AASA JOURNAL OF SCHOLARSHIP & PRACTICE

AASA THE SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENTS ASSOCIATION WWW.AASA.ORG

Research and Evidence-Based Practice Advancing the Profession of Education Administration

Winter 2026, Volume 22 No.4

Table of Contents

Editorial Review Board

Available at www.aasa.org/jsp
ISSN 1931-6569

Sponsorship and Appreciation

The *AASA Journal of Scholarship and Practice* would like to thank AASA, The School Superintendents Association, and particularly AASA's Leadership Network and Valerie Truesdale, for their ongoing sponsorship of the *Journal*. AASA Leadership Network, the School Superintendents Association's professional learning arm, drives educational leaders' success, innovation and growth, focused on student-centered, equity-focused, future-driven education.

We also offer special thanks to Brian Osborne, Lehigh University, with assistance from Kenneth Mitchell, Manhattanville University, in selecting the articles that comprise this professional education journal and lending sound editorial comments.

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 is to carry out the mission of school districts in the education of children.

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

Published by
AASA, The School Superintendents Association
1615 Duke Street
Alexandria, VA 2231

Editorial

Brian G. Osborne, EdD
Editor
AASA Journal of Scholarship and Practice
Winter 2026

Leadership for Equity, Belonging, and Sustainability

Taken together, the three articles in this issue offer a sobering yet instructive portrait of educational leadership in contemporary K–12 systems.

Across school and school district leaders, the research converges on a shared reality: educational leaders are operating in environments marked by sustained pressure, emotional exhaustion, and structural inconsistency. At the same time, the studies point toward concrete practices and leadership approaches that may mitigate burnout and strengthen both leadership effectiveness and retention.

In *Are We Burned Out?* Nicole V. Schilling, Kyle Wagner, Kristie M. Fetty, and Elizabeth Yoder document burnout among P-12 superintendents through a multi-year statewide study using the Copenhagen Burnout Inventory.

Their findings show that burnout is most acute in the form of emotional exhaustion and work-related fatigue, with superintendents reporting that they consistently give more time and energy than they receive in return, particularly in relationships with administrators, teachers, and school boards. Importantly, this study moves beyond acknowledging stress to specifying where burnout manifests, underscoring the cumulative toll of political pressures, crisis leadership, and constant availability.

A complementary perspective emerges in Karika Ann Parker's examination of female superintendents and complex adaptive systems leadership (CASL) in the third article. Parker argues that traditional, hierarchical leadership models, still dominant in preparation programs, are ill-suited for volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous environments, and too often rely on antiquated, patriarchal conceptions of leadership.

Drawing on existing literature and examples from practice, she positions CASL as a leadership mindset that emphasizes decentralization, emergence, adaptability, and systems thinking.

Particularly noteworthy is the alignment between CASL principles and leadership strategies employed by women during the COVID-19 pandemic, including transparency, collaboration, empathy, and equity-centered decision-making.

While Parker focuses on system-level leadership frameworks, in article two Heidi Hulse Mickelsen and Rachel White bring the discussion to the day-to-day realities of secondary school administration. Their mixed-methods study of vice principals highlights how inconsistent preparation, weak mentoring, irregular evaluation, and limited district support contribute directly to burnout and job dissatisfaction.

The findings point especially to the central role of the principal–vice principal relationship, with supportive, communicative principals associated with higher satisfaction and toxic leadership linked to extreme burnout, most acutely in Title I schools.

Across all three studies, a clear theme emerges: burnout is not simply an individual resilience issue but a systems and leadership design problem. The research consistently points to misalignment between job demands and available supports, whether at the superintendent, principal, or vice principal level.

At the same time, the studies identify actionable connections between research and practice—strong mentoring relationships, consistent feedback and evaluation, district accountability, distributed leadership, and adaptive approaches to complexity.

We know from experience and observation that leadership consistency helps create the stability and focus needed for school districts to improve, and the researchers focus in this issue on the factors necessary to sustain leaders in their positions has vital implications for both scholarship and practice.

Collectively, these articles challenge the field to rethink how leaders are prepared, supported, and evaluated. They suggest that sustaining educational leadership will require not only attention to individual well-being, but also structural reforms that recognize complexity, promote shared responsibility, and align leadership practice with the realities of contemporary schooling.

Research Article

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

Nicole V. Schilling, PhD
Professor
Educational Leadership
St. Bonaventure University
St. Bonaventure, NY

Kyle Wagner, PhD
Assistant Professor
College of Education
University of Findlay
Findlay, Ohio

Kristie M. Fetty, EdD
Instructor and Coordinator
Field and Clinical Experiences, Licensing, and Assessment, Education Programs
Malone University
Canton, OH

Elizabeth Yoder, EdD
Former Graduate Assistant
College of Education
University of Findlay
Findlay, Ohio

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.

Author Biographies

Nicole Schilling is a professor at St. Bonaventure University, St. Bonaventure, NY. Her research interests include superintendents, school boards, and treasurers. She is the past president of the Mid-Western Educational Research Association and program chair for the AERA Research on Superintendency SIG. E-mail: nschilling@sbu.edu

Kyle Wagner, assistant professor and co-chair at the University of Findlay's School Psychology Program, specializes in K-12 academic skill measurement, learning efficiency, statistics, psychometrics, and meta-analysis methods. He leads quantitative design and analysis for various projects. E-mail: kyle.wagner@findlay.edu

Kristie Fetty is a passionate and motivated educator and researcher. She has worked in the field of education for 18 years. Her research interests span science education, curriculum and instruction, social and emotional learning, and administration. E-mail: kristie.fetty@gmail.com

Beth Yoder is a band director passionate about alarming research regarding Music Performance Anxiety in school band directors. Servant leadership and student-led problem solving are Yoder's educational staples. Her bands begin developing these skills at early ages.
E-mail: bethsyoder@gmail.com

References

Bell, J. J. (2019). Superintendent job satisfaction in an era of reduced resources and increased accountability. *AASA Journal of Scholarship & Practice, 16*(3), 38-52.

Hart, W. H. (2018). Is it rational or intuitive? Factors and processes affecting school superintendents' decisions when facing professional dilemmas. *Educational Leadership and Administration: Teaching and Program Development, 29*(1), 14-25.

Hawk, N., & Martin, B. (2011). Understanding and reducing stress in the superintendency. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership, 39*(3), 364–390. 10.1177/1741143210394000

Hemmer, L., & Elliff, D. S. (2020). Leaders in action: The experiences of seven Texas superintendents before, during, and after Hurricane Harvey. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership, 48*(6), 964–985. 10.1177/1741143219873073

Hill, J., & Jochim, A. (2018). *Unlocking Potential: How Political Skill Can Maximize Superintendent Effectiveness.* Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE).

Johnson, B., Twitter, L., & Kaufman, J.A. (2020) Resilience and the African American superintendent. *AASA Journal of Scholarship and Practice, 16*(4), 57-69.

Klocko, B. A., Justis, R. J., & Kirby, E. A. (2019). Leadership tenacity and public-school superintendents. *Journal of Leadership Education, 18*(1), 1–13.

Kristensen, T. Borritz, M., Villadsen, E., & Christensen, K. (2005). The Copenhagen burnout inventory: A new tool for the assessment of burnout. *Work and Stress, 19*(3), 192-207.

