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

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## Superintendent as Advocate: Complexities, Challenges, & Courage

by

Ken Mitchell, EdD  
Editor

*AASA Journal of Scholarship and Practice*

The 2019-20 fall issue of the *AASA Journal of Scholarship & Practice* studies superintendent leadership: the complexity and challenges, stressors and politics, and skills and moral courage required to advocate for all children in our nation's schools. In the spirit of the *Journal*, our authors combine research studies with evidence-backed commentary to provide us with various contexts for such an examination.

James Harvey, the executive director of the National Superintendents Roundtable, in "Leading Amidst Criticism: Inoculate, Reframe, and Communicate," sets the table for the reader. Providing an overview of the misplaced blame on schools for failed social and economic policies, he calls on superintendents to take a stronger advocacy position in defending the well-documented excellence of public schools while being sufficiently informed to counter false narratives: "Despite the demonstrable successes of public education, its leaders seem to have had a difficult time framing a defense against charges of school failure."

Along with providing strategies to district leaders, Harvey characterizes the work as having moral implications for the greater good: "... amidst the barrage of criticism aimed at schools, developing persuasive arguments to turn around public opinion is a significant responsibility for school leaders. His plea mirrors the ISSLC standard that calls for "an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by understanding, responding to, and influencing the larger political, social, economic, legal, and cultural context.

Such labor is complex and demanding, so our three superintendent-researchers present suggestions from studies that examine the politics, job satisfaction, and stressors of the position. Teri Melton of Georgia Southern University, along with LaTanya Reeves, Julianne McBrayer, and Alexis Smith, explore the skills required to navigate the politics of the superintendency while John Bell, a Pennsylvania superintendent, measures job satisfaction in an era of reduced resources and increased accountability. Finally, former superintendents Joseph Lefdal of Schulyer Community Schools in Nebraska and David De Jong of the University of South Dakota look at the causes of superintendent stress and prescriptions for mitigating it.

The issue concludes with an opinion piece by AASA Executive Director, Dan Domenech, which was originally published in *The Hill*. Dan explains how a U.S. Department of Homeland Security

regulation will change the definition of who is considered a “public charge” for immigration purposes. He shares that AASA had advocated against this regulation because it would harm the students and families in the school districts we lead. Moreover, the regulation would reduce federal funding, exacerbating the already strained fiscal capacities of superintendents whose leadership bears the moral and legal obligations to support any and all students dealing with homelessness, nutrition, and healthcare. This decision has made such work even harder.

In the midst of today’s complexity, challenges, stressors, and politics—local and beyond—skillful superintendents continue to influence the mission to provide our nation with prepared, ethical, and informed citizens. The work of the superintendent is undergirded by moral purpose. It comes with a recognition that the responsibilities must go well beyond ensuring that schools are built, test scores climb, and buses run on time. It is a transformative mission that requires skill, courage, and an understanding of the complexities and inequities that transcend multiple sectors and disciplines within and beyond our organizations. Possessing such purpose and knowledge, every superintendent has the privilege of serving as an advocate for those without such a platform and voice.

## Leading Amidst Criticism: Inoculate, Reframe, and Communicate

James J. Harvey, EdD  
Executive Director  
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### Abstract

The author argues that despite demonstrable successes of public education, school leaders have not framed an effective defense against decades-long charges of school failure. Drawing on leadership literature from Aristotle through today's airport best-sellers, the author suggests that school superintendents have an obligation to make a case for public schools through a strategy of inoculation that acknowledges some shortcomings, reframing to point out the strengths of public schools, and communication that introduces audiences to the complexities of public schools in today's world. The case to be made: we have the best public schools in the world, international rankings compare apples and oranges, and many children in the United States are living in Third World conditions.

### Key Words

leadership, superintendents, public schools, international rankings

Recently it's been apparent that public education and educators have been under assault for decades, indeed ever since *A Nation at Risk* was issued (National Commission on Excellence, 1983). A school superintendent who retired a few years ago told me that her entire career in education had been amidst unrelenting public complaints since the day she entered the classroom (personal communication, 2014).

Despite the demonstrable successes of public education, its leaders seem to have had a difficult time framing a defense against charges of school failure. In some ways this may be understandable. Leadership texts and programs tend to be focused on institutions and corporations, not on campaigns to persuade the general public. But amidst the barrage of criticism aimed at schools, developing persuasive arguments to turn around public opinion is a significant responsibility for school leaders.

### Signs of Change

Fortunately, the tide of criticism is beginning to change. The astonishing “opt-out” movement of recent years in New York and elsewhere revealed that parents had had enough of drill-and-kill instruction and a bloated testing regime unique to the United States (Wallace, 2015). Teacher walkouts and strikes in Arizona, Oklahoma, and elsewhere helped transform the public perception of teachers (Will, 2018). Practically overnight teachers went from being maligned to being loved. And organizations such as the American Association of School Administrators and the National School Board Association have recently mounted attractive campaigns to tell the public school story (American Association of School Administrators, 2018 and National School Boards Association, 2019).

Other efforts have also been significant. The Learning First Alliance, a coalition representing 10 million parents, teachers, administrators, board members, and researchers issued a compendium just last year summarizing decades of research on what works in schools (Learning First Alliance, 2018). The Alliance's *Elements of Success* essentially concluded that educators know what works. And they know what they're doing.

Meanwhile, the National Superintendents Roundtable and the Horace Mann League issued two influential critiques of the data used to support the widespread perception of school failure. One called into question the credibility of the “proficiency” benchmark defined by the National Assessment of Educational Progress, or NAEP (National Superintendents Roundtable and Horace Mann League, 2018). The second questioned international assessments such as the Program on International Student Assessment. PISA issues rankings of school performance by nation with little regard for the social and economic conditions within which different national school systems function (Horace Mann League and National Superintendents Roundtable, 2015).

Although these efforts have tended to swim upstream against a flood of national bad press about schools, there's some evidence that they're making a difference. Some former critics now acknowledge that reform efforts were misguided. Two strong reform and pro-choice advocates—Jay P. Greene of the University of Arkansas and Michael McShane of EdChoice—published a candid exploration of the mistakes of reform supporters. Reformers, they confessed, have not been honest, often “wildly exaggerating the potential effects of their policy proposals” (Greene and

McShane, 2018). Prominent reformer Rick Hess of the conservative American Enterprise Institute, hitherto a staunch supporter of the reform agenda, acknowledged that Uncle Sam is good at forcing students to take tests but lousy at improving schools (Hess and McShane, 2018).

These developments represent real progress. They mark a new modesty amongst the saviors who swaggered onto the national stage in recent decades promising to save public school children from predatory and disinterested educators.

Now is the time for local leaders—school superintendents, board members, and union representatives—to build on that progress. And they can. It is time to step forward and start making the case that, while a lot remains to be done, public schools have been the backbone of American progress, they continue to play that role today, and they will continue to do so, well into the future.

### Leadership Literature

Wandering through airport bookstores, it's easy to think leadership advice is the latest big thing. Bookshelves groan with them. But they are as old as written language. Aristotle in the 4<sup>th</sup> Century B.C. emphasized that leaders hoping to persuade others need to establish their credibility (ethos), appeal to the audience's emotions (pathos), and employ arguments listeners are likely to find logical (logos) (Lawson-Tancred, trans.1991).

Today an array of leadership manuals range across conflict resolution, getting from good to great, team dysfunction, principles of organizational development, and habits of effective people (Anderson, 2012; Collins, 2001; Covey, 2004; Gerzon, 2006; Kouzes and Posner, 2007; Lencioni, 2002; and Runde and Flanagan, 2010). Michael Fullan's seminal

work in education has emphasized over the years the importance of moral purpose aligned with shared leadership amidst change (Fullan, 2001). Ronald A. Heifetz emphasizes the importance of leaders distinguishing between technical and adaptive challenges (Heifetz, 1996). And Peter Senge and his colleagues applied his "fifth discipline" insights to education in *Schools that Work* (Senge *et al*, 2000).

These are all valuable guides. Combined with case studies they promise to help school leaders frame a leadership style. But they tend to be longer on theory than on practice. They focus on organizations, not public persuasion. And they address leadership at a local level, not as a national imperative around an issue of paramount public importance. They provide little guidance on how to proceed in the face of the daily barrage of opprobrium with which educators contend.

### A Model Response

Several years ago, Martha Bruckner, then-superintendent of schools in Council Bluffs, Iowa, climbed on a plane headed for an ASCD meeting in Los Angeles (personal communication, February 2013). There she would participate in a panel about the importance of placing international test results in the context of the economic and social challenges facing schools in different societies.

Bruckner was tired. School leadership is grueling. As the plane took off, the businessman beside her asked what line of work she was in. As she tells the story, Bruckner had the "educator's flinch": Oh, I'm about to get another lecture on the failure of our schools. "I'm in education," she responded. Sure enough, the lecture emerged immediately from someone who hadn't been inside a public school for decades. He was especially critical of what he thought were the failures of Council



Bluffs' schools. Why couldn't they be as good as Finland's schools, he wondered?

Martha Bruckner does not suffer fools easily. She responded: "Actually, I'm the Council Bluffs school superintendent. Of course, we have some problems. Things don't always go well. I worry about our students every night. But, you know, we have a poverty rate in Council Bluffs of 88 percent. In spite of that, we graduate 71 percent of our students on time. Finland has a student poverty rate of five percent. Imagine how well we could do if we had Finland's poverty rate. The conversation turned on a dime. With this information, the businessman was willing to discuss the challenges facing schools realistically, instead of parroting back what he had heard in the locker room at the local country club.

Bruckner had instinctively practiced what communications specialist Kathleen Hall Jamieson preaches about leadership in the face of criticism: Inoculate ... Reframe ... And Communicate (Harvey, 2013).

### Inoculate

As school leaders, argued Jamieson, you need to understand that everyone you encounter carries in their head a picture of you and your schools. If you say you are an "educator," many people will immediately think "salt of the earth. But some will think: "overpaid and incompetent. As a leader, you need to be prepared for that. You cannot assume that everyone shares your view.

The technical term "enthymeme" defines these preconceived notions. In his *Rhetoric*, wrote Jamieson and her colleagues, Aristotle defined enthymemes as the "very body and substance of persuasion" (Jamieson, Falk, and Sherr, 1999, p. 13). Said Jamieson *et al*, "Enthymemes function by suppressing premises that are then filled in by members of

the audience. Out of this complicity come conclusions whose impact is heightened by audience participation in their construction" (Jamieson, Falk, and Sher, 1999, p. 13). Say that again?

Translation: You approach the public with a view that educators are public servants dedicated to the welfare of children. You are running into people suppressing that view and replacing it with beliefs parroted on cable television that schools are over-staffed with shirkers who go home every day at 2:30 and enjoy a three-month summer vacation every year. Most will not be rude enough to say that to your face. Instead, they'll complain about test scores, graduation rates, or property taxes.

You need to inoculate yourself against these views, taking on a weaker strain of the virus so you can withstand the more virulent strains, said Jamieson (Harvey, 2013). Bruckner inoculated herself. She didn't pretend there were no issues. She acknowledged: "Of course, we have some problems. Things don't always go well. Aristotle could not have said it better: by acknowledging challenges without being defensive, Bruckner established her credibility (ethos).

