Are We Burned Out? A Multi-Year Statewide Study of P-12 Superintendents

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Abstract

Despite the wealth of literature that reveals policy enforcement, psychological and social stressors, and additional routine job duties of the superintendency cause burnout (Johnson et al., 2020; Lefdal & Jong, 2020), comparatively neglected is literature on the source of this burnout. The purpose of this study was to conduct a multi-year statewide study of P-12 superintendent burnout. Superintendent participants (n=124, n=81) completed the Copenhagen Burnout Inventory (CBI), which addresses three subscales: 1) personal burnout, 2) work-related burnout, and 3) client-related burnout. The participants in the second year of the study reported slightly more burnout than participants in the first year of the study. Superintendents in both years experienced the greatest burnout through emotional exhaustion and tiredness.

Key Words

superintendents, burnout, Copenhagen Burnout Inventory

This study examines an emerging theme of burnout among superintendents across the nation. Morton and Valley (2022, January 6) reported in *The Hechinger Report* that in the past year, the superintendent turnover rate was up to 25% compared to the typical 14-16% rate and as many as 3,000 superintendent position vacancies can be attributed to ongoing political turmoil.

Despite the wealth of literature that shows policy enforcement, psychological and social stressors, and additional routine job duties of the superintendent position cause burnout (Johnson et al., 2020; Lefdal & Jong, 2020; Bell, 2019), comparatively neglected is literature on the source of these stressors. Since the turn of the century, superintendents have seen dramatic changes in their profession.

Among recent challenges are the advent of social media, the rising number of school shootings, the increased number of charter schools, vaping, a global pandemic, and a sudden shift to remote learning.

Additional changes can be seen in the context of the work superintendents do from an increased politicization of public education to stakeholder expectations of round-the-clock connectivity and activity including immediate responses to emails and phone calls as well as ongoing participation in events and fundraisers. How have these challenges impacted superintendents? Are they burnout? If so, how? This study investigated the answers to these questions.

Literature Review

Although literature exists on teacher burnout, still in 2024, there remains no comparative literature on *superintendent* burnout. Klocko et al. (2019) found that grit and resilience build up overtime in effective superintendents due to the perseverance required to do what matters and constantly working under challenging conditions.

However, Lefdal and Jong (2019) revealed that the constant challenges and pressures of the superintendency can have devastating effects on the superintendent and his/her family. Their results posit superintendents place an elevated level of stress on themselves to meet expectations, and if they

do not have family and peer support, the stressors can be destructive.

In addition to the stress superintendents put on themselves, other types of stressors have historically negatively impacted superintendents including time pressures, lack of communication, performance feedback, role ambiguity, role overload, and the responsibility of the welfare of others (Litchka et al., 2009). Past research on understanding and reducing stress in the superintendency related more to the impact of federal and state policy enactments.

Hawk and Martin (2011) found high policy stressors affect superintendents and some of the more effective coping mechanisms were exercise, a collaborative community, and support from the school board.

If coping mechanisms are ineffective, there is increased chance for stress. They also confirmed there was a high amount of pressure that superintendents put on themselves related to feeling responsible for the success or failure of their schools. Most superintendents reported feeling additionally stressed because "success" was determined by how satisfied the school board and community were with the results of the school.

Two occupational stressors commonly identified by superintendents are not only complying with state and federal mandates without having necessary resources but also preparing and allocating budget resources. Hawk and Martin (2011) conducted a study with 100 superintendents in the state of Missouri.

Participants completed the *Superintendent Stress and Coping Mechanisms* survey and qualitative open-ended questions investigating stress and coping mechanisms,

specifically in terms of gender. Researchers found high policy stressors affected most superintendent participants regardless of their gender.

Additionally, the researchers revealed that a minimal number of superintendents were participating in stress management programs. Although Hawk and Martin (2011) found no gender differences, Robinson and Shakeshaft (2015) found female superintendents identified long days, isolation, visibility, position requirements, school board relations, helplessness, unhealthy practices, lack of sleep, and being considered a token superintendent all as stressors affecting them.

The success of superintendents often hinges on the relationships they build with their school boards, central office staff, unions, teachers, principals, civic leaders, and community members (Hart, 2018; Hill & Jochim, 2018). Hart (2018) conducted a qualitative study with 13 superintendents investigating what factors affect their decision making.

The most common response was the belief of what was best for children followed by concerns for how the school board would interpret community reactions (Hart, 2018).