Lefdal, J., & Jong, D. D. (2019). Superintendent stress: Identifying the causes and learning to cope. *AASA Journal of Scholarship & Practice, 16*(3), 56–82.

Litchka, P., Fenzel, M., & Polka, W. S. (2009). The stress process among school superintendents. *International Journal of Educational Leadership Preparation, 4*(4).

Morton, N. & Valley, J. (2022, January 6). Who wants to lead America's school districts? Anyone? Anyone? *The Henchinger Report.* https://hechingerreport.org/who-wants-to-lead-americas-school-districts-anyone-anyone-superintendent-search-is-just-beginning/

Myers, S. (2011). Superintendent length of tenure and student achievement. *Administrative Issues Journal: Education, Practice & Research, 1*(2), 43–53. 10.5929/2011.1.2.4

Robinson, K. K., & Shakeshaft, C. (2015). Women superintendents who leave: Stress and health factors. *Planning and Changing, 46*(3/4), 440-458.

Wells, C. (2013). Educational leaders describe a job too big for one: Stress reduction in the midst of leading. *AASA Journal of Scholarship & Practice, 10*(3), 32-45.

Research Article

Contributing Factors to Secondary Administrator Job Satisfaction and Outcomes

Heidi Hulse Mickelsen, EdD
Consultant
Palo Alto, CA

Rachel White, PhD
Associate Professor
Educational Leadership & Policy
University of Texas
Austin, TX

Abstract

The significance of the role of school administrator has been shown in recent years to be second only to the influence of the classroom teacher in terms of increasing student achievement and improving the climate and culture of a school. The purpose of this mixed-methods study was to determine how preparation, mentorship, feedback, and district infrastructure influence secondary administrator principal job satisfaction and outcomes. While the study focused on the assistant principal (AP), the findings and recommendations apply to principals and vice principals (VP) alike. Correlational analyses indicated that strong principal relationships, the presence of a formal evaluation, and having district support all significantly contributed to higher levels of AP job satisfaction.

Key Words

Principal, school administrator, assistant principal, vice principal, feedback, evaluation, mentorship, accountability

Effective school leadership has been shown to be one of the most important factors in improving student achievement, hiring and motivating excellent teachers, and creating a strong professional school climate (Allensworth et al., 2009; Grissom et al., 2021; Hanushek & Rivkin, 2010). The majority of secondary schools have a team of administrators, composed of a principal and one or more assistant principals (APs) or vice principals (VPs). While much research has focused on recruitment, support, development, and retention of principals, the VP role is studied much less often.

Yet, over the past decade, the number of VPs being hired in schools has consistently increased, and their role has been identified as essential to the operations and outcomes of schools (Goldring et al., 2021). In particular, VPs often work closely with students, teachers, and families in ways that principals who are more focused on overall operations of the school may not be able to; and, VPs often serve as a co-instructional leader, lead on issues related to student discipline as well as scheduling and teacher development, evaluation, and support (New Leaders, 2021). Additionally, VPs are an essential component of the "principal pipeline" (Gates et al., 2019; Goldring et al., 2021). Given their important role in student and educator support and development, recruiting, training, supporting, and retaining effective vice principals is an important research focus.

One key practice for supporting and retaining school administrators is providing adequate preparation and effective mentoring, feedback, and evaluation. While much work has been done by states, universities, and research organizations to develop a consistent and uniform process of preparation, induction, mentoring, feedback, and evaluation for its new teachers, none of these components are consistent or uniform for school administrators. Research has documented the recent increase of administrator burnout and turnover (Beausaert et al., 2016; Tekleselassie & Villereal, 2011), and administrator turnover is even higher in high poverty schools serving students of color (Goldring et al., 2014).

Vice principals have even higher rates of turnover than principals (Bartanen et al., 2021), and they experience the additional challenges of not having clearly defined duties, managing the majority of student behavioral challenges, having inconsistent mentoring and support, and often not being able to participate in the more fulfilling roles of instructional leadership and whole-school change (Glanz, 1994; Kwan, 2009; Oleszewski et al., 2012). It is also important to note that vice principals are "at-will" employees, meaning they can be let go at any time without cause and, in many states, school administrators do not have an equivalent of the teachers' union to provide job protections.

To inform policy and practices that can promote administrator well-being and stability, which ultimately may impact effective school operations; improved student, community, and educator relations; and a stronger principal pipeline, it is crucial to understand what factors help alleviate burnout and improve job satisfaction of VPs. As such, the purpose of this study was to better understand the sources of burnout and job dissatisfaction of secondary school VPs, and to determine what resources or aspects of support can be provided by the principal, district, and other sources to mitigate the feelings of burnout to reduce administrator turnover. The study occurred in California, the state with the most public school students and one known for its diversity of ethnicity and socio-economic status. We also focused on secondary schools because they are more likely to have one or more assistant principals than elementary schools, which often only have a principal.

Review of Literature on Administrator Burnout and Turnover

Burnout has long been identified as a source of physical, emotional, and psychological stress resulting from several challenging aspects of one's job (Maslach et al., 2001). Employees experience burnout when there is a mismatch between their expectations compared to the reality of their workload, level of control, the presence of rewards, the community, their sense of fairness, and the values they experience in their role (Maslach & Leiter, 1997). Extended feelings of burnout can cause disengagement and eventual departure from one's position, as well as poor health and other negative personal consequences (Tekleselassie & Villereal, 2011).

Due to the importance of the school leader role, it is of particular importance that districts prioritize policies that counteract the aspects of administrators' jobs that heighten burnout and turnover. This can happen by reducing job ambiguity and job conflict, clearly delineating roles within the administrator team, and improving growth satisfaction, or the feelings associated with professional learning and successfully completing tasks (Conley et al., 2007). In this literature review we focus on the factors this study examined that pertain to the preparation and evaluation of new administrators: induction and mentoring, feedback and evaluation, and district infrastructure and support.

Induction and Mentoring

The majority of educators enter school administration through the role of the vice principal (VP) (Goldring et al., 2021). These new administrators are required to complete an induction program approved by the state to have their credential "cleared," or made permanent. In California, the two-year induction program requires new administrators to complete a portfolio of professional growth opportunities with the support of an appointed mentor (Commission on Teacher Credentialing, 2022a).

In most of the districts included in this study (74 percent), this mentor was a retired administrator outside of the district, so the mentor could not provide advice on district policies, technology, personnel, etc. Due to the variability of the induction mentor, the most important source of on-the-job training and support is the site principal once a VP begins her role (Barnett et al., 2012). Some districts provide a system of training, mentorship, and support referred to as the "principal pipeline," and these comprehensive systems have been shown to have an overall positive impact on student achievement and administrator retention (Gates et al., 2019). However, most districts do not provide such systems of support, leaving VPs to fend for themselves with occasional support from an induction mentor or unpredictable mentoring from the site principals (Barnett et al., 2012). The vice principal position is demanding and requires a wide variety of skills and conflicting duties; it would greatly benefit new VPs to have consistent, quality training, guidance, and mentoring to prepare them for their role.