### Reframe

Bruckner did a brilliant job of reframing. Let me tell you how well we're doing in the face of terrific challenges, she said. Imagine what we could do if we had the luxury of Finland's low poverty rates. The center of gravity shifted from what's wrong with the schools to the social and economic context in which schools here and abroad function.

As part of the reframing move from the abstract to the specific. Move as quickly as you can from talking about bureaucracy, assessment results, property taxes, and the

fabulous schools of Shanghai and Finland to real kids, real teachers, and real classroom issues. That's your sweet spot. Nobody knows as much about your schools as you do.

Real people like stories, not numbers. Search out and find local illustrations that tug at people's heartstrings. This is pathos at work. We know people feel good about their schools. Every year PDK International's Poll of Public Perceptions about Public Schools consistently reports that parents and the public consistently award high marks to local schools (Phi Delta Kappan, 2018). Your neighbors know your schools produce Merit Scholars, competitive sports teams, winter concerts, and spring musicals.

This view of local schools is an enthymeme that works in your favor. It's a gift horse for you.

Below are some examples of how you might humanize your schools:

- Mrs. Smith in tenth grade just won the state Teacher of the Year Award. She's in the running to be named National Teacher of the Year at the White House. She is just one of many outstanding teachers in our district.
- This year, our valedictorian is a young hearing-impaired man. Throughout his years with us he required teams of assistants skilled in American Sign Language. We provided those teams for John. He's just one of more than 1,000 students

in our district with an individual education plan.

- As part of our civics education program emphasizing community service, our high school kids collected nearly \$10,000 worth of toys and clothes in a "Toys for Tots" campaign organized by social studies teachers.

There are a lot of wonderful things going on in your schools. Dig them up and brag about them. After you've acknowledged there are some problems, stop apologizing for them.

### **Communicate**

Note that in each of the human-interest stories above, the story itself is used, either explicitly or implicitly, as a launching pad to illustrate a broader truth. We have a lot of outstanding teachers. Our social studies program worries about civic education and community service. We provide the support needed by more than 1,000 of our students who live with disabilities of one kind or another.

Don't be afraid to introduce your audience to the complexity of the enterprise you lead and the difficult challenges facing many of your students. These are stories that need to be told. Alonzo Crim, a legendary superintendent in Atlanta in the 1980s, used to tell audiences that Atlanta Public Schools was the largest employer in the city with a budget approaching \$1 billion.

On a daily basis, he said, the district served more meals than all the restaurants in the city and it transported more people than the city bus service. It also offered more classes to more students than all the universities in the state. Simply as a management exercise,

overseeing a district of any size, large or small, requires leaders to put on many different hats, as educators, community leaders, politicians, and managers.

And do remind people that the purpose of public schools in a democracy is about more than training young people to take tests. It's about preparing them for life in a complex modern society and for a future that's largely unknown. As Horace Mann, founder of the American public school put it, "education must be universal" since our "theory of government" requires that all "shall become fit to be a voter" (cited in Rebell, October 2018).

Here you have to be on top of the information about your own district. Some years ago, Jamieson provided school leaders with a list of twenty pieces of information they should have at the tips of their fingers (Harvey, 2013 p. 295). This is logos at work—an appeal to logic for those likely to be interested in data and where it leads them.

### **Making the Case for Public Education**

But you need to go beyond defending your local schools. As a school leader you have an obligation to make a positive case for public education in the United States. And if you are on top of the data, it is an easy case to make.

Here's a three-part argument that will surprise many:

- Public schools today are better than they have ever been.
- We have the finest system of public education in the world.

- Despite progress, many children in the United States are living in Third World conditions

### **Our schools are better than ever**

Think about it. The nostalgic view of the good old days ignores a lot of things, including segregation. Sixty years ago, the majority of students in the United States left school after completing Grade 8. Nobody labeled them dropouts or failures. Manufacturing and rural economies provided them with work. Women? Well, they were as scarce as hens' teeth in the professions, but they were blessed to be homemakers, nurses, or teachers.

At heart, it was a system that discriminated. Tracking was common from Grade 1 on. Students in need of special services were ignored, sometimes barred from school entirely.

And Jim Crow presided over a brutally segregated system through the South (Clotfelder, 2004). Meanwhile "de facto" segregation in the North and West was buttressed by banks which racially red-lined neighborhoods, and Federal policy that ensured mortgages went to the suburbs, effectively barred to families of color by housing covenants (Rothstein, 2017).

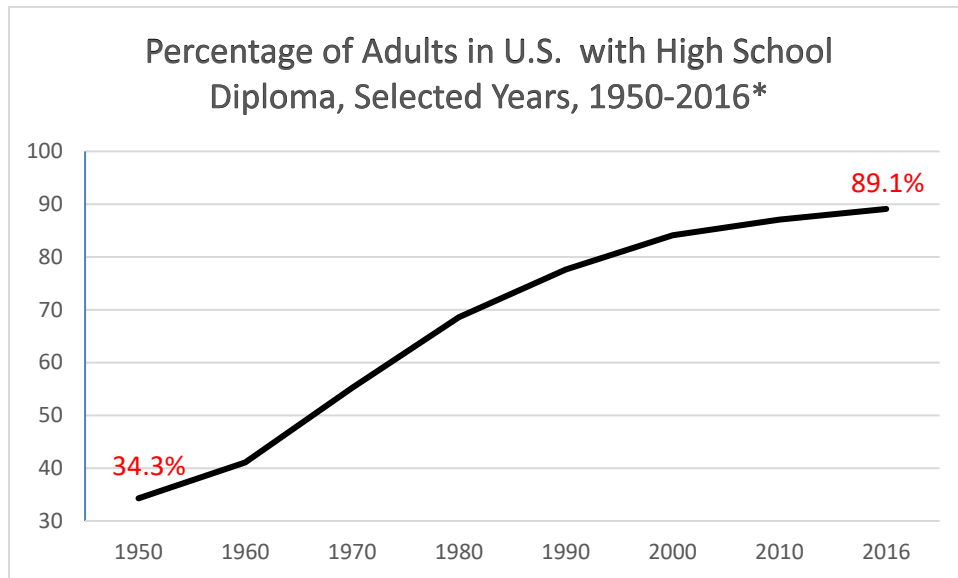
One of the great glories of the United States is that today's public school system has abandoned that discriminatory past. One of the nation's great tragedies is that our schools are still dealing with the consequences of that past.

### **Twenty Pieces of Information School Leaders Should Have at Their Fingertips**

1. What is the expenditure per student? And the per-capita expenditure per resident?
2. How much have these figures increased or decreased in the last decade?
3. What is the average teacher salary?
4. How much has average teacher salary increased or decreased in the last decade?
5. What is the district graduation rate?
6. How much has that figure increased or decreased in the last decade?
7. What proportion of students go on to college?
8. What proportion of students are classified as special needs students?
9. What proportion of students use English as a second language?
10. What proportion of student qualify for help under the Americans with Disability Act?
11. What are district test scores (local and in comparison, with national data)? What are five- year comparisons with national and local scores?
12. What is the total district budget? How much has the district budget increased or decreased in the last decade? Compared to city or county budgets?
13. What proportion of students come from homes defined as in poverty?
14. What is the ethnic/minority composition of the student body?
15. What proportion do not speak English at home?
16. What proportion of students are mainstreamed? Have a serious disability?
17. What is the average salary of workers in your community? What has been their proportion of salary increase over the last five years?
18. List members of your state legislature who have a public school education. What proportion are public vs. private school educated?
19. Are there any legislators who are alumni of your district or schools?
20. List members of the press who have a public school education. Are there any who are alumni of your district or schools?

## Graduation Rates

Where's the evidence to back up the claim that schools are better than ever? Figure 1 is the first part of that evidence. In 1950, just 34 percent of adults aged 25 or older in the United States held a high school diploma. By 2016, the proportion had climbed to 89.1 percent (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017, Table 104.10).



\*Source: *Digest of Education Statistics*, 2016, Table 104.10

Figure 1. Evidence that schools are better than ever are represented in this figure.

### Students with special needs

Meanwhile enrollment of students with disabilities nearly doubled between 1976 (when P.L. 94-142 went into effect) and 2015, from 3.6 to 6.6 million (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018, Table 204.30). The growth of programs for English language learners more than quadrupled in recent decades (National Center for Education Statistics, 1990, Table 52 and 2016, Table 204.20). In 1987, enrollment in English as a Second Language totaled about one million students (National Center for Education Statistics, 1990, Table 205.10). By 2014, fully 4.5 million students were enrolled in programs for English language learners (National Center

for Education for Education Statistics, 2016, Table 205.10).

### Dumbing down the curriculum?

Well, say the critics, this has been accomplished by “dumbing down” the curriculum. Kids aren’t learning anything. That is not true. The only long-term insight we have on student achievement is to be found in NAEP. Across the board, whatever their racial or ethnic background, students at ages 9, 13, and 17 were, on average, scoring higher on NAEP reading and mathematics assessments in 2012 than they had been in 1971 (National Assessment Governing Board, 2013). As Table 1 demonstrates we see impressive reading

performance gains across the board for all age levels and all racial and ethnic groups. For students of color, we see, 25-, 30- and 36-point increases in reading performance since 1971.

Some analysts believe gains of this magnitude represent up to two or three years of additional schooling. Similar encouraging results can be displayed for mathematics achievement.

Table 1

*NAEP Reading: Changes by Age, 1971 – 2012*

Age	White	Black	Hispanic
9	+15	+36	+25
13	+9	+24	+17
17	+4	+30	+21

Source: National Assessment Governing Board, 2013

The meme of school failure, in short, is fake news. Our schools have been transformed demographically. Although in 1970 just 12 percent of public school enrollment was made up of children of color (National Center for Education Statistics, 1985, Table 43), currently the proportion stands at 52 percent (National Center on Education Statistics, February 2019). Amidst this dramatic and little-noted change, not only are public schools graduating more students, reducing dropouts, and educating more students facing challenges of language, disability, and poverty, but they are educating them to higher levels of achievement than schools of yesterday even dreamed about.

Yet, amidst the febrile criticism aimed at public schools, this impressive progress is ignored, and educators are belittled.

### **We have the best public schools in the world**

Well, granted, but you know schools in other nations are just running circles around us. The Finns and the Chinese are eating our school lunch, according to results from the PISA administered by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD).

Not so fast. When one takes a closer look at these international comparisons, the results overseas are not nearly as impressive as the headlines indicate.

### **School Segregation in Shanghai**

Take, for example, those results from Shanghai, so impressive, according to a front-page 2010 story in the *New York Times*, that they “stunned” educational experts (Dillon, 2010). A torrent of expert criticisms of the Shanghai results have been largely ignored by OECD since, but the criticism seems, on balance, well taken. The University of Washington’s Kam Wing Chan pointed out that the children of rural Chinese citizens who had migrated to Chinese cities for work were ineligible for public services, including school attendance, in their new cities (Chan, 2011). Literally hundreds of thousands of students are not in Chinese urban schools. The National Superintendents Roundtable pointed out that children with disabilities are nowhere to be seen in Chinese schools (Kohn and Harvey, 2009). Taiwanese scholar Pei-chia Lan describes an “apartheid” system of schooling in Shanghai (Lan, 2014). And a *Wall Street*

*Journal* analysis of Chinese national data suggests that fewer than 30 percent of 15-year-olds across China are in Grades 9 or 10, when PISA assessments are administered (Strauss, 2019).

