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The Pipeline to the Superintendency

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Abstract

Current literature offers a variety of reasons for a perceived shortage of individuals interested in becoming superintendents. A survey to determine the perception of individuals in the traditional pipeline regarding the position was given to 1000 principals and central office administrators in Illinois. Five hundred fifty-two offered opinions regarding their interest in the position.

Differences between those interested and those not interested centered on faith in the position to impact student learning, pay, and time and energy the job requires. Additional concerns included board relationships, location of district, and certification. Recommendations include considerations for addressing the identified issues.

The Pipeline to the Superintendency

The most recent American Association of School Administrator's study of the superintendency (Glass, Bjork & Brunner, 2000) suggests that the majority of current superintendents are at an age that will allow them to retire almost at will. Equally interesting is a body of literature that suggests administrators are less attracted to the superintendency. In a national study sponsored by AASA, Cooper, Fusarelli and Carella (2000) found that 88% of superintendents surveyed believed a crisis existed in both the number, and quality of administrators available for anticipated superintendency vacancies, and 92% expressed concern that high turnover in the superintendency is creating a serious crisis in keeping strong leaders in the position. O'Connell (2000), after studying data collected in 1995 and 1999, concluded that the "applicant pool continues to diminish in size and quality (p.14)." Other studies suggest that at a time when increasing numbers of superintendents are retiring, there is correspondingly less interest in the position by administrators in the traditional pipeline. (Glass, 1992; Hall & Difford, 1992; Jordon, D., McCauley & Comeaux 1997; Henry 2000, Howley, Pendarvis, & Gibbs, 2002). Many reasons for the apparent crisis have been offered.

Hall and Difford (1992), who studied opinions of current and former superintendents and state administrator association executives, suggested a complex mix of pressures contributed to the emerging shortage:

School districts are under intense pressure from state and federal governments, school boards, unions, courts, tight budgets, diverse parent interests and the increasingly complex needs of children. The superintendent is in the middle of this array of crossfire. (p. 4)

In a report prepared for the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, Wolverton, Rawls, and Macdonald (2000) found the most frequently cited reasons by individuals holding superintendent certification but who choose not to seek the superintendency were satisfaction with current jobs, being place bound, politics of administration, stress, job location, low pay differential from current position, school board relationships, lack of job security, size of district, and spouse's job.

Most of the literature addressing these concerns has examined the issues from the perspective of those already serving in the position or from individuals who obtained certification but may or may not have ever had an interest in becoming a superintendent. However, little research has looked at the views of those individuals who are in the traditional pipeline to the superintendency. In one of the few pipeline studies that focused on practitioners, Howley, Pendarvis, and Gibbs (2002) surveyed Ohio principals and found the most frequently mentioned attractions to the superintendency were the chance to have greater impact, the opportunity to make a difference, and to implement creative personal ideas. They also found the burden of responsibility for mandates, the need to be accountable for outcomes beyond an educator's control, and low levels of board support to all be detriments to interest in the position.

The Traditional Pipeline

Job selection theory has long held that occupational choice is not a single decision, but a series of decisions made over a period of years after considering one's own interests, capacities, and values within the context of the opportunities and limitations of the available jobs. (Ginzberg, 1966) AASA's 10-year study of the superintendency suggests that those most likely to have the appropriate interests,

capacities, values, and opportunities to become superintendents are individuals who have already ventured into school administration. Indeed, the path to the superintendency most often passes through a principalship, a central office position, an assistant superintendency, and culminates by accepting a first superintendency 5 to 10 years after obtaining the first administrative position. (Glass, Bjork, & Brunner, 2000)

Method

This study was designed to determine if the reasons for the perceived lack of interest in the superintendency suggested by people currently in the position were actually held by those in the traditional pipeline. One thousand principals and central office administrators (other than the superintendent) in public schools in Illinois were randomly selected to receive an instrument that included 33 statements cited in the literature as reasons for a lack of interest in the superintendency. Responses were received from 553, a response rate of approximately 55%. Forty-one percent of the responses received were from central office administrators, 27% were from Sr. High principals, 15% were Jr./Middle school principals, and 17% were elementary principals. Respondents were asked to complete a 5-point Likert scale that addressed specific conditions seen as influential in the attractiveness of the superintendency. The instrument also included questions asking for demographic information.