Feedback and Evaluation

While most K-12 public school districts across the U.S. have clear teacher evaluation protocols based on state laws and recommendations (e.g., EdSource, 2011), individual districts decide on whether and how their administrators will be evaluated (Goldring et al., 2009). Researchers acknowledge that it is difficult to know what to assess, given the varied roles held by principals and VPs. Goldring and associates (2009) found that there is also quite a range of individuals who conduct the actual assessments of school-level administrators. Typically, the superintendent or assistant superintendent evaluates the principal, and the principal evaluates the vice principal. Vice principal evaluations are often dependent on their

relationship with the principal and may not include feedback from teachers or other staff on site. The VP may also have limited sources of support and advocacy in their evaluation, so they can potentially receive a negative evaluation based on their relationship with the principal rather than actual performance.

District Support and Accountability

New administrator induction programs are provided through regional offices of education, private programs, and colleges or universities. For example, in California, one organization that exists to support administrators is the Association of California School Administrators (ACSA). ACSA provides resources to administrators to their members. Most administrators are hired under renewable one-year contracts; states vary in terms of whether they grant tenure or not (EdWeek, 1998). Sometimes tenure means administrators are guaranteed a position in the district, but not necessarily an administrative position.

Research Questions

This study sought to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the greatest contributors to burnout for secondary vice principals?

RQ2: How are preparation, mentorship, feedback, and district infrastructure related to secondary vice principal job satisfaction and outcomes?

RQ3: How does the secondary school administrator experience differ between Title I and non-Title I schools?

Conceptual Framework

This study drew on the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model of job satisfaction (Demerouti et al., 2001) to frame the exploration of administrator burnout and turnover. In this model, job demands are the duties and aspects of a job that require physical, intellectual and emotional effort, while resources refer to the training, knowledge, social network, and physical resources that provide the employee with the knowledge and materials to be successful. In terms of VPs' job satisfaction, this framework would suggest that they need to perceive the balance of demands and resources as fairly even; if the demands exceed the resources, they may experience burnout or job dissatisfaction.

In addition, the Job Characteristics Theory (Hackman & Oldham, 1980) outlines five job characteristics that contribute to motivation, engagement, and job satisfaction: skill variety, task identity, task significance, autonomy, and feedback (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). This study examined the presence of these characteristics in the VP's role, and how they impacted the VP's overall job satisfaction and intent to remain or leave their position. As a note, the phrase "job outcomes" in the research question encompasses VPs' job satisfaction as well as their desire to remain in the role of a school administrator, either as a VP or a principal. Since the VP role is typically used as a steppingstone to the principalship, the job outcome under consideration is whether VPs desire to remain in school administration generally, and not whether they want to continue indefinitely as vice principals.

Design and Methods

This study used a mixed-methods research design, with Phase One consisting of a survey of secondary school administrators and Phase Two including qualitative semi-structured interviews. The surveys were sent to all secondary principals and vice principals in four counties in the San Francisco Bay Area: Santa Clara County, San Mateo County, Alameda County, and San Francisco County (n=756). The survey and interview questions were based

on the two conceptual frameworks to determine the presence and quality of mentorship and support, feedback and evaluation, and district infrastructure on the job satisfaction and intent to stay on the behalf of secondary school administrators.

The Job Characteristics theory helped frame some of the interview questions that helped us understand what contributes to an administrator's job satisfaction. The survey data was coded and analyzed using inferential statistics (Lochmiller & Lester, 2017) to uncover associations and relationships between the different factors. The goal was to be able to make conclusions around school and district practices that would best support the professional development and job satisfaction of school administrators.

The population of interest was limited to secondary schools because most elementary schools do not have vice principals and because secondary schools usually have more student behavior incidents and other stressors. Principals were also included in the population; however, principal participation was limited to principals who were VPs within the past five years to ensure that their experiences were recent. A total of 90 school administrators (12% of the survey population) completed surveys that were then analyzed for the purposes of this study.

All survey participants were given the option to participate in the interviews at the end of the survey, with a linked interview interest form. Interview participants were sought who represented diversity in terms of type of school (Title I vs. not Title I), gender, ethnicity, and whether they experienced high or low job satisfaction or burnout. This was done to gather insights into the aspects of the position and environments that most strongly contributed to or detracted from their overall job satisfaction.

Fourteen administrators were interviewed, and they represented a variety of experiences in terms of their first year as a VP: two described it as "extremely positive;" six described it as "more positive than negative;" four described it as "more negative than positive," and two as "extremely negative."

Data analysis

To analyze the survey data, we employed descriptive statistics as well as t-tests to determine possible correlations between several key factors pertaining to an administrator's role. For the qualitative interviews, the transcripts were deductively coded based on themes from the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) (Maslach et al., 2001), the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) Model (Demerouti et al., 2001), and Job Characteristics Theory (Hackman & Oldham, 1980).

For RQ1, the following themes were coded: a) overall burnout, including work-life balance; b) workload, including number and intensity of duties; c) role ambiguity and role conflict; d) community and relationships, including those with the principal, other VPs, and the staff; e) reward, including salary and non-pecuniary benefits; and f) fairness and values.

For RQ2, five themes were chosen: preparation (prior to the job); mentorship and support (during the job); informal feedback; formal evaluation; and district infrastructure, support, and accountability. And for RQ3, the transcripts were examined across VPs with experience in Title I vs. non-Title I schools to look for variation in coding patterns and themes.

Findings

We began by examining contributors to burnout for secondary VPs. We found a significant, negative relationship between VP burnout and job satisfaction ($r = -.332$; $p = 0.001$); however, we did not find a significant correlation between burnout and fatigue. While 74 percent of VPs experienced significant fatigue, there was not a relationship between fatigue and burnout, suggesting that causes of fatigue may be multifaceted. As such, we turned to interviewees to understand the interrelatedness of burnout, fatigue, and job satisfaction. The most common factors that interviewees identified as contributors to burnout were a lack of district support, the lack of preparation and training, negative relationships with one's principal, isolation, mental stress, and levels of student violence, particularly in Title I schools.

One former Title I administrator, who gave herself a 9 out of 10 on a scale of burnout, expressed it like this:

> That's the reason why I'm not an AP anymore, because the level of burnout was very high … I lost my physical health … the hours are unreasonable … the fact that we are not given a lunch break … there's this toxic culture … the mental stress and the energy you expend at home thinking about things … parents accuse you of being discriminatory…

Discussions with administrators about burnout confirmed the importance of a more balanced ratio between demands and resources, as explained in the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) Model (Demerouti et al., 2001).

As described by all fourteen administrators interviewed, the unending list of intense demands of the VP without the accompanying site or district support, preparation and training, or balance in terms of physical breaks, rest, proper food, or even time to use the restroom sharply skewed this position towards the demand side.

The nature of the relationship a VP has with their principal was also related to VP job satisfaction, with VPs reporting more positive relationships with their principal having higher levels of job satisfaction ($r = .563$, $p < 0.001$). VPs that received more feedback from their principal were also more satisfied with their job ($r=.523$, < 0.001). In interviews, VPs described their principals in four general ways: effective", "ineffective," "negative," and "toxic."

A VP with an effective principal reported that her principal was "great at his job … super good at communication … he has coached and mentored me; if that wasn't the case, I don't know if I would have made it, to be honest with you, because it's a hard job. It's super hard."

By contrast, most interviewees (five out of seven) who described their first year as a VP as "extremely negative" or "more negative than positive" also reported negative or extremely negative experiences with their principals during that first year.

One interviewee started with an effective principal at a middle school and described that experience as "extremely positive."