The point is not that the Shanghai numbers “stun” the world. The point is that comparing the school performance of 30 percent of the wealthiest and brightest Chinese 15-year-olds with essentially 100 percent of American 15-year-olds calls the credibility of the entire PISA enterprise into question. Beyond that, the following needs to be clearly understood: In the United States, all children residing in a school district, including children of undocumented immigrants, are constitutionally entitled to a free public education by decree of the U.S. Supreme Court (American Immigration Council, 2016). Across China, by contrast, millions of children (all Chinese nationals) are discriminated against—as a matter of law—based on where they were born.

### Apples-to-apples comparisons

Beyond Shanghai and China, there are serious questions to be asked about most international assessments. The first serious question is that the measurement experts and psychometricians who developed these assessments said it would be “a false question” to ask whether the students in “country X were better educated than those in country Y” (International Project, 1960, p. xx). But politicians and ideologues have insisted that this false question is the only relevant issue.

The second is that what these assessments conceal is just as important as what they reveal. Does it really matter where American student performance stands in relation to that of students in dictatorships (Kazakhstan), religious monarchies (Qatar),

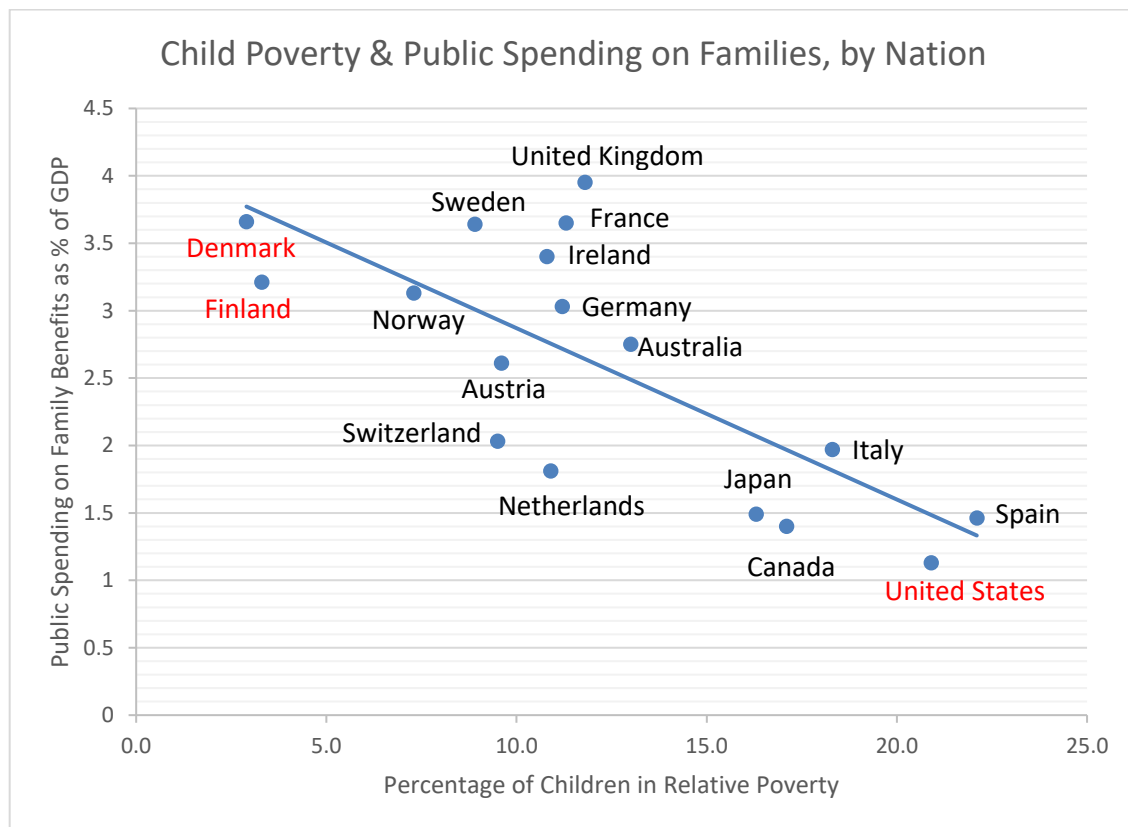
wealthy European principalities with a just a handful of students (Lichtenstein), or the wealthiest city in China (Shanghai)? To the extent these comparisons have any value, shouldn’t we compare ourselves to other large, democratic, market-oriented, relatively wealthy, and diverse societies?

When that comparison is made, American schools look robust. In the groundbreaking 2017 analysis cited earlier, *School Performance in Context* (aka, *The Iceberg Effect Report*), the Horace Mann League and the National Superintendents Roundtable examined indicators of children’s health, well-being, and education in the G-7 nations (Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the United Kingdom, and the United States), plus China and Finland. The detailed 60-page report examined 24 separate indicators of student, family, and community well-being in six broad dimensions: economic inequity, social stress, support for families, support for schools, student outcomes, and system outcomes.

What the report revealed is that on three of the six dimensions—economic inequity, social stress (including violent deaths), and support for families—the United States was in the bottom one-third of the nine nations. What about support for schools and student outcomes, two of the remaining dimensions? Here the U.S. found itself in the middle of the nine nations. In terms of the final dimension, system outcomes (i.e. years of education, possession of high school diplomas and bachelor’s degrees, and global share of high performing science students), the U.S. is without peer. It is difficult to get a grip on 24 separate indicators. An easier way to apprehend the social context of schooling in different nations is to examine a different set of social indicators, also from OECD.

Figure 2 compares relative child poverty by nation with public spending on families as a percentage of GDP for 17 nations. *Relative child poverty* represents the percentage of children aged 0-17 in families living on 50% of the mean disposable income in each country. A locally referenced poverty standard is

thought to reflect perceptions of disadvantage by nation since it reflects the social reality of people's lives in terms of cost of living. Public spending on families includes cash transfers, benefits such as food and health care, and tax preferences such as the Earned Income Tax Credit in the United States.



Child poverty data is taken from OECD Income Distribution Database at: <http://www.oecd.org/social/income-distribution-database.htm> Chart CO2.2.A. Source for data on public spending on family benefits is taken from OECD Social Expenditure Data Base at <https://www.oecd.org/social/expenditure.htm> Chart PF1.1.A

*Figure 2.* This figure 2 compares relative child poverty by nation with public spending on families as a percentage of GDP for 17 nations.



What is immediately apparent is that Denmark and Finland are outliers at one end of the scale, while the United States is an outlier at the other. That is to say, Denmark and Finland are characterized by high levels of public support for families combined with remarkably low levels of child poverty. The United States, on the other hand, long considered the wealthiest nation in the world, displays the lowest level of public support for families combined with a shockingly high level of childhood poverty.

### **Many children in the United States are living in Third World conditions**

Which gets us to the third major part of the argument you must make. The data documenting the status of children in the United States are distressing. More than 50 percent of students in American public schools are low-income (Southern Education Foundation, 2015). Segregation and social isolation by race and income have increased in this century (Jargowsky, 2013 and U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2016). An astonishing 1.5 million families in the United States, with nearly three million children, are reported to be living at subsistence levels on \$2.00 per day (Shaefer and Edin, 2016). Subsistence levels means that some of these families are selling blood to put a roof over their heads and food on the table.

All of this is ignored and papered over in the public discourse about schools. Educators are somehow expected to pick up the pieces of these larger societal catastrophes. Yet for more than 50 years researchers have documented the powerful relationship between poverty and achievement: out-of-school factors account for 70 percent or more of variation in tested achievement (Berliner, 2006; Coleman, 1966; and Ladd, 2012).

To be clear, demography is not destiny. It is easy to find individuals who have heroically escaped the pull of childhood poverty and racial segregation—and schools that beat the odds for the most disadvantaged children. Indeed, apologists like to cite such examples as evidence that if only the disadvantaged displayed more “grit” and pulled their socks up, they too could join the “legacies” whose families buy their way into Ivy League institutions. But 50 years of research is consistent and powerful: On average, poverty and its accomplices—joblessness, parental absence, community and household violence, adult substance abuse, poor nutrition, lack of medical care, squalid substandard housing, homelessness and evictions, appalling rates of gun violence, and the shame and humiliation of perceived family failure—are powerful influences on student achievement and life outcomes.

It is impossible to avoid the conclusion that, while mouthing pious cant and platitudes about “children as our most important asset,” American policymakers have, in the biblical phrase, walked by on the other side as a train wreck of community disintegration has piled up in front of their eyes.

So, this is your final leadership challenge. You need to be prepared to say to your local Chamber or Rotary: We educators have done a lot. We don’t need to apologize. We’ve done much more than we get credit for. And we’re not finished yet. But we do not have the staff, the resources, or the expertise to deal with the severe challenges that walk through the schoolhouse door every morning. Many of these children are too traumatized to learn. Everyone needs to do their part. If they do, then our schools and our society can again be a shining model for the world.

If everyone does their part, perhaps then American society can heal its wounds and renew itself, community by urban and rural community. In that environment, educators can continue the hard work of renewing our

schools, confident that they can help restore the dream that is America, while breathing new life into the dreams all our students bring with them as they enter school on the first day.

### **Author Biography**

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## **Navigating the Politics of the Superintendency**

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### **Abstract**

This study examined how P-12 superintendents understand and respond to political influences on their decision-making regarding matters of student success. Participants included seven recently retired superintendents from two states. Findings revealed that the major influences on superintendents' decisions were school boards, parents, community members, and teachers, who attempted to influence superintendents in matters pertaining to accountability and fiduciary responsibilities, as well as with schools and facilities. Strategies most often used to respond to political influences were identifying key stakeholders, deciding the best course of action, networking and forming coalitions, and communication. Results should be beneficial to practicing and aspiring superintendents in helping them to identify, acquire, develop, or refine the skills needed to understand and respond to political influences of the superintendency.

### **Key Words**

superintendency, politics, district/school administration, decision-making

## Introduction

School districts are considered to be social systems comprised of internal and external stakeholders (Hoy & Tarter, 2008). As in other organizations, the success or failure of the school system rests on the shoulders of the chief executive officer (CEO), known in educational circles as the *superintendent* (Stenmark & Mumford, 2011). Across the nation, approximately 14,000 public school superintendents are responsible for the success of 77.2 million students (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016).

In addition to the normal challenges of running a human-intensive complex organization, superintendents often must contend with low student achievement, high dropout rates, dysfunctional operating systems, difficult school boards, facilities in need of repair, labor issues, and funding deficiencies (Stenmark & Mumford, 2011). The challenges are further compounded because superintendents operate within a highly political, media-intensive, bureaucratic, and highly-regulated public environment (Gil, 2013; Quinn, 2010; Noppe, Yager, Webb, & Sheng, 2013). As such, the superintendent must be aware of, “the social, political, and economic forces in the environment surrounding the school district that impinge on the organization” (Lunenburg, 2010, p. 28).