Data were examined to look for patterns of factors that influence interest in the position. Responses were grouped to distinguish those interested in becoming superintendents from those not. Independent t-tests were used to identify differences of opinion about specific survey items between administrators interested in the

superintendency and those who were not. A significance level of .001 was used to control for multiple comparisons.

Results

The respondents included 37% females and 63% males. Seventy percent of respondents had been administrators for 5 or more years, 90% were 40 or more years old and 33% held superintendent certification, with another third planning to obtain certification within three years. All respondents had at least a master's degree and 22% had doctorates. Most had worked in more than one school district although 30% had not. Less than 20% had worked in a state other than Illinois. Most respondents identified small suburban districts as the most attractive places to work. Least attractive were large inner city districts, over 70% of respondents indicated no attraction for the urban superintendency.

Individuals with doctorates showed more interest in the superintendency than respondents with master's degrees. Almost 60% of respondents in their thirties indicated interest in the position, but interest steadily declined until only 21% of those in their sixties indicated any interest. Although the majority of respondents were at the prime point in their careers (85% in their forties or fifties, 5-10 years in administration) to move into the superintendency, only 25% indicated strong interest in the position and another 15% had "some interest." However, 34% of respondents expressed a strong indication that they had no interest in the position with another 9% indicating almost no interest.

Areas of discrepancy between respondents expressing interest in the superintendency (40%) and those expressing no interest (43%) was determined by selecting survey items for which a significant difference was found on the t-test between

the two groups. The area of greatest difference was a belief regarding the extent to which the position offers an opportunity to make a difference in student learning. Individuals attracted to the challenges of the position were confident that they could influence improved student learning as superintendent. However, a majority of all respondents indicated that increased state requirements have actually infringed upon the capacity of the superintendent to accomplish the work that makes the job most desirable. An even more somber finding was that 17% of all respondents, each of whom holds a significant leadership position in their school districts, have lost faith in the superintendency as a place to influence student learning. Most of the members of this group expressed no interest in the superintendency; however, a few (less than 1% of those interested in the position) who were among the group wanting to become a superintendent in the next five years.

The second greatest discrepancy between groups centered around pay. Over 75% of respondents interested in the position indicated level of pay motivated their interest. Conversely, among those not interested, higher salary did not serve as an attraction. Even those interested in the position were clear that they would not take on the challenges of the position just because of the pay. Pay differential with other administrative positions did not appear to be either an attraction or a deterrent to respondents' interest. Neither group identified it as a factor impacting interest in the position.

The final area of differences between the groups involved thoughts about the job itself. The amount of time and energy perceived necessary to accomplish the job was a concern to both groups, but those not interested found it to be of significantly greater concern than those who desired a superintendent position. Those not interested indicated

that after watching the difficulties and pressures their superintendents lived with, the job was not worth the hassle. Job security was viewed as moderately influential among respondents. Interested respondents indicated some agreement that their interest would be even greater if they could obtain a similar level of job security to their present position. However, among those with no interest in the job, additional job security would not change their minds about the position. In addition, more of those wanting to become superintendents found status and prestige associated with the job and identified that as providing motivation for their interest. That was not the case among those not interested. The very nature of the work also seemed to be a factor. A significant number of those respondents not interested in the position see the superintendency as distant from students. They clearly identified one of the reasons the superintendency had less appeal was their interest in a position that had a more direct impact on students.

There were several issues on which those in the interested group and those in the non-interested group did not differ. Most respondents (80%) reported the Board-Superintendent relationship in their own districts were good; however, a majority (60%) of all respondents also indicated they found the job less appealing because of increased micro-management by boards of education. Second, mobility appears to be of some concern. As might be expected, the majority of those interested in becoming superintendents were willing to move to obtain a position. However, 22% of them indicated a reluctance to change residency for a position and 12% expressed strong feelings that even though they wanted to become superintendents, they would not move for the position. Third, while policy makers have moved toward alternative certification as a means to increase the availability of individuals for the superintendency only 10% of

those who indicated a lack of interest in becoming a superintendent saw an alternative certification process as attractive or likely to result in greater interest in the job. In fact, those in the interested group had significantly more interest in alternative certification than did those who were generally less interested in a superintendency, although those who were not expecting to receive certification for at least 6 years had a slightly higher interest than any other group.