Upon moving to the high school, however, her experience switched to "extremely negative." She described that principal, whom she described as "toxic," as follows:

> He [the principal] would send us forty-five-minute messages on our phones at like three o'clock in the morning. He would constantly call us in individually, and then together…and just go through just how…We weren't good enough, and he was here to clean us out if we weren't gonna do our job…He made me physically ill… didn't sleep…it's making me physically sick almost just to think about it. Honestly, total PTSD here … He would write us up…just about how if something went wrong it was all our fault…He would talk crap on us to the staff members…he would belittle us in front of the staff. The level of burnout was…I would have rather worked at Walmart being a greeter…I don't care how much education I have or anything else, it was killing us. He told us that he was good friends with everybody in the district office, and how the district was looking at myself and the other AP…so we couldn't tell anybody or ask anybody in the district office because we felt like we were so isolated.

The relationship with one's principal, as well as factors such as excessive demands, the presence or absence of training or resources, and the physical and mental demands of the job greatly contribute to administrator satisfaction or burnout.

Elements of the System that Support or Constrain VP Support

Next, we aimed to explore what changes in the system can be made to make the VP role more sustainable to increase job satisfaction, retention, and effectiveness and reduce burnout. We particularly focused on preparation, mentorship, feedback, and district infrastructure.

Preparation and Mentoring

In terms of preparation, all the administrators interviewed indicated that administrator preparation programs were minimally helpful in terms of preparing them for the actual work of school administration, and shared that essentially all of the knowledge, skills, and competencies were learned on the job. The interviewed administrators shared that the on-site mentoring was not formalized through the district; whether new VPs received on-the-job mentoring was more a factor of principal personality and inclination rather than an actual structured support system.

Interviewees who said they received mentoring from their principals appreciated their principals who "mentored by example," used a "coaching route rather than an authoritarian route," who were "very accessible from the beginning," and who asked the VP team for their ideas and perspectives. By contrast, there was a considerable disconnect for many VPs who expected to be mentored by their principal and were not — either not formally, or not at all. If they did not receive instruction or mentoring from their principal, they were forced to seek it out on their own.

VPs in this situation shared that their principals were "always in their offices," "never offered any positive reinforcement," and "provided no support." The mentor provided by the county or organization for the two-year induction program was helpful for about half of the interviewees, but since they only met once a month, this was not a significant source of mentoring.

The survey analysis confirmed this, as there was not a significant relationship between the induction mentor's effectiveness and administrator job satisfaction.

Feedback and Evaluation

Feedback is part of the Job Characteristics Theory (JCT, Hackman & Oldham, 1980), and appropriate feedback has been shown to help individuals grow professionally, develop confidence, and feel more invested and motivated. The absence of feedback can cause people to feel uncertain about their performance, and excessive negative feedback can be outright discouraging and demoralizing, contributing to job dissatisfaction and intent to leave (Harvard Business Review, 2016).

The surveys and interviews alike indicated a lack of consistency, objectivity, and purpose regarding administrator evaluations, especially for vice principals. Out of the 90 survey responses, 57 percent of VPs were not told how they would be evaluated when they began their jobs. Of the 14 administrators interviewed, seven were evaluated by their principals, one was evaluated by her mentor and the superintendent, and six were not evaluated at all their first year. Two were not evaluated once in eight years; two were evaluated only in their first year of four; and none were evaluated every year. For those that were evaluated, practices ranged from a goal-setting document to a checklist or self-rating to a matrix based on goals. As one VP shared:

> There should be observations, just like teachers, there should be feedback, there should be a cycle, right? It shouldn't be that you rub someone the wrong way, and then, all of a sudden, you find out you're being reassigned to the classroom! There needs to be a feedback loop … I also think the staff should be able to evaluate administrators …I think that would make administrators think twice before they do things if they know teachers are going to evaluate them, or classified staff or secretaries are going to evaluate them.

District Infrastructure and Support

The level of support VPs received from the district was significantly related to their job satisfaction and feelings of burnout. The "district support" index was an average of all nine of the factors on the survey pertaining to district infrastructure, including whether the principal was held accountable for training the VP, whether the district provided professional development or a formal network of administrators for support, and whether the VP felt like the district leaders were invested in their training and success. We found that strong district support was positively correlated with high VP job satisfaction ($r = 0.434$) for the survey respondents. The survey respondents' comments and responses from interviewees both indicated as much variability in terms of district support as there was in mentoring from site principals. VPs who felt supported cited support groups, positive relationships with someone at the district office, and partnerships with outside leadership consortiums as helpful district resources. Ten of the fourteen interviewees had little to no district support, professional development, or support groups for new administrators. One interviewee shared that "the top contributor to [her] feelings of burnout [was] lack of district support."

Variation Across District Title I Status

Finally, we explored if and how secondary VPs experiences differ among those in Title I and non-Title I schools. The accounts detailed by the interviewees indicated some strong differences in terms of work conditions and levels of burnout and satisfaction among VPs serving in low- versus high-income schools. The survey respondents were fairly evenly split between Title I (44 percent) and non-Title I (48 percent) schools.

We compared the mean values from the responses from Title I compared to non-Title I VPs on ten indicators, and VPs in Title I schools reported significantly ($p < .05$) more challenging first years compared to expectations, and their job satisfaction was significantly lower. Title I VPs received significantly less helpful feedback from their principals compared to their non-Title I counterparts, and they had less support from their districts. Vice principals serving in Title I schools received less training from their districts and disagreed more strongly with the statements about districts holding principals accountable for supporting and mentoring them.

During the interviews, the VPs at Title I schools spent an average of 82 percent of their day dealing with student discipline and supervision, compared to 56 percent for the non-Title I VPs who gave estimates. The five VPs who described extremely toxic, challenging principals all worked for Title I schools, and they spent a good deal of their interview time talking about how their principals' lack of leadership and communication skills, emotional intelligence, and mentorship all deeply influenced their experience in a negative manner. Comments from VPs from Title I interviewees included that their burnout on a scale of one to 10 was a ten, or an eleven: "I was done with education"; "my mental health was suffering"; "balance is not possible in this job"; "you burn out from seeing all the trauma in the children." From both the survey and interview responses, there were a lot more vice principals who had unsupportive principals, districts, and overall negative experiences in Title I schools than in non-Title I schools.

Recommendations and Policy Implications

At the conclusion of this study, the current system of preparation, mentorship, evaluation, and district support and accountability for school administrators—and especially for vice principals—is inconsistent between schools and districts. Some new administrators are mentored well by their principals and fellow VPs, and profit from district systems that provide feedback and support to help them become competent and confident in their roles. Others are not provided with the necessary breadth and depth of training on the myriad, often competing or conflicting tasks that they must master and balance during their extremely busy and demanding days at a school site. Feedback and evaluation of new as well as seasoned administrators are similarly inconsistent, subjective, and often dependent on one person's opinion or perspective.

To improve VP support and development, the authors make the following recommendations:

> **1 - States should adopt a principal pipeline system similar to that proposed by Gordon (2020).** This system is a coherent, standardized system that includes administrator recruitment, participation in a quality principal preparation program, continued professional development, and licensure renewal for all school administrators. In addition, there should be administrator shadowing in advance of assuming the VP role; a coherent and required mentoring program that involves both the site principal and a skilled district administrator; and continual feedback and evaluation process that involves an annual, 360 multi-rater system for all administrators. Principals should be held accountable for mentoring and giving regular feedback to new vice principals, with weekly check-ins built into the school schedule and enforced by the district.

