendents serve districts in remote/rural locations as do those in Wyoming; therefore, a great deal can be learned from them and their leadership.

In terms of significance, this study:

- Illuminates the amount of time superintendents orally communicate in order to carry out the position of superintendent (74% of the time);

- Reinforces previous results (Oakley, Watkins, & Sheng; 2017) that superintendents may shy away from political engagement and involvement, thus indicating a need for preservice and in-service development for superintendents to increase their effectiveness as political actors;

- Emphasizes the importance of superintendent talk as part of superintendent preservice education and ongoing in-service development (Holmes & Parker, 2019) addressing the concerns expressed by Kowalski (2013) (a) administrators learn to communicate and talk by practice (often too late), and (b) communication is confined to a managerial context (instead of a multi-faceted and layered contextual competence).

Looking forward, future research should continue to: (a) explore the concepts of superintendent talk as the medium of superintendent administrative practice; (b) further examine the amount of time superintendents spend orally communicating, equivalent study (Gaziel, 1995); and (c) an examination of superintendent talk impact on employee and district stakeholders and outcomes.

Conclusion

Given Copeland's (2013) call for rural superintendents to have comprehensive communication skills this study sheds light on not only on how much time those skills are needed by rural superintendents but additionally reinforces how rural superintendents prefer to engage internal and external stakeholders. Knowing that the medium by which superintendents carry out their roles, practices, beliefs, and actions three-fourths of the time is oral language should drive those who hire, train, and prepare superintendents, as well as superintendents themselves to reflect upon the importance of talk and how to best maximize the power of talk while reducing the assumption that every superintendent knows how to talk and does not need any specialized training, support, or guidance in this most critical of areas. Finally, knowing that superintendents have a preference in working with internal stakeholders as opposed to external ones is a valuable insight for superintendents to reflect upon in terms of policy work, community engagement efforts, and bond management and leadership campaigns.

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- Publisher, city, state, year, # of pages, price
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