In these social, political, and economic contexts superintendent work is marked by pressures at the local, state, and federal levels (Gil, 2013; Lunenburg, 2010). Thus, superintendents find it necessary to manage and develop internal operations while concurrently monitoring the environment and anticipating and responding to external demands.

Additionally, superintendents must cope with various expectations for their behavior,

particularly as it pertains to decision-making for the school district (Lunenburg, 2010).

In tracing the history of the superintendency, the position was created between 1837 and 1850 (Cuban, 1976; Kowalski, 2006) when school districts grew to be too large and complex to be managed by lay boards and was considered to be *apolitical*. As the position evolved, it moved from one of clerical assistant (Cuban, 1976) to teacher-scholar, manager, democratic leader, applied social scientist, and, currently, communicator (Callahan, 1966; Kowalski 2006). In the midst of these transitions in form and function of the role was the stock market crash of 1929 and Great Depression of the 1930s (Kowalski, 2006); it was at that time that superintendents were forced to become political as they lobbied on behalf of their districts for scarce resources.

According to the current Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium Standards (ISSLC) standard six, superintendents must understand, respond to, and influence the larger political context in order to promote the success of students (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015). At one point or another, superintendents must focus on the political realities that exist within and outside of their school districts (Bolman & Deal, 2013). At every level of the superintendents’ involvement in the governance of their districts, they encounter some form of politics.

In addressing the challenging nature of the superintendency, Quinn (2010) commented, “The fact that schools are most often the biggest spenders of local taxpayer dollars and are charged with the care and development of the community’s most precious resources - its children - places everything superintendents do under the community’s magnifying glass” (p.16).



As such, superintendents sometimes find themselves in the position of having to respond to community influences and challenges.

Quinn referred to this aspect of the superintendency as being politically astute or playing politics. Like Quinn, other researchers (e.g. Bolman & Deal, 2013; Casto & Sipple, 2011; Hoy & Tarter, 2008; Polka, Litchka, Calzi, Denig, & Mete, 2011) have also maintained that superintendents must understand the politics of the job. From the perspective of the superintendent, “playing politics is simply the exercise of common sense and sensitivity to the interests of others in a sometimes highly volatile environment” (Quinn, 2010, p. 52). As school districts are held more accountable for improved student achievement, superintendents must make a plethora of decisions regarding teaching and learning. It is not uncommon for superintendents to encounter political manipulations as they make decisions for the good of the school system (Blase & Bjork, 2010; Callan & Levinson, 2011; Hoy & Tarter, 2008).

As the chief executive officer of schools, the superintendent is ultimately accountable for the operation of the entire school system. The high turnover rate of superintendents in school districts across the nation points to the complexities of the job. Superintendents must assume various roles that require specific knowledge and skills for effective practice. Adding to the myriad of job responsibilities, superintendents must be responsive to various constituencies as they make decisions regarding matters of leading student success. These competing demands can be considered a significant part of the politics associated with the position.

Politics, in particular, has been singled out as the primary reason superintendents are fired from the job or choose to leave the position (Quinn, 2010). The challenge facing superintendents is to acknowledge the reality that politics is a part of their daily routine. Knowing how to navigate the politics of school district administration is important for superintendents to survive in the position. In order to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding of the political context, successful superintendents utilize specific strategies to gain acceptance or reduce resistance from various stakeholders as they make decisions relative to student success.

Several researchers have investigated the influence of political entities on superintendents’ decision-making (e.g. Denig, Polka, Litchka, Calzi, & Brigano, 2011; Gil, 2013; Noppe et al. 2013; Polka et al. 2011; Tyler, 2014). The consensus among the researchers is that political influences can positively or negatively impact a superintendent’s tenure. Specifically, the researchers posit that when superintendents are caught between competing interests, they sometimes proceed cautiously and do not make the necessary decisions in order not to offend specific interest groups. The political nature of the superintendency has made this a position that requires skills that are not necessarily listed in the formal job description. The superintendent must be able to understand and respond to the various stakeholders that seek to influence decisions regarding matters of leading student success.

The problem that this study addressed was that school superintendents are sometimes ill-prepared to manage political influences and counter restraints that impact their decision-making regarding matters of leading student

success. Therefore, the purpose of the study was to examine how P-12 school superintendents understand and respond to political influences on their decision-making regarding matters of leading student success.

### Research Questions

An overarching research question guided the study: How do P-12 school superintendents understand and respond to political influences, particularly as they relate to decision-making regarding matters of leading student success?

Additionally, the following sub-research questions were addressed:

1. Who are the individuals and groups that seek to influence P-12 superintendents' decision-making regarding matters of leading student success?
2. How do the identified individuals and groups influence P-12 superintendents' decision-making regarding matters of leading student success?
3. What strategies do P-12 superintendents use to respond to political influences?

### Procedures

A semi-structured interview protocol to collect data for the study was developed, pilot-tested, and revised based on feedback. The protocol consisted of six open-ended questions; questions were developed based on the literature review and, thereby, had content validity. Study participants included seven retired superintendents from two southeastern states who were selected through purposive sampling. While five to 10 participants is an appropriate number for a phenomenological study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), the fact that participants were only representative of two states does limit the transferability of the findings to other states with differing cultures

and political structures exist, specifically when examining non-union versus union states.

The decision to use retired superintendents was based on the fact that some sitting superintendents might feel uncomfortable answering questions regarding the nature of politics in their districts. However, it is important to note that all seven participants were recently (within three years) retired and, therefore, not far removed from the day-to-day roles and responsibilities of the superintendency. Data analysis involved coding participants' responses to the interview questions; initial coding was based on a preliminary coding list developed from the literature. Initial coding then led to categorical aggregation, direct interpretation, and naturalistic generalizations to reveal predominant themes (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) to answer the research questions.

### Findings

The findings revealed several sources of political influence on superintendents' decision-making in matters regarding leading student success; however, the major influences were school boards, parents, community members, and teachers.

These individuals and groups attempted to influence the superintendents in matters pertaining to accountability and fiduciary responsibilities, as well as with schools and facilities. This influence was evidenced through myriad examples in the participants' responses. The strategies most often used by superintendents to respond to the political influences were identifying key stakeholders, deciding the best course of action, and networking and forming coalitions.

Additionally, the superintendents indicated that they relied on the interpersonal skill of communication to help them navigate

the political waters. These findings were addressed according to the research questions.

### **Demographic profile of respondents**

Participants consisted of seven retired P-12 superintendents from two southeastern states; five were female and two were male. Four of the superintendents were Caucasian and three were African-American. Participants' years in the superintendency ranged from 3 to 17 years; all had been appointed by an elected school board. As stated previously, participants were retired for a maximum of three years.

### **Understanding and responding to political influences**

The seven superintendents who participated in the study acknowledged that the position of superintendent was, in and of itself, political. Thus, they were making all of the decisions regarding matters of leading student success within a political context. They indicated that it was important for them to know who would support and who would come out against their decisions. As such, they utilized a repertoire of strategies to respond to political influences on their decision-making.

The superintendents interviewed viewed politics as an ever-present and necessary challenge of the job. Their remarks indicated that they were aware that politics, both positive and negative, came with the position.

According to Participant S3: "Political influences keep us grounded in kind of a check and balance process for what we do every day with students. They keep us transparent in what and how we go about the business of improving student success. Some viewed it as a positive, almost like a system of checks and balances where they might capitalize on the politics of certain groups in order to acquire necessary resources.

Understandably, others view political influences as a challenge, particularly when the political influences had conflicting motives and goals that deterred their work. This conflicting motive often is seen happening when there might be a single-agenda board member or parent group. Participant S4 spoke to this issue: "The ability of the superintendent and the school board is greatly hampered when you have naysayers who have individual agendas that have nothing to do with student success. Although it was clear that each superintendent had his or her own style of responding to these political influences, the most frequently identified strategies fell into three categories: identifying key stakeholders; deciding the best course of action; and, networking and forming coalitions.

### **Political influences on the superintendents**

Superintendents' responses regarding individuals and groups that seek to influence them confirmed that they constantly found themselves in the position of having to contend with internal and external political influences on their decision-making regarding matters of leading student success. Not surprisingly, those influences mainly consisted of the board, the community, parents, and teachers.

While the superintendents were quick to declare that for the most part they had no conflicts with all board members, the majority of participants perceived that school board members exerted the most influence on their decision-making regarding matters of leading student success.

Participant S3 remarked, "Boards of education many times have members who have personal agendas that conflict with and contradict what is best for students. They attributed this to the hierarchical nature of school systems; they reported to the board and,

therefore, were subject to influences from the board. Most participants attributed the root causes of these political issues to conflict, power struggles, and/or ethics.

After the board, the superintendents deemed the community to be a significant political influence on their decisions regarding matters of leading student success. Each superintendent stressed the importance of getting to know the school community, especially the key political players. As Participant S2 remarked, “There can be somebody that’s very well thought of in the community who stands out and they just want their way. They spoke of the need to communicate with the community regarding new initiatives in order to mitigate opposition, citing the benefits of communication and collaboration with the community. Participant S1 stated: “My number one concern was not allowing fallout from decisions that I made to affect the politics of the community.

In addition to the board and the community, superintendents commented on the political pressure from parents, which was especially prevalent during times of change. This was especially noted when these parents’ children would be affected by the proposed changes or initiatives. As participant S1 stated, “When you’re doing something that is different and it affects the way things are and students are reacting, parents don’t necessarily like it. In addition to change, other initiatives that led to conflict with parents were school closings or consolidations, curriculum and program offerings, student placement, and provision of resources. Participants expressed mixed beliefs regarding parent influence being positive or negative, indicating that it was situational.

Teachers also exerted influence on superintendent decision-making regarding matters of leading student success. While the

four of the seven (57%) superintendents reported that they valued teacher influence and tried to use teachers to help propel their agendas, the primary challenges presented by teachers pertained to changes involving curriculum and instruction, program offering, evaluations, staff handbooks, and policies and procedures. Participants indicated that teachers and/or teacher representatives were slow to embrace change. Other sources that influenced superintendents’ decisions regarding matters of leading student success included government officials, the state department of education, other superintendents, and other school districts; the first two were found to challenge their decisions, while the second two served to provide support for their decisions.

### **Ways in which individuals and groups seek to influence superintendents**

Data revealed that the identified ways in which individuals and groups were most likely to exert influence were in terms of accountability. When the superintendents spoke of accountability, the specific types of political influences and the sources of influences were varied. Most often, the superintendents cited local, state, and federal school effectiveness measures, charter legislation, evaluation and grading of schools, federal legislation, state and federal testing requirements, and, funding compliance.

The sources of these political influences were board members, parents, community, the state department of education, and government officials. The superintendents viewed such influences as having an adverse impact on their decision-making in matters regarding student success. For example, participant S3 stated, “There are all kinds of federal, state, and local political influences, such as legislation and policies that tend to focus more on compliance than a true comprehension of the systems and processes that influence continuous

improvement for student achievement. Other participants commented on state or federal paperwork and testing mandates that took precedence over teaching and learning.