Morton and Valley (2022, January 6) reported many superintendents were unhappy in their role due to additional stressors related to the COVID-19 pandemic, specifically during school board meetings.

Superintendents wanted to protect the community and children, but COVID-19 vaccine and mask mandates angered parents and community members. Current research triggered by more traumatic events related to natural disasters, school safety, and mental health of individuals has placed additional

responsibility on the superintendent and unfortunately added to the stressors that negatively affect a superintendent.

The stress of the superintendent role has historically affected the individual on a personal level as well (Johnson et al., 2020; Lefdal & Jong, 2019; Robinson & Shakeshaft, 2015). Lefdal and Jong (2019) conducted a state-wide study that investigated the causes of stress and how superintendents cope with stress.

The researchers found that stress on a superintendent spilled over into their homes impacting their spouse or significant other and children. Eventually, this stress can lead to the demise of relationships. Robinson and Shakeshaft (2015) conducted semi-structured interviews with 49 women that had left the superintendency position.

A reoccurring theme was summed up by the researchers stating, "the effect of the stress caused issues with sleeping, eating, maintaining exercise, minimizing time off, and damaging relationships and friendships" (p. 440). Johnson et al. (2020) conducted a study examining how African American superintendents coped with stressors of the superintendent role.

Their African American superintendent participants gravitated toward problem-based coping strategies; however, "the typical African American superintendent in the study was only able to muster enough psychological and social resources necessary to remain successful in the position" (p. 6). In the era of residual past and current crises affecting all superintendents, researchers must examine and reveal the sources of burnout in the superintendent role for them to not just remain successful but to move to the next level of improving and transforming education.

Methods

The purpose of this exploratory study was to investigate P-12 school superintendent burnout. The researchers utilized survey research and requested the participants complete the Copenhagen Burnout Inventory (CBI).

The core focus of the CBI is fatigue and exhaustion split into personal, work, and client-related subscales. The CBI survey modified for this study entailed 31 Likert-based questions (always or to a very high degree, often or to a high degree, sometimes or somewhat, seldom or to a low degree, and none/almost never or to a very low degree).

The CBI subscales were addressed in the order of personal burnout (6 questions), work-related burnout (7 questions), client-related burnout related to students and parents (6 questions), client-related burnout related to administrators and teachers (6 questions), and client-related burnout related to school board members (6 questions).

In the first year of the study, of the participants (N = 123) who responded to the demographic questions, 84% were male and 60% of superintendent participants were 50-59 years of age, with the next highest age being 40-49 years (30%).

The majority of participants were married (94%) and white or Caucasian (99%). Seventy-four percent of the participants' highest earned degree was a masters and the majority (71%) served as superintendent for 6 or more years. Additionally, 68% of participants reported having held a principal or teacher position for 6 or more years. Just under half of the participants (43%) reported being in

their current position for 0-5 years (43%), and 57% have held their position longer than 6 years. Participants represented a variety of school district sizes including 2,000 or less students (63%) and over 2,000 students (37%). Fifty-three of participants indicated less than 40% of their students were receiving free/reduced lunches.

In the second year of the study of the participants (N = 80) who responded to the demographic questions, 86% were male and 59% of participants were of 50-59 years of age, with the highest age being 40-49 years (24%).

Most participants were married (90%) and all were white or Caucasian (100%). Seventy percent of the participants' highest earned degree was a master's, and slightly more than half (58%) served as superintendent for 6 or more years. Additionally, 74% of participants reported having held a principal position for 6 or more years. Seventy-five percent of participants reported 2,000 or less students in their districts (75%) with 57% of participants indicating less than 39% of their students were receiving free/reduced lunches.

Findings

The superintendent participants in this study reported they *do* experience burnout. Participants in the second year of the study reported slightly greater burnout ($M = 44.13$) than the participants in the first year of the study ($M = 43.36$). Across the subscales in both years, the highest mean was work-related burnout ($M = 52.56$, $M = 50.28$) and the lowest mean was client-related burnout (Students and Parents) ($M = 35.31$, $M = 37.25$). Subscale descriptives are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Subscale Descriptives

	Year One		Year Two	
	M	SD	*M*	SD
Personal-Related Burnout	51.16	24.25	48.43	23.24
Work-Related Burnout	52.56	25.95	50.28	24.34
Client-Related Burnout (Students & Parents)	35.31	26.24	37.25	25.73
Client-Related Burnout (Administrators & Teachers)	40.35	28.21	43.88	25.99
Client-Related Burnout (School Board)	37.43	32.86	40.79	33.95

More specifically, by item, the superintendent participants in both years of the study reported the greatest burnout when asked, "Is your work emotionally exhausting?" ($M =$ 68.09, $M =$ 67.28) and "Do you feel worn out at the end of the working day?" ($M =$ 64.84, $M =$ 63.27).