2- There need to be measures put in place that can dramatically reduce the burden and burnout experienced by school administrators, especially those working in high poverty schools and in secondary schools. Seventy-four percent of new VPs from this study indicated that their level of fatigue was between a seven and a ten, with ten being "very high." Specific suggestions include staggered work shifts for administrators; additional administrators and counselors provided for Title I schools; and stipends administrators choosing to work in Title I schools. Administrators should all be enrolled in some sort of district collaborative that protects their safety, physical health, employment status, and professional conditions such as restroom and lunch breaks.

3 - District leaders should work to dramatically improve the connection between the district office and the school sites. District administrators should make routine and regular visits to school sites that include rotating check-ins with principals, VPs, teachers, counselors, and other school staff. This would give teachers the sense that the district cares about what is happening at their site and would provide school staff members with the opportunity to give confidential feedback that they typically are unable to provide. Annual district-wide surveys at each school would enable districts to gather honest feedback about staff, school climate, district policies, and other relevant measures.

4 - There should be an established system such as a three- or four-year cycle by which principals are up for contract renewal based on the multi-rater system and other measures of performance. Principals should not be allowed to just remain at a school for years merely because there have been no formal complaints about them. While truly negligent principals will often be removed, mediocre principals should also be expected to continue to perform at high levels or allow their position to be filled by someone more competent. Similarly, VPs should be held accountable but should also not be retained or removed simply based on principal opinion.

With the role of school administrator an undisputed, significant force for hiring and retaining effective teachers, creating a positive school climate, and promoting student success (Allensworth et al., 2009; Grissom et al., 2021; Hanushek & Rivkin, 2010), there needs to be a more consistent, effective, and research-based plan for preparing, mentoring, evaluating, and supporting school administrators. These are not processes that can be left to chance, personality, or personal inclination, but ones that should be revised and standardized for the success and well-being of all school administrators, and, in turn, the staff and students at every site.

Author Biographies

Heidi Mickelsen is a retired school administrator in the San Francisco Bay area who is now consulting with districts to create effective systems of administrator support, mentoring, and evaluation and is interested in broadening this work to create standardized, coherent systems of feedback, support, and evaluation for all administrators in the state. She holds an EdD from the University of Southern California in educational leadership. E-mail: mickelsenconsulting@gmail.com

Rachel White is an associate professor of educational leadership & policy at the University of Texas at Austin. She is also the founder of The Superintendent Lab, a central hub for data, research, insights, and innovation on the school district superintendency. E-mail: rachel.white@austin.utexas.edu

References

Allensworth, E., Ponisciak, S., & Mazzeo, C. (2009). *The schools teachers leave: Teacher mobility in Chicago Public Schools*. Consortium on Chicago School Research - University of Chicago.

Barnett, B. G., Shoho, A. R., & Oleszewski, A. M. (2012). The job realities of beginning and experienced assistant principals. *Leadership and Policy in Schools*, *11*(1), 92–128. https://doi.org/10.1080/15700763.2011.611924

Bartanen, B., Rogers, L. K., & Woo, D. S. (2021). Assistant principal mobility and its relationship with principal turnover. *Educational Researcher*, *50*(6), 0013189X2199310. https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189x21993105

Beausaert, S., Froehlich, D. E., Devos, C., & Riley, P. (2016). Effects of support on stress and burnout in school principals. *Educational Research*, *58*(4), 347–365. https://doi.org/10.1080/00131881.2016.1220810

Commission on Teacher Credentialing (CTC). (2022). www.ctc.ca.gov. https://www.ctc.ca.gov/educator-prep/teacher-induction

Conley, S., Shaw, S., & Glasman, N. (2007). Correlates of job and growth satisfaction among secondary school administrators. *Journal of School Leadership*, *17*(1), 54–88. https://doi.org/10.1177/105268460701700103

Demerouti, E., Bakker, A. B., Nachreiner, F., & Schaufeli, W. B. (2001). The job demands-resources model of burnout. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *86*(3), 499–512. https://doi.org/10.1037//0021-9010.86.3.499

EdSource. (2011). How state laws and collective bargaining shape the way teachers are evaluated, paid, and dismissed in California. *EdSource*. https://doi.org/www.edsource.org

Education Week. (1998, April 1). *Principals Losing Tenure*. https://www.edweek.org/education/principals-losing-tenure/1998/04#:~:text=After%20a%20probationary%20period%20that

Gates, S., Baird, M., Master, B., & Chavez-Herrerias, E. (2019). *Principal Pipelines A Feasible, Affordable, and Effective Way for Districts to Improve Schools*. RAND Corporation, Santa Monica, CA.

Glanz, J. (1994). Redefining the roles and responsibilities of assistant principals. *The Clearing House: A Journal of Educational Strategies, Issues and Ideas*, *67*(5), 283–287. https://doi.org/10.1080/00098655.1994.9956089

Goldring, E., Cravens, X., Murphy, J., Porter, Andrew C., Elliott, Stephen N., & Carson, B. (2009). The evaluation of principals: What and how do states and urban districts assess leadership? *The Elementary School Journal*, *110*(1), 19–39. https://doi.org/10.1086/598841

Goldring, E., Rubin, M., & Herrmann, M. (2021). *The role of assistant principals: Evidence and insights for advancing school leadership*. The Wallace Foundation.

Goldring, R., & Taie, S. (2014). *Principal attrition: Results from the 2012-13 principal follow-up survey*. National Center for Education Statistics.

Gordon, S. P. (2020). The principal development pipeline: A call for collaboration. *NASSP Bulletin*, *104*(2), 61–84. https://doi.org/10.1177/0192636520923404

Grissom, J., Egalite, A., & Lindsay, C. (2021). *How principals affect students and schools: A systematic synthesis of two decades of research*. New York: The Wallace Foundation. http://www.wallacefoundation.org/principalsynthesis

Hackman, J. R., & Oldham, G. R. (1980). *Work Redesign*. Addison-Wesley.

Hanushek, E. A., & Rivkin, S. G. (2010). Generalizations about using value-added measures of teacher quality. *American Economic Review*, *100*(2), 267–271.

Harvard Business Review. (2016). *HBR guide to delivering effective feedback*. Harvard Business Review Press. https://doi.org/10.1257/aer.100.2.267

Kwan, P. (2009). The vice-principal experience as a preparation for the principalship. *Journal of Educational Administration*, *47*(2), 191–205. https://doi.org/10.1108/09578230910941048

Lochmiller, C. R., & Lester, J. N. (2017). *An introduction to educational research: Connecting methods to practice*. Sage Publications, Los Angeles.

Maslach, C., & Leiter, M. P. (1997). *The truth about burnout: How organizations cause personal stress and what to do about it.* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Maslach, C., Schaufeli, W., & Leiter, M. (2001). *Job burnout*. Annual Review of Psychology, 398-422.