Another area of political influence encountered by the superintendents was regarding fiduciary matters. As participant S6 expressed, “The part that politics plays most of the time has to do with funding. The breadth of this influence was widespread and ranged from the allocation of resources, and appropriation and management of the budget to local, state, and federal funding and various taxes and assessments. Participant S5 summed it up as: “Things such as funding compliance cause the hands of educators to be tied regarding spending for what is truly needed versus just compliance with the funding guidelines made by people who have no clue.

As with accountability, the primary sources of these fiduciary political influences were board members, community, parents, and government officials in terms of power to sway decisions. For example, according to S7, “When it comes to politics, it’s about scarce resources because everybody wants a share of something, and there’s not enough money to go around. When you have a money problem, you’re going to operate in a political frame.”

Schools and facilities were also disclosed by the superintendents as areas involving much political influence. The sources of political influence included school administrators, board members, community, parents, students, teachers, other districts, and other superintendents. The types of influences were regarding curriculum and instruction, curricular and extracurricular participation, discipline, personnel matters, policies and procedures, programs and services, resources, schools, and student placement.

### Strategies used to respond to political influence

Analysis revealed that four principal strategies for dealing with political influence emerged: identifying key stakeholders, deciding the best course of action, networking and forming coalitions, and communication. The main mode of response to political influences was the importance of identifying key stakeholders in order to accomplish goals as the educational leaders of the district. Superintendents stated that being able to identify potential sources of conflict that could hamper their effectiveness also played a large role in the strategy. They believed identifying potential sources of conflict to be a priority in accomplishing their goals for the district, particularly as it applied to their board members, the powerbase of the community, parents, and teachers, particularly when trying to promote change. As Participant S1 declared, “When you’re doing something different and it affects either the way things are, or it gets into the lives of students in some way, they don’t necessarily like it, so they react, and then, their parents react.

Participants in this study revealed that deciding the best course of action was an important leadership attribute for superintendents. Although the superintendents agreed that it was necessary to collaborate with stakeholders, they contended that the task of deciding the best course of action was solely the responsibility of the superintendent and should involve communicating with others internal and external to the organization. It also involves skills such as transparency, agenda setting, communication, consensus-building, and being able to anticipate conflict and resistance.

A contextual difference discussed by the superintendents was whether or not the superintendent was from within the district

versus coming from outside the district. For example, according to the superintendents, this factored into how they responded to political influences. Specifically, participants contended that if the superintendent came from within the district, he or she might have more support; however, if the superintendent came from outside the district, he or she had to work harder to identify key players, network, form coalitions, and get consensus.

As participant S7 commented, “You always need to know who is connected to whom.”

The next political skill described by the superintendents as essential to responding to political influences was networking and forming coalitions. Participants indicated that building alliances and forging relationships involves a combination of identifying key stakeholders and deciding the best course of action. They were specific as to with whom they needed to network—and this included board members, teachers, parents, or the community.

While they all described networking and forming coalitions as essential to understanding the political landscape, they also noted that networking and forming coalitions needs to be used in conjunction with other strategies, particularly when confronting conflict or opposition or trying to engender support.

Most often, superintendents spoke of networking with other superintendents, lobbying and working with legislators, and building internal and external teams. However, they agreed that the most important coalition was with board members. In terms of building relationships, each of the seven superintendents cited networking and forming coalitions with the board members as their top priority.

However they spoke of cultivating relationships with all board members as opposed to focusing on singular relationships, stressing that forming individual alliances with board members can be dangerous. This is supported in the literature, in that social influence has been noted as essential in the superintendent’s need to develop and maintain a cooperative working relationship with all board members and the community at large (Petersen & Short, 2001).

A common thread throughout superintendents’ responses was the need for open and two-way effective communication. More than anything else, the superintendents referred to communication as the key to their success. At the top of the list was communication with the board for the purposes of building a working relationship with the board, engendering trust, providing information, and making sure that the board understood what the superintendent was trying to do. For example, participant S6 declared, “Communication is such a major part in leadership where you communicate not just inward, but, outward as well. You’re really a salesman.

Throughout their interviews, participants consistently declared the interpersonal skill of communication as one of the strategies used to respond to political influences from internal and external stakeholders. In a manner similar to participant S6, participant S2 commented on the need for superintendents to dispel feelings that they are trying to hide something: “You have to communicate with stakeholders as much as you possibly can. Be clear in what your goals and objectives are, and that way, it’s not the first time anybody’s heard it.

They spoke of keeping the lines of communication open with different stakeholders by using various modes of

communication. Other interpersonal skills interspersed throughout interviews where the following: accessibility, visibility, transparency, building trust, teambuilding, honesty, and integrity.

## Discussion

School superintendents do not make decisions in a vacuum (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011). Rather, their decisions are made within social systems that are made up of various stakeholders. Thus, it is not uncommon for superintendents to encounter political manipulations as they make decisions regarding matters of leading student success (Blase & Bjork, 2010; Callan & Levinson, 2011). The seven P-12 superintendents in this study were explicit in discussing the numerous political challenges and attempts to exert influence on their decision-making. Their responses to the interview questions revealed similarities, as well as contradictions to data reported in the review of literature.

In understanding that politics is inherent with their jobs, the superintendents in this study maintained that they had to *know how to play politics* in order to survive in their positions. This need to be politically astute was illustrated in prior research (Bolman & Deal, 2013; Casto & Sipple, 2011; Gil, 2013; Hoy & Tarter, 2008; Polka et al. 2011). Likewise, the research of Denig et al. (2011) and Gil (2013) concluded that effective superintendents are conscious of and willing to participate in the political process if they are to survive in the position.

Superintendents also understood that they could expect to encounter some form of politics at every level of their involvement in the governance of their school districts. Additionally, superintendents were cognizant that in their position, they had to be flexible in terms of their leadership style. As such, at one time or another, they assumed all the historical

role perspectives of the superintendent depicted in the literature: teacher-scholar, manager, democratic leader, applied social scientist, and communicator (Callahan, 1996; Cuban, 1976; Kowalski, 2006). As with the earliest of superintendents, the superintendents in this study did not have the option of being apolitical. They were required to engage in political activity and lobby on behalf of their school districts. They had to be spokespersons for their districts and advocates for their students. As such, they relied on a repertoire of strategies to respond to political influences.

The literature review revealed various individuals and groups that sought to influence superintendents (Denig et al. 2011; Noppe et al. 2013). These included school board members, parents, principals, teachers, students, community, business people, labor unions, government officials, and the media.

The seven superintendents in this study identified the same individuals and groups as was found in the literature. However, primarily the superintendents spoke of challenges faced with board members such as blurred roles of governance, micromanagement, and personal agendas. They spoke of the challenging position they were put in of having to choose what is best for children or what is morally right over appeasing or alienating board members.

For example, the literature noted that “The fact that schools are most often the biggest spenders of local taxpayer dollars and are charged with the care and development of the community’s most precious resources, its children, places everything superintendents do under the community’s magnifying glass” (Quinn, 2010, p. 16). The superintendents viewed politics as ever present and a necessary part of the job. Participant S3 asserted, “Political influences keep us grounded in kind

of a check and balance process for what we do every day with students. They keep us transparent in what and how we go about the business of improving student success. The superintendents referenced operating in what they called “the political frame” whenever they faced issues. However, the superintendents stressed the importance of understanding how to navigate the politics of the job to avoid conflict.

Superintendent concerns about appropriate board member role understanding and the challenging nature of boards are found throughout the literature (Gil, 2013; Kowalski, 2006; Noppe et al. 2013; Polka et al. 2011). Kowalski (2006) specifically cited three historical tensions existent in the superintendent-school board relationship: blurred lines regarding roles and responsibilities, power struggles, and questionable motives for serving on the board. In a manner similar to Kowalski (2006), all of the superintendents referenced these tensions as barriers to productive relationships with their boards.

The superintendents in this study also spoke of other political influences, some from within the school district and others outside of the school district. Specifically, the superintendents spoke of problems with parents, teachers, or community groups over competing agendas, interests, curriculum, special programs, or allocation of resources.

However, the superintendents spoke more about dealing with parent or community factions than with teachers. When they did speak of teachers, they also spoke of teacher unions or collective bargaining groups. The superintendents’ responses were consistent with prior research (Bolman & Deal, 2013; Durlak et al. 2010; Lunenburg, 2010) that superintendents must contend with various

entities to enhance acceptance or reduce resistance to decisions.

The superintendents revealed that internal and external stakeholders attempted to exert influence on their decisions regarding matters of leading student success. This influence specifically pertained to accountability and fiduciary matters and these areas of influence resemble those discussed in prior research (Kowalski, 2006; Noppe et al. 2013).

In regard to schools and facilities, the superintendents indicated that they were expected to communicate detailed information to internal and external stakeholders regarding school openings and closings, curriculum and instruction, assessment, personnel, and needed resources. These findings were reflected in prior research by Kowalski (2006) and Noppe et al. (2013) illustrating that the nature of conflict in the superintendency is the result of competing resources or resistance to change. Prior research also spoke of the need for school superintendents to engage the community as they communicated their districts’ needs for resources and advocated regarding school taxes (Noppe et al. 2013).

The literature review revealed that effective superintendents know how to work with various constituencies in order to move along their agendas and accomplish their goals (Denig et al. 2011; Noppe et al. 2013; Polka et al. 2011). The study found that superintendents had to interact with various constituencies and engage with different groups prior to making decisions regarding matters of leading student success.

The superintendents understood that moving a school district forward required engagement with both internal and external stakeholders. As in the review of the literature,



these activities forced the superintendents to rely on their political skills to achieve district goals (Cuban, 1976; Kowalski, 2006). However, although they had to engage the stakeholders as they communicated district goals and had to be careful not to alienate them.

In spite of political influences on their decision-making, the superintendents in this study took a hard stance to preserve what they considered best for their respective school districts. They expressed that while it was incumbent upon the superintendent to pursue a role that is politically savvy, it was also necessary to remain steadfast in maintaining and improving the school district. This viewpoint was a contradiction to prior research (Denig et al. 2011) that asserted that superintendents give in to political pressure.

The superintendents in this study did not deny political influences on their decision-making in matters of ensuring student success. However, they asserted that they respond to these political influences by using various skills or strategies. While each superintendent had his or her own particular best practices, among the seven superintendent participants the commonalities were identifying key players, deciding the best course of action, networking and forming coalitions, and communication. The superintendents considered these strategies as paramount to their efficacy in the position. Prior research supports the use of these strategies (Cuban, 1976; Denig et al. 2011; Hoy & Tarter, 2008; Kowalski, 2006; Polka et al. 2011).

Central throughout the strategies used by the superintendents was the interpersonal skill of communication. Other strategies mentioned by the superintendents were not separate and apart from the skill set laid out by Bolman and Deal (2013), Cuban (1976), and Hoy and Tarter (2008) in their work. Included

in the other strategies was visibility, use of consultants, accessibility, and vision, which were all integral parts of all of the political frames.

## Conclusions

The political nature of the superintendency has made this a position that requires skills that are not necessarily in the formal job description and that are not taught in educational leadership preparation programs. What is seen from this and prior research is the growing acceptance of political behavior as a positive skill set critical to the role and success of superintendents.