Superintendents in the second year of the study reported less *personal* burnout ($M =$ 48.43) than the superintendent participants in the first year of the study ($M =$ 51.21). They experienced personal burnout similarly through emotional exhaustion ($M =$ 62.70, $M =$ 60) and tiredness (M $=$ 62.20, $M =$ 58.02) as well as feeling worn out ($M =$ 57.23, $M =$ 57.72) and physically exhausted ($M =$ 55.69, $M =$ 46.69). Similarly, the superintendents in the second year of the study reported less *work-related* burnout ($M =$ 50.27) than the superintendent participants in the first year of the study ($M =$ 52.56). However, the superintendent participants in both years reported the greatest burnout when asked, "Is your work emotionally exhausting?" ($M =$ 68.09, $M =$ 67.28) and "Do you feel worn out at the end of the working day?" ($M =$ 64.84, $M =$ 63.27). Finally,

superintendents reported the most *client-related* burnout with their administrators and teachers ($M =$ 40.35, $M =$ 43.88) followed by the school board ($M =$ 37.43, $M =$ 40.79) and students and parents ($M =$ 35.95, $M =$ 37.25). They feel they give more time than they get back when working with administrators and teachers ($M =$ 48.57, $M =$ 52.78).

Discussion

This exploratory study has significance in that our findings demonstrate superintendents are experiencing burnout in all three constructs of the Copenhagen Burnout Inventory (CBI). Superintendents are experiencing personal burnout predominantly through emotional exhaustion and tiredness. Not only is personal burnout a factor, but work-related items appeared to be a major source of burnout for the participants in this study. Superintendents need opportunities, such as the one provided through this study, to reflect on their personal, work, and client-related burnout and then to engage with the necessary resources and supports to mitigate burnout. Future research might consider an exploration of superintendent resilience.

The utilization of the CBI subscales revealed that burnout impacted superintendent relationships. Many participants reported they did not have enough time for family or friends. Lefdal & Jong (2019) warned that personal burnout can lead to the demise of personal relationships.

Local school boards should provide superintendents with an appropriate number of vacation, sick, and professional development days so the superintendent may have time for his/her family and friends and model a healthy work life balance in the district. Local school boards should also be cautious of any attempt to demand superintendent presence at all school events. Instead, they should promote a collaborative culture in which administrative presence at school events is distributed among the central and/or building administration.

In both years of the study, the participants shared they did not feel there was a way to prepare for burnout, specifically amidst a crisis. Hemmer and Eliff (2019) reported similar findings from superintendents during the hurricane Harvey tragedy. Superintendents are in a role that is governed by federal mandates, state mandates, and school board agendas that cause superintendents to have high stressors in their personal and work-related tasks. Many participants felt the political and state mandates, especially during a crisis, exacerbate burnout just as Hawk and Martin (2011), Litchka et al. (2009), and Myers (2011) found in past studies. Federal and state policy makers as well as state departments of education should collaborate with superintendent organizations, such as AASA, to create more manageable mandates for their constituents, especially during a crisis.

Local school boards should collaborate with their superintendents to construct more manageable agendas and provide safe spaces for superintendents to explore how to address federal and state mandates. Future research might investigate successful school board and superintendent partnerships.

Across all three client-related burnout subsets in both years of the study, the single most reported factor contributing to client-related burnout was that superintendent participants felt they give more time than they get back when working with students and parents, administrators and teachers, and the school board. Lefdal and Jong (2019) stated, "The top two factors that superintendents identified as the most stressful were high self-expectations" (p. 6).

Researchers have identified that the success of superintendents often hinges on the relationships they build with their school boards, central office staff, unions, teachers, principals, civic leaders, and community members (Hart, 2018; Hill & Jochim, 2018). Future research could explore how school boards and superintendents build healthy relationships that result in successful school districts. This research might then investigate how to build healthy partnerships with other stakeholders.

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