New Leaders. (2021). *"Our role is critical": How to best support assistant principals.* https://www.newleaders.org/blog/our-role-is-critical-how-to-best-support-assistant-principals

Oleszewski, A., Shoho, A., & Barnett, B. (2012). The development of assistant principals: A literature review. *Journal of Educational Administration*, *50*(3), 264–286. https://doi.org/10.1108/09578231211223301

Schaufeli, W. B., & Bakker, A. B. (2004). Job demands, job resources, and their relationship with burnout and engagement: A multi-sample study. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, *25*(3), 293–315. https://doi.org/10.1002/job.248

Tekleselassie, A. A., & Villarreal, P. (2011). Career mobility and departure intentions among school principals in the United States: Incentives and disincentives. *Leadership and Policy in Schools*, *10*(3), 251–293. https://doi.org/10.1080/15700763.2011.585536

Research Article

Female Superintendents and Complex Adaptive Systems Leadership

Karika Ann Parker, PhD
Associate Director
Community Partnerships and Research
Lewis Walker Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnic Relations
Western Michigan University
Kalamazoo, MI

Abstract

Female superintendents face a unique set of challenges as the leadership models offered by traditional educational leadership programs are undergirded by patriarchal and technocratic ideologies that promulgate top-down decision-making. These models are insufficient in addressing complex educational issues such as closing the achievement gap, promoting equity, and meeting diverse student needs (Brown et al., 2023). Research suggests that antiquated leadership models have proven to limit new leaders, coupled with the lingering symptoms of COVID-19 (Arundel, 2022; Fidanboy, M., 2022; Fasel, 2023; Author, 2022). This paper examines how female superintendents can apply complex adaptive systems leadership (CASL) in a volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) K-12 educational environment.

Key Words

Female superintendents, educational leadership, complex adaptive systems leadership, volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) environments

Female superintendents face a unique set of challenges as the leadership models offered by traditional educational leadership programs are undergirded by patriarchal and technocratic ideologies that promulgate top-down decision-making. These models are insufficient in addressing complex educational issues such as closing the achievement gap, promoting equity, and meeting diverse student needs (Brown et al., 2023).

Research suggests that antiquated leadership models have proven to limit new leaders; this, coupled with the lingering symptoms of COVID-19, has significantly contributed to the mass exodus of female superintendents (Arundel, 2022). It is time to change this narrative. Implementing successful leadership models is hindered when training is rooted in traditional approaches (Author, 2022; Milosevic et al., 2019). Exploring and implementing leadership models that support and empower female leaders is essential to create more equitable and effective educational systems.

One such model is Complex Adaptive Systems Leadership (CASL), which offers a framework for understanding and managing the dynamic interactions and emergent behaviors within educational organizations. CASL is not just a model; it is a mindset. It emphasizes adaptability, collaboration, and the ability to respond to changing conditions. It is well-suited for today's schools' complex and ever-evolving environments, providing a promising anchor in uncertain times (Fidanboy, M., 2022; Author, 2022).

Limitations in Addressing Complex Educational Challenges

It is time to recognize the limitations of traditional leadership models when addressing complex educational issues like closing the achievement gap, promoting equity, and meeting diverse student needs. These challenges involve multiple stakeholders and interconnected factors that cannot be managed through top-down directives alone. This realization should strongly motivate us to embrace new, more effective models.

Traditional models, with their emphasis on stability and control, can stifle innovation and adaptability. This rigidity can prevent schools from evolving in response to changing demographics, new technologies, and societal shifts. In a volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) world, where adaptability is critical, leaders who rely solely on these methods may find themselves struggling. The urgency of adapting to this new reality cannot be overstated (Sum, 2022).

Additionally, traditional leadership models often fail to engage the broader school community. By centralizing decision-making, these models can alienate teachers, staff, students, and parents. Without their active participation, even well-intentioned initiatives may struggle to succeed. Superintendents face heightened ecological and environmental factors and complex challenges in improving district-level educational outcomes for students in more VUCA environments that require a shift from dominant traditional (hierarchical and control) leadership approaches. Preiser, et.al., 2018).

Women & Superintendency

According to Bell (1988), androcentricity produces information that is one-dimensional about “what male leaders thought and did” (p. 34). Consequently, researchers have begun to investigate female superintendent experiences in the K-12 educational leadership system from the females' perspectives. Over three decades have elapsed since Bell’s (1988) work cited above, in which some progress has been made toward producing research on the superintendency that includes female

perspectives (Brantley, 2024; Smith, 2022; Miller, 2022).

There is some research highlighting how female superintendents implement a complex adaptive systems leadership (CASL) framework in educational environments (Dehmer, 2024; Gildersleeve-Hernandez, 2024; Hernandez, D., 2024); however, the literature on the change process from traditional leadership to a CASL approach for female superintendents is scant. This gap presents a unique opportunity to explore complex adaptive systems leadership theory as understood from a female superintendent perspective (Dehmer, 2024; Arriaga et al., 2020; Cassidy et al., 2021).

Traditional leadership theory continually excludes the experiences and voices of women (Pianta, 2020; Miller, 2022). Although women make up over 70% of the educational profession, women remain grossly underrepresented as superintendents (Grogan & Nash, 2021). Nestled in the experience of female superintendents is a burgeoning nexus between ecological innovation and a paradigm shift in leadership adaptation and practice. Educational leadership training should provide a space for female superintendents' perspectives, perceptions, and thoughts on the superintendency utilizing complex adaptive systems leadership (Shaw, 2022; Pianta, 2020; Author, 2022; Bell, 1988).

Complex Adaptive Systems Leadership

CASL shifts away from rigid hierarchies, emphasizing flexibility, adaptability, and decentralized decision-making (Carmichael & Hadžikadić, 2019; Author, 2022). Admittedly, current literature situates complex adaptive systems as an emerging construct in leadership (McGregor, 2020), where scholars attempt to develop an overarching theory for leading in complex environments, drawing inspiration from complexity, biology, and leadership.

Some leadership scholars draw heavily upon complexity theory to describe common elements of a complex environment: a) emergence, b) adaptation, and c) unpredictability. Complex adaptive leadership values adaptability, pattern sensing, and emotional intelligence. These skills and competencies enable leaders to navigate through emergent contexts while engendering the trust of their followers.

More specifically, Boal and Schultz (2007) posited that within a complex adaptive system, "surprising and innovative behaviors can emerge from the interaction of groups of agents, seemingly without the necessity of centralized control" (p. 412). Some superintendents are adopting CASL in response to traditional leadership's limitations. It views schools and districts as dynamic, interconnected systems where leadership is distributed across various levels.

CASL's adoption addresses the need to manage the uncertainties and rapid changes in modern education, such as technological advancements, diverse student needs, and shifting policies. Unlike a one-size-fits-all approach, CASL allows institutions to tailor strategies to specific contexts and evolve with changing circumstances. This adaptability is critical to maintaining effectiveness in an increasingly complex world (Fidanboy, 2022). Adopting CASL involves embracing behavioral tools and strategies to enhance the superintendents' ability to respond to change, foster innovation, and build resilience.

These tools include:

- *Decentralization of Authority*: CASL promotes distributing decision-making power across the organization, empowering teachers, staff, and students to take ownership. This approach fosters engagement, accountability, and the development of more responsive, context-specific solutions.

- *Emphasis on Emergence*: CASL leaders create conditions for new ideas and solutions to emerge organically rather than relying on top-down directives. They foster a culture of experimentation, encouraging individuals to try new approaches, learn, and share insights.

- *Adaptive Leadership:* CASL leaders navigate uncertainty and change, understanding that complex systems often require trial and error. They remain flexible and adjust strategies as new information emerges.