Superintendents are caught between serving the needs of children and responding to the needs of adult stakeholders. The superintendents in this study responded to the individuals and groups that sought to exert influence on their decisions by applying a combination of the interpersonal skill of communication, and three strategies from varied leadership models: identifying key stakeholders, deciding the best course of action, and networking and forming coalitions. The superintendents recognized communication as the key to accomplishing their goals.

As with all research, there were limitations to this study that may affect the reader's interpretation of the findings. As the study was limited in scope to seven participants in two states and participants were purposively and not randomly selected, results may not be generalizable. In addition, the study only addressed contexts or situations perceived by superintendents as political. The assumption was made the participants were open and honest in their responses, providing accurate insights into the problem under study.

## Implications

The increasing prominence of politics in education has given rise to the need for the

school superintendent to understand, practice, and become adept at political leadership (Gil, 2013; Quinn, 2010; Noppe et al. 2013). As the superintendency continues to become more complex, superintendents must make innumerable judgments that have no established criteria or protocol. Superintendents are engaged with conflict, problems, and issues that require political acumen.

Superintendents are practitioners who need to be able to recognize the significance and implications of a political situation. Thus, how superintendents learn political leadership skills should be included in leadership training. To note, traditional preparation programs and professional development available through professional organizations may be inadequate in preparing superintendents for the myriad of leadership demands that characterize their roles. Undoubtedly, superintendents must have unique skill sets to respond to the demands and influences from a multitude of stakeholders. Beyond traditional leadership skills, they must know how to navigate the political waters of the superintendency.

This study addressed a gap in the educational literature regarding how superintendents understand and respond to political influences on their decision-making regarding matters of leading student success. The study contributes to the body of research on the superintendency by providing insight for

superintendents who are struggling with the political aspects of district-level decision-making. The study also identifies the skills needed to understand and respond to political influences on superintendents' decision-making. The results of the study could be instructive for aspiring superintendents on understanding and responding to political influences. Additionally, the results of the study could inform educational leadership programs on how to train superintendents to use specific skills to manage political influences on decision-making.

The findings for this research study resulted from examining the phenomenon related to navigating the politics of school district leadership. The P-12 superintendents in this study understood that their position was, by nature, political. They acknowledged that board members, parents, teachers, and community members sought to influence their decisions regarding matters of leading student success. Specifically, these individuals and groups attempted to influence the superintendents' decisions regarding accountability and fiduciary matters. The superintendents responded to the political influences by identifying key stakeholders, deciding the best course of action, and networking and forming coalitions. Additionally, the superintendents relied on the interpersonal skill of communication to help navigate the political waters.

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## **Superintendent Job Satisfaction in an Era of Reduced Resources and Increased Accountability**

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this study was to investigate New York State school superintendent job satisfaction and the potential contributing factors to their job satisfaction in an era of reduced resources and increased accountability. Sharp, Malone and Walter (2002) created a 49-item survey entitled the Positive Aspects and Motivation Survey and used it in a three-state study (Indiana, Illinois and Texas) that found increasing job satisfaction. Padalino (2009) used the same instrument and found increasing superintendent job satisfaction (75%) in New York State. In this study, superintendent job satisfaction was only measured at 60%. This is a 15% decrease in 6 years. Approximately 81% of respondents had positive feelings about working with the board of education. Almost exactly the same 81% of respondents said they would aspire to the superintendency if starting their careers over. Thus, superintendent-board of education relations were far more important to superintendent job satisfaction than any external factors measured in this study.

### **Key Words**

superintendent, job satisfaction, school district leadership, superintendent-school board relations, superintendent motivation

Glass, Bjork & Brunner (2000) wrote that superintendents of public school districts hold one of the toughest jobs in the nation. According to Carter & Cunningham (1997), “Nowhere is there a job with higher expectations and so little trust and confidence. (p. 4)” These statements were made before the No Child Left Behind legislation was passed in 2001, the Great Recession of 2008 occurred and the Common Core State Standards were adopted in 2012. Thus, there has been great change already in this century that has added new pressures to the education system.

With the increasing demands of the job comes increasing stress on the office holder. Faelton & Diamond (1998) found that stress in the superintendency can pose serious mental and physical health consequences for the superintendent. While school employees of all types can experience stress, superintendents tend to experience the highest levels of stress due to their role as leader of the entire organization and the face of the district to the outside world (Unzicker, 2007).

### **Statement of the Problem**

Public education has played a pivotal role in America’s growth from its early years as a small, agrarian country to becoming a leader in world affairs. The 20<sup>th</sup> century has often been called the “American Century” (Luce, 1941) due to the country’s ascension to world leader in politics, business, education, entertainment and military affairs.

However, the 21<sup>st</sup> century has been a difficult one for America with two recessions, two wars and a growing chorus of dissatisfaction with government in general and the public education system in particular (Jones, 2014; Howell, Peterson & West, 2009). When a system is under attack, the leaders receive the greatest criticism.

A review of literature in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century pointed to increasing job satisfaction among school superintendents. (Sharp, Malone & James, 2002, and Padalino, 2009). However, in recent years, pressures on superintendents have grown with increased accountability, reduced resources, and the challenges of implementing numerous federal and state policy initiatives. Thus, it was important to learn if this trend of increasing job satisfaction continued or reversed itself.

Job satisfaction could affect superintendent longevity and the quality of candidates in future superintendent searches. Therefore, it was important to the field of education to learn more about the current state of the superintendency as it has implications to the future leadership of school districts.

Furthermore, improving superintendent leadership will help America’s public schools improve. This can be accomplished by studying superintendent job satisfaction and the potential contributing factors then making changes accordingly to the superintendency.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this quantitative study was to investigate New York State school superintendent job satisfaction and the potential contributing factors to their job satisfaction in an era of reduced resources and increased accountability. The instrument used in this study was a survey sent to all New York State superintendents.

Sharp, Malone & Walter (2002) created a 49-item survey entitled the Positive Aspects and Motivation Survey and used the survey in a three-state study (Indiana, Illinois and Texas) that found increasing superintendent job satisfaction. Padalino (2009) used the same instrument when studying superintendent job

satisfaction in New York State. The Padalino study (2009), which also found increasing superintendent job satisfaction, served as a baseline for this new study.

In light of reduced resources and increased accountability in the field of education in New York, this new study explored the job satisfaction of today's superintendents and compared these percentages to previous rates as measured in the Padalino study.

### Research Questions

Four research questions guided this study:

1. Given the increased stress and pressures inherent to the position, was there a downward trend in superintendent job satisfaction among New York State superintendents?
2. What factors most contributed to superintendent job satisfaction and dissatisfaction?
3. What motivated current superintendents to pursue the superintendency?
4. What percentage of superintendents would aspire to the position again if starting their careers over?

### Review of Related Literature

Public schools in America are under scrutiny from all directions. Local taxpayers have fought against higher school taxes, state governments have reduced funding to school districts and the federal government's role in education has grown dramatically in recent years.

At the same time, politicians are advocating for charter schools and vouchers while the media remains fixated on America's less than stellar standing on international tests.

Teachers in many states feel under attack due to the new teacher evaluation systems implemented under the federal Race to the Top (RTTT) requirements. Many parents and conservative groups across the country are vehemently against the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), which has been a key component of RTTT.

In 2010, New York State was awarded approximately \$700 million in RTTT funds from the U.S. Education Department (U.S. Education Department, 2010). The Regents Reform Agenda is New York's plan for implementing RTTT. The agenda includes three major areas: the implementation of the New York State P-12 Common Core learning standards, teacher and leader effectiveness, and data-driven instruction (engageny.org, 2015).

These education policy changes on the federal and state levels have created a period of great change in public education. At the same time, education funding in New York State has undergone major changes as well. In terms of reduced resources, the decrease in state aid to school districts, called the Gap Elimination Adjustment (GEA), under Governor Patterson in 2010 (New York State Budget, 2010) caused districts to lose millions of dollars in state aid. This resulted in thousands of layoffs in school districts across the state. In addition, Governor Cuomo signed into law the 2% property tax cap in 2011 (New York Governor's Office, 2011) thereby limiting the amount of revenue a district could raise locally through property taxes.

While the job satisfaction of New York State superintendents has been measured before (Padalino, 2009), it was prior to the federal and state education policy changes, and the state school finance policy changes outlined above. In light of these changing conditions in the field of education in New York State, a new



study was warranted to gauge the job satisfaction levels of today's superintendents and to compare these levels to previous levels as measured in the Padalino study.

This study investigated New York State school superintendent job satisfaction in an era of reduced resources and increased accountability. Specifically, it examined whether job satisfaction decreased in recent years and what factors most contributed to job satisfaction and dissatisfaction.

In addition, the study investigated what motivated superintendents to pursue the position initially and whether they would seek the position again if starting over. The literature and research behind this study's thesis was explored in three sections: the current state of the superintendency, job stress and job satisfaction research in education and other fields, and the future appeal of the superintendency.

### **Current State of the Superintendency**

Today's superintendents are stuck between two competing forces—increased accountability and reduced resources. The phrase “do more with less” is very appropriate for this time in education. “The education world is facing transformational forces and challenges that are unprecedented in its history” said Brandon Busteded, executive director of Gallup Poll Education (2013, p. 3).

American Association of School Administrators (AASA) executive director Dan Domenech said, “The superintendent's job is one of the most difficult jobs in America and one of the most important” (2014, p.42). Recent educational research has emphasized the importance of effective leadership by district leaders (Marzano & Waters, 2009). A meta-analysis of district leadership and student achievement studies from 1970 to 2005

identified 27 studies that included data from 2,817 school districts across the country. Marzano & Waters (2009) found a correlation between district leadership and student achievement of 0.24 with 0.05 being significant. Therefore, a district with leadership that has increased one standard deviation from the average would raise student achievement from the average of 50% to 59.5%. Thus, their research says leadership does matter.

Several other studies have found a relationship between the superintendent and student achievement (Bredeson, 1995; Brunner et al. 2002; Hoyle et al. 2005; Kowalski & Brunner, 2005). Multiple studies found a correlation between district office staff and student achievement as well (Elmore, 2005; Fullan, 2008; Honig, 2012, 2013; Iver, 2010; Leon, 2008; Reeves, 2002).

Increased accountability and reduced resources have placed a strain on school district employees, in general, and superintendents, in particular. This strain creates stress on educational leaders which can lead to shorter superintendent tenures. Shorter tenures can wipe away the positive effects of district leadership on student achievement as cited by Marzano & Waters (2009).

### **Job stress**

New, tougher academic standards, complex new teacher evaluation systems and decreased public support for public education overall have combined to make the role of superintendent more stressful. In addition, all of the fiscal issues in New York State only compounded the situation. According to research sponsored by the American Association of School Administrators (AASA), Glass's (2000) “Study of the American Public School Superintendent” indicated that stress levels were increasing in the superintendency

due to under-financing, high-stakes testing and special interest groups. Cooper's (2000) "Career Crisis in the School Superintendency?" found a shortage of applicants for the superintendency because many found it unappealing, too great of a time commitment or too stressful. These findings were prior to the Great Recession of 2008.

Since the Great Recession, superintendent job stress has increased. Terranova et al. (2012) "Snapshot of the Superintendency" study reported that 75% of New York State superintendents found the job more stressful than expected compared to just 56% in the 2009 iteration of this triennial study.

This time frame would take into account many of the financial issues facing New York State superintendents but was prior to implementation of RTTT. Thus, a new study taking into account both the increased accountability and reduced resources issues was needed.

### **Superintendents' views on the superintendency**

Superintendents' views on the superintendency are moving in a negative direction. Terranova et al. (2012) found that only 55% of New York superintendents would encourage a son or daughter to pursue the superintendency down from 68% in 2009. Padalino (2009) found approximately 84% of superintendents surveyed said they would enter the superintendency again compared to 93.2% in the 2002 Sharp et al. survey. Glass & Franceschini's (2007) national study found that only 80% of superintendents in districts with less than 1,000 students would choose the career again.

Terranova et al. (2012) identified a desire to take on a greater challenge and having a greater influence on the lives of children as

the strongest incentives for applying for their first superintendency. The greatest barriers identified were having school-age children, the scope of the role and loss of job security. Kowalski et al. (2011) in "The American School Superintendent 2010 Decennial Study" found 69% of superintendents were satisfied with their career choice but only 63% would definitely become a superintendent again if starting over.

In summary, the talent pool is shrinking for both professional and personal reasons. Professionally, superintendent pay, job insecurity, and school board relations are detractors. Personally, job stress, hours required to perform the job and time away from family deter candidates from applying.

### **Methodology and Procedures**

This quantitative study used survey methodology. To gauge job satisfaction across New York State with superintendents from all types of districts, the use of a survey provided an effective and efficient way to garner such necessary information. This survey was sent to 684 superintendents throughout New York State and completed by 280 superintendents (41% response rate).

The Positive Aspects and Motivation Survey (Sharp et al. 2002) was selected as the survey instrument because it has been used in multiple studies (Sharp et al. 2002 and Padalino, 2009) and in multiple states (Illinois, Indiana, Texas and New York) to measure superintendent job satisfaction. Using this survey specifically in New York in the past (Padalino, 2009) and again in this 2015 study allowed a comparison of responses across different time frames. The original 49-question survey was amended to add five new questions regarding current issues in education in New York State.

While there have been various studies of superintendent job satisfaction over the years, few have been conducted in New York State. With the many changes to the education

landscape in New York State since the Padalino study of 2009, this study provides a gauge of the level of job satisfaction of New York State school superintendents.

**Limitations and Delimitations**

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

1. The sample size was based on the voluntary survey return rate of 40.9%. While this is a high response rate, it is not the total population so generalizability to all superintendents is limited.
2. The study was limited to New York State superintendents only. Therefore, the results may not be applicable to other states.
3. The researcher was a school superintendent at the time of the study, although not in New York State.

**Findings**

The findings for each of the four research questions are detailed in this section.

***Question 1: Given the increased stress and pressure inherent to the position, was there a downward trend in superintendent job satisfaction among New York State superintendents?***

Overall superintendent job satisfaction decreased more than 15% since the Padalino (2009) study. In addition, all four current policy initiatives were identified as being negative in the opinion of respondents: the rollout of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), new Annual Professional Performance Review (APPR) teacher evaluation system, the Gap Elimination Adjustment (GEA) state funding cuts, and the 2% property tax cap. The one governance issue, working with Board of

Education, was identified as being positive by the respondents. Of the superintendents who responded to the questions related to job satisfaction, 60.21% rated their overall job satisfaction as high or very high (Table 1). From a historical perspective, this was a lower rate of job satisfaction than the Padalino (2009) study of New York State superintendents in which 75.6% felt that way. This was a decrease of 15.39% over a six-year time span.

Table 1

*Overall Superintendent Job Satisfaction*

	Very Low	Low	Average	High	Very High
Percentage	2.87%	10.04%	26.88%	40.50%	19.71%
Frequency	8	28	75	113	55

Table 2

*Correlation Between Superintendent Job Satisfaction and Five Current Issues in Rank Order*

	r
Working with BOE	.461
CCSS Rollout	.169
New APPR	.113
2% Property Tax Cap	.084
Gap Elimination Adjustment	.054

The four current policy initiatives were identified as having a negative effect on their position as superintendent: the 2% property tax cap, the Gap Elimination Adjustment state funding cuts, the new APPR teacher evaluation system and the rollout of the CCSS. With ratings between 75% and 93% negative, the survey respondents overwhelmingly

disapproved of these policy issues. However, the Pearson coefficient did not show a significant correlation between the superintendents' feelings on these four issues and superintendent job satisfaction. Working with the Board of Education was found to have a significant positive correlation to superintendent job satisfaction.

***Question 2: What factors most contributed to superintendent job satisfaction and dissatisfaction?***

The survey asked superintendents, "What do you like most about being a superintendent?" The respondents were asked

to rate the items using five possible choices: very weak, weak, neutral, strong or very strong.

Table 3

*All 17 Factors That Contributed to Superintendent Job Satisfaction Ranked by the Combined Strong and Very Strong Percentages*

Item	Combined Strong and Very Strong Percentages
1. An opportunity to impact students	97.43%
2. Substantial input into direction of school district	95.97%
3. Opportunity to build a team of educators	94.14%
4. Able to utilize the skills I have	94.13%
5. Make a difference in teaching and learning	92.28%
6. Have daily challenges in this job	91.18%
7. Can interact with a wide variety of people	87.18%
8. Enjoy the school district culture	78.31%
9. Opportunity to work with people I like	76.29%
10. Enjoy being the CEO, making final decisions	69.79%
11. Can influence community decisions	66.54%
12. Enjoy working with the Board of Education	63.37%
13. Well paid for this job	53.41%
14. In control of my daily schedule	47.06%
15. Enjoy the status of the job	44.12%
16. Able to work twelve-month job, not a separate summer job	36.53%
17. Like the high visibility of the job	30.89%

Providing more information on the factors contributing to job satisfaction and

dissatisfaction, Table 4 lists the top three items in rank order based on mean scores.

Table 4

*Three Highest Rated Factors That Contributed to Superintendent Job Satisfaction in Rank Order by Mean Score*

Item	Mean Score
I have an opportunity to impact students.	4.58
I have substantial input into the direction of the district.	4.55
I have an opportunity to build a team of educators.	4.47

Table 5 shows the correlation between superintendent job satisfaction as measured in Table 2 and the 17 factors superintendents were asked to rank from very weak to very strong in Table 3. “Enjoy working with the Board of Education” had the highest rating of  $r = .474$ . This compares to the earlier question where “Working with the Board of Education” scored

$r = .461$ . The next four items in terms of correlation were “enjoy the status of the job”, “enjoy the school district culture”, “an opportunity to impact students” and “opportunity to build a team of educators”. In fact, 13 of the 17 items in Table 5 had a higher correlation than any of the four current issues listed in Table 2.

Table 5

*Correlation Between Superintendent Job Satisfaction and 17 Factors in Rank Order*

	Overall Superintendent Job Satisfaction r
Enjoy working with the Board of Education	.474
Enjoy the status of the job	.340
Enjoy the school district culture	.322
An opportunity to impact students	.299
Opportunity to build a team of educators	.299
Opportunity to work with people I like	.291
Substantial input into direction of school district	.275
Make a difference in teaching and learning	.262
Well paid for this job	.235
Like the high visibility of the job	.215
Can interact with a wide variety of people	.209
Can influence community decisions	.208
Able to utilize the skills I have	.207
Enjoy being the CEO, making final decisions	.155
Able to work twelve-month job, not a separate summer job	.125
Have daily challenges in this job	.121
In control of my daily schedule	.097

**Question 3: What motivated current superintendents to pursue the superintendency?**

The respondents were asked to rate 12 items using five possible choices: very weak (1), weak (2), neutral (3), strong (4) or very strong (5). Table 6 ranks all 12 items when combining the strong and very strong

percentages. Only three items scored above 90% - “I thought I could make a difference,” “the job enabled me to provide leadership,” and “the job would allow me to move the district forward.”

Table 6

*Motivating Factors to Pursue the Superintendency Ranked by the Combined Strong and Very Strong Percentages*

Item	Combined Strong and Very Strong Percentages
1. I thought I could make a difference	96.65%
2. The job would enable me to provide leadership	93.33%
3. The job would allow me to move the district forward	91.08%
4. The job would give me a broader span of influence	76.96%
5. The job was a logical progression in my career	73.50%
6. I wanted to be all that I could be	64.93%
7. I wanted to go beyond the building administrator level	64.55%
8. I thought I could do a better job than those who came before me	48.51%
9. The job would provide me with financial security	38.80%
10. Other superintendents I knew or worked for seemed to enjoy their work	38.79%
11. I thought I would like working with the people in the district office	27.34%
12. I had “paid my dues”	5.27%



Table 7 lists the 12 items in rank order based on mean scores. The highest mean score was “I can make a difference” with a mean of 4.58.

“I had paid my dues” had the lowest mean score of 1.88.

Table 7

*Reasons for Liking the Job of Superintendent Ranked by Mean Score*

Item	Mean Score
I can make a difference.	4.58
The job would enable me to provide leadership.	4.32
The job would enable me to move the district forward.	4.21
The job would give me a broader span of influence.	3.92
The job was a logical progression in my career.	3.90
I wanted to be all that I could be.	3.79
I wanted to go beyond the building administrator level.	3.66
I thought I could do a better job than others that came before me.	3.40
Other superintendents I knew or worked for seemed to enjoy their work.	3.16
The job would provide me with financial security.	3.15
I thought I would like working with the people in the district office.	2.99
I had “paid my dues.	1.88

***Question 4: What percentage of superintendents would aspire to the position again if starting their careers over?***

Of the respondents in this study, 81.29% responded yes while 18.71% responded no. This is a slight decrease from the Padalino (2009) study of New York State

superintendents in which approximately 84% responded in the affirmative that they would again aspire to the superintendency if starting their careers over.

Table 8

*“If I Had to Do It All Over Again, Would I Become a Superintendent?”*

Response	Percent
Yes	81.29%
No	18.71%

It was interesting to find that more than 80% of the respondents said they would seek the superintendency again despite their extremely negative responses to the four policy initiatives currently confronting them in their roles. As detailed in Table 2, the respondents had very strong negative feelings about the two key financial policies (2% tax cap and GEA) as well as the two key academic policies (new APPR and the CCSS rollout). Therefore, it appears these outside forces would not deter current superintendents from seeking the position again if starting their careers over.

A large majority of respondents in this study (81.43%) felt positive about working with the Board of Education. A similar number (81.29%) said yes to the question: “If I had to do it all over again, would I become a superintendent?” Further analysis showed that those who felt positive in terms of working with the board of education were the same people who said they would be a superintendent again if starting over.

Thus, superintendent-school board relations are far more important to superintendent job satisfaction than any outside factors such as Common Core, APPR, 2% tax cap or the GEA.

In summary, more than 40% of superintendents across New York State participated in this study representing all

regions, district sizes and socioeconomic levels. The overall job satisfaction of the participating superintendents was 60.21% when the high and very high ratings were combined. This was more than a 15% decrease compared to the Padalino (2009) study of New York State superintendents.