- *Systems Thinking*: CASL encourages leaders to see the organization as an interconnected system, where changes in one area can ripple throughout. This perspective helps leaders anticipate consequences and consider the broader impact of their decisions.

By embracing decentralization, emergence, adaptive leadership, and systems thinking, CASL creates more responsive, innovative, and resilient institutions. As schools face 21st-century complexities, CASL offers a flexible, forward-thinking path, empowering leaders to meet the needs of all stakeholders.

CASL Strategies Employed by Female Leaders

The following section reflects research that recounts CASL strategies employed by female leaders to illustrate the approach's versatility and the various ways it can be implemented.

For example, female leaders in K-12 education employed adaptive strategies during the pandemic, leveraging collaboration, communication, and empathy skills. They prioritized open communication with staff, students, and parents, providing regular updates and creating support channels.

These leaders demonstrated flexibility by working with their teams to develop innovative solutions for remote learning. Some implemented hybrid models to meet diverse needs, while others enhanced social-emotional support, recognizing the crisis's impact on mental health. Taking a holistic approach, female leaders addressed both academic and social-emotional competencies (Preiser, 2018).

For example, they ensured support for vulnerable students through meal programs, counseling, and resources for parents—their inclusive and compassionate leadership maintained trust and confidence during this period of uncertainty.

Utilizing CASL strategies, some female superintendents were able to pivot, adjust strategies, and embrace uncertainty, often making decisions with incomplete information (Smith, 2022). Their ability to maintain clear communication and transparency was instrumental in stabilizing the ever-changing environment of the pandemic.

Leaders who communicated openly about challenges and decisions fostered trust and unity within their school communities, emphasizing the importance of building solid relationships and a culture of trust. The

pandemic further underscored the importance of equity and inclusion. The pandemic underscored the importance of equity in leadership as well. Superintendents who directly addressed disparities supported their students and staff more effectively, reinforcing the need to prioritize equitable policies and practices, especially for the most vulnerable students.

As schools recover, superintendents must commit to creating inclusive environments that support all students. This may involve new policies addressing systemic inequities and ensuring access to necessary resources.

Implications for Future Leadership Education & Training

Volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity will continue to shape K-12 education's future. Leadership development programs must prepare future leaders to navigate these challenges with adaptive strategies, moving beyond traditional, linear approaches.

Training should focus on building resilience, fostering innovation, and promoting continuous learning. Superintendents must anticipate and respond to change, manage uncertainty, and lead through complex challenges. This includes developing problem-solving skills, critical thinking, and decision-making in ambiguous situations. Encouraging a growth mindset is crucial, as is viewing challenges as opportunities for learning (Price, 2023).

Educational institutions should also emphasize collaboration and networking, which explicitly trains superintendents to leverage team expertise and build supportive networks. This collaborative approach enhances individual leadership capacity and district-level resilience (Fasel, 2023). Promoting gender equity, creating inclusive environments, and incorporating CASL principles are vital strategies for preparing leaders in a VUCA world. By embracing these practices, institutions can develop leaders equipped to navigate the complexities of modern education, fostering resilient and inclusive schools. Flexibility and adaptability have emerged as crucial tipping points, showing that traditional, rigid leadership approaches are insufficient in crises.

The lessons of the COVID-19 pandemic have significant implications for the future of K-12 superintendency. Superintendents must prioritize adaptability and flexibility, recognizing that the educational landscape will remain fluid (Powell et al., 2023). This may involve rethinking traditional models and adopting more decentralized, collaborative approaches like Complex Adaptive Systems Leadership (CASL) (Chace, 2019).

Communication and transparency should also remain critical priorities. Open lines of communication with stakeholders are crucial, primarily as schools address post-pandemic challenges like learning loss and students' social-emotional needs.

The adaptive strategies female leaders employed during the pandemic provided valuable insights into navigating future challenges. The pandemic has highlighted the need for resilient, compassionate, and equity-focused leadership, offering an opportunity to build more robust, inclusive educational systems.

Future-driven research could examine "How superintendents implement complex adaptive systems leadership tools within a VUCA environment? Do superintendents understand that traditional leadership approaches of prediction, control, and authority can lead to micromanaging?" The traditional

technical approach of command, control, and prediction is no longer adequate. To meet the challenges of the VUCA environment in the Knowledge Era, it must include complex adaptive systems leadership.

Conclusion

This exploration of K-12 superintendents highlights the importance of centering women in superintendency roles, the transformative potential of Complex Adaptive Systems Leadership (CASL), and the impact of their gendered perspective during times of volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity. As the educational landscape evolves, ongoing reflection, adaptation, and research are essential to ensure effective and equitable leadership.

Several areas for future training include the application of CASL principles in K-12 education. While CASL is studied in other fields, its impact on educational leadership, especially in diverse and under-resourced schools, needs more exploration. Educational leadership training institutions could examine how CASL can be tailored to address challenges like equity gaps, student engagement, and superintendent retention. The intersectionality of race, gender, and other identities in leadership also warrants further study.

Although strides have been made in understanding the challenges faced by females and females of color, additional research is needed to explore the experiences of other marginalized groups, including leaders with disabilities and those from various cultural and socio-economic backgrounds.

Research could focus on the pandemic's long-term effects on leadership practices, the role of technology, and strategies that effectively supported students, staff, and communities during the crisis. Further exploration of CASL principles, a deeper understanding of intersectionality, and lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic will shape the future of K-12 superintendents. By centering females in leadership and fostering inclusive environments, leaders can better meet the needs of all students in a complex world.

Author Biography

Karika Ann Parker is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at Western Michigan University Lewis Walker Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnic Relations in Kalamazoo, MI. Her research interests include African-American history, complex adaptive systems leadership, and equity in education. E-mail: karika.parker@wmich.edu

References

Arriaga, T. T., Stanley, S. L., & Lindsey, D. B. (2020). Leading while female: A culturally proficient response for gender equity. Corwin: A SAGE Publishing Company.

Arundel (2022, February). DIVE Brief. Report: Pandemic to blame for rising district leader turnover | K-12 Dive (k12dive.com). Retrieved September 30, 2024.

Bell, C. S. (1988). Organizational influences on women's experience in the superintendency. *Peabody Journal of Education*, *65*(4), 31–59.

Brantley, A. L. (2024). *Personal Power Tactics African American Female Superintendents Employ to Overcome Four Identified Self-sabotaging Behaviors* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Massachusetts Global).

Brown, K., & Washington, K. (2023). Equity During the Pandemic: Exploring Rural Women Superintendents Perceptions of Equity Leadership. *Tapestry: Journal of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging in Education*, *1*(1), 8.

Carmichael, T., & Hadžikadić, M. (2019). *The fundamentals of complex adaptive systems* (pp. 1-16). Springer International Publishing.

Cassidy, M., Burgin, X. D., & Wasonga, T. A. (2021). Gender differences in perceived barriers of aspiring superintendents. Management in Education, 35(3), 127–135. https://doi.org/10.1177/0892020620988010

Chace, S. (2019). *Advancing the development of urban school superintendents through adaptive leadership*. Routledge.

Dekker, M. M., van Lieshout, R. N., Ball, R. C., Bouman, P. C., Dekker, S. C., Dijkstra, H. A., & van den Akker, M. (2022). A next step in disruption management: Combining operations research and complexity science. *Public Transport*, 1-22.

Dehmer, K. (2024). The Relationship Between Mentorship, Career Pathways, and Success In The Superintendency: A Comparative Study Of Men and Women Educational Leaders in Minnesota.

Fasel, E. R. (2023). *Female Superintendents' Perspectives About the Preparation, Experiences, and Challenges Important to Secure a Superintendent Position* (Doctoral dissertation, Walden University).

Fidanboy, M. (2022). *Organizations and complex adaptive systems*. Routledge.

Gildersleeve-Hernandez, P. (2024). *Adaptive Leadership and the Small School District Superintendent* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Massachusetts Global).

Hernandez, D. (2024). Personal Disruption Strategies Used by Latina Superintendents for Career Advancement.

Krawczyńska-Zaucha, T. (2019). A new paradigm of management and leadership in the VUCA world. *Zeszyty Naukowe. Organizacja i Zarządzanie/Politechnika Śląska*, (141), 221-230.

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

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

Mission and Scope

The **mission** of the Journal is to provide peer-reviewed, user-friendly, and methodologically sound research that practicing school and district administrations can use to take action and that higher education faculty can use to prepare future school and district administrators. The Journal publishes accepted manuscripts in the following categories: (1) Evidence-based Practice, (2) Original Research, (3) Research-informed Commentary, and (4) Book Reviews.

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

Copyright

Authors please note: By submitting a manuscript the author/s acknowledge that the submitted manuscript is not under review by any other publisher or society, and the manuscript represents original work completed by the authors and not previously published as per professional ethics based on APA guidelines, most recent edition. By submitting a manuscript, authors agree to transfer without charge the following rights to AASA, its publications, and especially the *AASA Journal of Scholarship and Practice* upon acceptance of the manuscript. The *AASA Journal of Scholarship and Practice* is indexed by several services and is also a member of the Directory of Open Access Journals. This means there is worldwide access to all content. Authors must agree to first worldwide serial publication rights and the right for the *AASA Journal of Scholarship and Practice* and AASA to grant permissions for use of works as the editors judge appropriate for the redistribution, repackaging, and/or marketing of all works and any metadata associated with the works in professional indexing and reference services. Any revenues received by AASA and the *AASA Journal of Scholarship and Practice* from redistribution are used to support the continued marketing, publication, and distribution of articles.

Privacy

The names and e-mail addresses entered in this Journal site will be used exclusively for the stated purposes of this journal and will not be made available for any other purpose or to any other party. Please note that the Journal is available, via the Internet at no cost, to audiences around the world. Authors' names and e-mail addresses are posted for each article. Authors who agree to have their manuscripts published in the *AASA Journal of Scholarship and Practice* agree to have their names and e-mail addresses posted on their articles for public viewing.

Ethics

The *AASA Journal of Scholarship and Practice* uses a double-blind peer-review process to maintain scientific integrity of its published materials. Peer-reviewed articles are one hallmark of the scientific method, and the *AASA Journal of Scholarship and Practice* believes in the importance of maintaining the integrity of the scientific process in order to bring high quality literature to the education leadership community. We expect our authors to follow the same ethical guidelines. We refer readers to the latest edition of the APA Style Guide to review the ethical expectations for publication in a scholarly journal.

Themes and Topics of Interest

Below are themes and areas of interest for publication cycles.

1. Governance, Funding, and Control of Public Education
2. Federal Education Policy and the Future of Public Education
3. Federal, State, and Local Governmental Relationships
4. Teacher Quality (e.g. hiring, assessment, evaluation, development, and compensation of teachers)
5. School Administrator Quality (e.g. hiring, preparation, assessment, evaluation, development, and compensation of principals and other school administrators)
6. Data and Information Systems (for both summative and formative evaluative purposes)
7. Charter Schools and Other Alternatives to Public Schools
8. Turning Around Low-Performing Schools and Districts
9. Large Scale Assessment Policy and Programs
10. Curriculum and Instruction
11. School Reform Policies
12. Financial Issues

Submissions

Length of manuscripts should be as follows: Research and evidence-based practice articles between **2,800** and **4,800** words; commentaries between **1,600** and **3,800** words; book and media reviews between **400** and **800** words. Articles, commentaries, book and media reviews, citations and references are to follow the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*, **latest edition**. Permission to use previously copyrighted materials is the responsibility of the author, not the *AASA Journal of Scholarship and Practice*.

Cover page checklist:

1. title of the article:
   identify submission as original research, evidence-based practice, commentary, or book review
2. contributor name(s)
3. terminal degree
4. academic rank
5. department
6. college or university
7. city, state
8. telephone and fax numbers
9. e-mail address
10. 120-word abstract that conforms to APA style
11. six to eight key words that reflect the essence of the submission
12. 40-word biographical sketch

We are currently continuing to use Times New Roman, 12 font. Manuscripts should be sent to the editor by e-mail as an electronic attachment in **Microsoft Word**. Please do not submit page numbers in headers or footers. Rather than using footnotes outside the manuscript, it is preferred authors embed footnote content in the body of the manuscript. **Additionally, APA guidelines have been revised so that one space is required after the period at the end of a sentence**. ‘

Acceptance Rates

The *AASA Journal of Scholarship and Practice* maintains a record of acceptance rates for each of the quarterly issues published annually. The percentage of acceptance rates since 2010 is as follows:

2012: 22%
2013: 15%
2014: 20%
2015: 22%
2016: 19%
2017: 20%
2018: 19%
2019: 19%
2020: 18%
2021: 17%
2022: 17%
2023: 17%
2024: 16%
2025: 16%

Book Review Guidelines

Book review guidelines should adhere to the author guidelines as found above. The format of the book review is to include the following:

- Full title of book
- Author
- Publisher, city, state, year, # of pages, price
- Name and affiliation of reviewer
- Contact information for reviewer: address, city, state, zip code, e-mail address, telephone and fax
- Reviewer biography
- Date of submission

Publication Timeline

Issue	Deadline to Submit Articles	Notification to Authors of Editorial Review Board Decisions	To AASA for Formatting and Editing	Issue Available on AASA website
Spring	October 1	January 1	February 1	April 1
Summer	February 1	April 1	May 15	July1
Fall	May 1	July 1	August 15	October 1
Winter	August 1	October 1	November 15	February 1

Additional Information

Contributors will be notified of editorial board decisions within eight weeks of receipt of papers at the editorial office. Articles to be returned must be accompanied by a postage-paid, self-addressed envelope.

The *AASA Journal of Scholarship and Practice* reserves the right to make minor editorial changes without seeking approval from contributors.

Materials published in the *AASA Journal of Scholarship and Practice* do not constitute endorsement of the content or conclusions presented.

The Journal is listed in Cabell's Directory of Publishing Opportunities. Articles are also archived in the ERIC collection. The Journal is available on the Internet and considered an open-access document.

Editor

Brian G. Osborne, EdD
AASA Journal of Scholarship and Practice

To submit articles electronically:
bosborne@lehigh.edu

To contact by postal mail:
Dr. Brian Osborne
Lehigh University
Iacocca Hall
111 Research Drive
Bethlehem, PA 18015

Associate Editor

Kenneth Mitchell, EdD
AASA Journal of Scholarship and Practice