### Conclusions

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

1. Superintendent job satisfaction in this era of increased accountability and reduced resources, as measured in this survey, decreased more than 15% since the Padalino (2009) survey completed six years earlier. However, there was little or no correlation between the external factors examined and current superintendents’ willingness to seek the position again if starting their careers over.
2. More than 81% of the respondents rated “working with the board of education” as a positive experience. Further- more, those respondents who felt positive about working with the board of education were the same people who said they would be a superintendent again if

starting over. Thus, superintendent-school board relations are far more important to superintendent job satisfaction than any external factors. Perhaps having such strong, negative external forces helped the superintendents and school board members work together against the common enemy of certain government policies.

3. When respondents were asked to rank their reasons for liking the job of superintendent, the highest ranked items were factors that were more intrinsic in nature (opportunity to impact students, substantial input into the direction of the district, and opportunity to build a team of educators). Meanwhile, the lowest ranked items were more extrinsic factors (enjoy the status of the job and like the high visibility of the job). Most educators have a strong desire to help others when entering the profession. Still possessing this intrinsic motivation later in their careers shows that despite the many external pressures, superintendents still strive to make a difference in the lives of children.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

The demographics of the sample showed great diversity among respondents in terms of length of service as a superintendent, years in education, number of superintendencies held, gender and age. The same can be said about the characteristics of the districts where the superintendents served, as the sample was diverse with regard to student enrollment, socioeconomic status and location in New York

State. Most of the superintendents who responded to the survey were male (70%) and between the ages of 46 and 60 (61%). The largest percentage worked in a district with less than 2,500 students (70%) and had been a superintendent for six years or less (53%). Based on survey response, the average number of years as a superintendent was 7.6. More than 50% of superintendents were in their first six years and more than 75% were in their first 10 years. The following recommendations for practice emerged from this study:

1. Superintendents and school boards must continually find ways to cultivate their relationship. It is incumbent upon superintendents to invest the time (perhaps as much as 40-50% of their time) to build relationships with board members and provide them with high-quality professional development.
2. Superintendents in this study had very negative feelings about the four major policy initiatives. Superintendents should play a key role in advocating for the proper course of action as it relates to educational policies particularly on the state level.
3. Administrative preparation programs should use this study to reflect on their current coursework and compare how it aligns with the respondents' answers particularly in three major areas: cultivating a positive relationship between superintendents and school boards, as well as superintendent training in leading system change, and effectively advocating for legislative changes.

### **Author Biography**

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## **Superintendent Stress: Identifying the Causes and Learning to Cope**

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### **Abstract**

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

### **Key Words**

superintendent stress, coping with stress, rural school leadership



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

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

### **Purpose of the Study**

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

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

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

### **Research Questions**

The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. Which of the following aspects of the superintendency do public school superintendents perceive to cause the most stress to themselves?
  - a. High self-expectations
  - b. Evening activities
  - c. Increased paperwork and reporting
  - d. Collective bargaining
  - e. Role ambiguity
  - f. Constraints of board policy
  
2. Which of the following aspects of the superintendency do public school superintendents perceive to cause the most stress to their spouse (if applicable) and children (if applicable)?
  - a. Spillover
  - b. Consequence on spouse or significant other
  - c. Consequence on children
  - d. Consequence on extended family
  - e. Led to demise of a relationship
  
3. What differences exist in public school superintendents' perception of stress based on their demographics of age, school size, and years as superintendent?

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

### Significance of the Study

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

### Spillover Theory

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

### Population

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

### Instrumentation

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

### Research Limitations

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

### Data Collection

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

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

### Data Analysis

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

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

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

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

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

### Demographics

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

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

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

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

Table 1

*Size of District*

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

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

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

Table 2

*Children at Home*

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

## Findings

### Superintendent and family stress

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

### Perceived superintendent stressors

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

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

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

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

Table 3

*Job-related Duties that Cause Stress*

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

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

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

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

### **Perceived family consequences of stress**

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

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

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

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

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

Table 4

*Impact of Stress on the Family*

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

### Demographic impact on perceived stress

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

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

stress factors proved to be significantly insignificant, yet many superintendents

believed they would be considered as stress inducers.

Table 5

*Stress Factors and Size of School*

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

\*Denotes significant statistical difference

A=<500

B=501-1000

C=>1000

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

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



Table 6

*Stress Factors and Age*

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

\*Denotes significant statistical difference

A=30-40

B=41-54

C=55+

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

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

Table 7

*Stress Factors and Children Living at Home*

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

\*Denotes significant statistical difference

A=0

B=1-2

C=3-4

D=5+

### **Coping Results**

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

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

Table 8

*Alcohol Drinks Consumed Per Week*

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

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

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

Table 9

*Tobacco Use*

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

**Superintendent coping methods**

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

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

Table 10

*Coping Methods*

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

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

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

Table 11

*People Superintendents Turn to for Help*

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

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

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

### **Focus group**

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

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

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

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

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

## Discussion

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Conclusions

The following conclusions emerged from the findings of the research:

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

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

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

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

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

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

### **Recommendations for Further Study**

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

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## Appendix A

## Superintendent Survey Instrument

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

### Factors that lead to stress

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

1      2      3      4      5

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

1      2      3      4      5

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

1      2      3      4      5

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

1      2      3      4      5

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

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

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

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

1      2      3      4      5

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

1      2      3      4      5

### **Coping Methods of Stress**

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

1      2      3      4      5

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

1      2      3      4      5

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Your answer

### **Personal and Demographic Data**

17. *What is your gender?*

Male

Female

18. *What is your marital status?*

Single

Married

Divorced

Committed Relationship

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

0-4 years

5-9 years

10+ years

Not Applicable

20. *Have you ever been divorced?*

Yes

No



21. *What is your age?*

Less than 30

30 to 40

41 to 54

55+

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

1-3

4-6

7+

I do not drink

23. *Do you smoke or use tobacco?*

Yes

No

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

No children

1-2 children

3-4 children

More than 4

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

Less than 500 students

501 to 1000 students

More than 1000

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

Your answer

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

Your answer

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

Your answer

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

written and published in *The Hill*

Daniel Domenech, PhD  
Executive Director  
AASA. The School Superintendents Association  
Alexandria, VA

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### **Editor's Note**

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

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

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

### 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.

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## 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.

## Upcoming 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 if the submission is 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; and
12. 40-word biographical sketch

**Please** do not submit page numbers in headers or footers. Rather than use footnotes, it is preferred authors embed footnote content in the body of the article. Articles are to be submitted to the editor by e-mail as an electronic attachment in Microsoft Word, Times New Roman, 12 Font. **New:** the editors have also determined to follow APA guidelines in adding two spaces after a period.

### Acceptance Rates

The *AASA Journal of Scholarship and Practice* maintains of 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%

### 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 15	April 1
Summer	February 1	April 1	May 15	July 1
Fall	May 1	July 1	August 15	October 1
Winter	August 1	October 1	November 15	January 15

### 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

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*AASA Journal of Scholarship and Practice*

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## AASA Resources

- ✓ Learn about **AASA's books program** where new titles and special discounts are available to AASA members. The AASA publications catalog may be downloaded at [www.aasa.org/books.aspx](http://www.aasa.org/books.aspx).
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- ✓ The **AASA School Safety and Crisis Planning Toolkit**, available to members, is comprised of a set of online resources to assist school districts before, during and after a crisis. This package features a myriad of resources as well as a select group of safety leaders throughout the U.S. who are ready to provide peer-to-peer guidance about a variety of crises, including shootings, hurricanes, tornadoes, floods, fires, suicides and other major disruptions that come without notice. For additional information, visit [www.aasa.org/toolkits.aspx](http://www.aasa.org/toolkits.aspx).
- ✓ The **AASA's Leadership Network** drives superintendent success, innovation and growth, shaping the future of public education while preparing students for what's next. It is the largest, most diverse network of superintendents in America. Passionate and committed, the Network connects educational leaders to the professional learning, leadership development, relationships and partnerships needed to ensure a long career of impact. For additional information on leadership opportunities and options visit [www.aasa.org/LeadershipNetwork](http://www.aasa.org/LeadershipNetwork) or contact Mort Sherman at [msherman@aasa.org](mailto:msherman@aasa.org) or Valerie Truesdale at [vtruesdale@aasa.org](mailto:vtruesdale@aasa.org).

**New** from **AASA's Leadership Network**, the quarterly **Network News** newsletter. The first issue has just published. See it at <http://aasacentral.org/2019/09/09/network-news-volume-1-edition-1/>

### ✓ **Upcoming AASA Events**

AASA's ongoing academies, cohorts, consortiums, and programs are open for renewal (and if you're interested in, let us know):

#### **Urban Superintendents Academy**

- Howard University: [aasa.org/urbansuperintendent.aspx](http://aasa.org/urbansuperintendent.aspx)
- University of Southern California: <http://www.aasa.org/content.aspx?id=37483>

#### **AASA National Superintendent Certification Program®--West Cohort**

[www.aasa.org/superintendent-certification.aspx](http://www.aasa.org/superintendent-certification.aspx)

#### **Aspiring Superintendents Academy®**

[www.aasa.org/aspiring-academy.aspx](http://www.aasa.org/aspiring-academy.aspx)

#### **National Aspiring Principals Academy 2019-2020**

[www.aasa.org/aspiring-principals-academy.aspx](http://www.aasa.org/aspiring-principals-academy.aspx)

**Redefining Ready!**

[www.aasa.org/redefiningready.aspx](http://www.aasa.org/redefiningready.aspx)

**Early Learning**

[www.aasa.org/early-learn-cohort.aspx](http://www.aasa.org/early-learn-cohort.aspx)

**Digital Consortium**

[www.aasa.org/DigitalConsortium.aspx](http://www.aasa.org/DigitalConsortium.aspx)

**Personalized Learning**

[www.aasa.org/personalized-learning.aspx](http://www.aasa.org/personalized-learning.aspx)

**Leadership Academy**

[www.aasa.org/AASALeadershipAcademy.aspx](http://www.aasa.org/AASALeadershipAcademy.aspx)

**STEM Consortium**

[www.aasa.org/stem-consortium.aspx](http://www.aasa.org/stem-consortium.aspx)

**Innovation and Transformational Leadership Network**

[www.aasa.org/AASACollaborative.aspx](http://www.aasa.org/AASACollaborative.aspx)

**Impacted by the ESSA requirement to improve the lowest 5% performing schools?** AASA has embarked on a new partnership with Talent Development Secondary (one of the premiere school turnaround organizations in the country, meeting the federal thresholds for evidence in multiple categories) to build a networked improvement community (NIC) of 20 districts with up to 40 CSI schools to participate in a rich school transformation initiative. To learn more visit: [www.tdschools.org/2018/11/14/you-can-now-apply-for-the-tds-aasa-networked-improvement-community-nic](http://www.tdschools.org/2018/11/14/you-can-now-apply-for-the-tds-aasa-networked-improvement-community-nic)

**AASA 2020 National Conference on Education**, Feb. 13-15, 2020, San Diego, Calif.