Fourth, as small districts struggle with declining enrollments and budgets restrictions, school boards have often turned to combining the superintendency with another administrative position. None of the respondents indicated interest in such an arrangement. While a small number of the interested group (20%) indicated they might accept such an arrangement, the general response to the question would suggest it would be accepted only as a stepping-stone to a more desirable position.

Discussion

The path to the superintendency has remained relatively stable over the last decade and typically consists of a stint as principal or central office administrator and frequently time is spent at both positions (Glass, Bjork, & Brunner, 2000). Recent concerns about the quality and quantity of the applicant pool for the superintendency have led to conjectures for the lack of interest among those qualified for the position. This study was designed to explore the thoughts of people in the traditional pipeline relative to assumptions about the causes of diminished interest in the superintendency. Results of the study suggest several implications for boards of education, state policy makers, and superintendent preparation programs.

The data clearly show that a belief in the ability of the superintendent to make a difference in student learning is a primary motivator for individuals in the traditional pipeline to move into the position. That belief, coupled with anticipated satisfaction in addressing the challenges required to achieve improved student learning, sets those interested in the superintendency apart from those who are not interested. Respondents in this study appear to be motivated to fill a superintendent role for reasons closely aligned with those of practicing superintendents and non-superintendents applying for a superintendency. (e.g. Cooper, Fusarelli, & Carella, 2000; Houston, 2001; Wolverton, Rawls, & Macdonald, 2000), and with Howley, Pendarvis, and Gibbs' (2002) findings regarding Ohio principals' interest in the superintendency.

Another distinction between those in the interested group and those in the uninterested group is the perception of the position and the attributes that make it attractive. While current legislation has increased the pressure for superintendents to improve student achievement that pressure has often been highly prescriptive. Howley, Pendarvis, and Gibbs (2002) found that principals expressed concern about the difficulty of the superintendency because of the pressure to “to be accountable for outcomes that are beyond an educator’s control” (p. 11). Respondents in this study also noted that increased state requirements made the job less attractive. Local boards of education as well as state policy makers may need to consider the extent to which their efforts to improve student learning infringe upon the capacity of the profession to attract the level of leadership necessary to achieve the very goals they have tried to legislate.

Furthermore, local boards may benefit from redistributing duties to allow the superintendent to spend more time with students. Considering that a substantial number

of respondents believed the position no longer has the capacity to impact learning and that a sizeable number of those in the not-interested group express a desire to remain at a level that offered more “direct work” with students suggests the position is still viewed as “running the district” rather than providing leadership for student learning. Coupled with the data indicating a concern about job security, boards may also need to consider employment considerations such as extended term contracts to allow aspiring superintendents confidence they will be given the time necessary to improve student learning.

The decision to pursue a superintendency also appears to be related to several extrinsic motivators. While salary and status do not appear to motivate those in the non-interested group, they are an important consideration for those who have interest in pursuing the position. This study would suggest that those who are most interested in becoming a superintendent understand the complexity of the position, the long hours and hard work, the challenges working with a board, and believe that such a job should carry with it appropriate compensation. Respondents in the interested group indicated that pay would not be the deciding factor in their decision to take a position; however, they were equally clear that appropriate compensation was an important factor in deciding whether to accept the responsibilities of the position. This implies that state and local policy makers will need to continue to seek attractive compensation packages if they are to attract quality candidates to this difficult position. As early as 1990, Educational Research Services made this point and advocated for compensation plans that included in addition to salary such things as portable retirement plans, annuities, insurance packages, and expense account allowances.

The consistent concern about board of education relations seems relevant in understanding the interest or lack thereof in pursuing the position. Once again those in the interested group believed they were up to the challenge of working with the complexity of a board; however, the vast majority of all respondents expressed apprehension about increased micro-management by boards. Increased prescriptive legislation related to school reform may also add to the misgivings. Interestingly, 80% of all respondents described their superintendent's relationship with the board as desirable. However, even with a desirable relationship as a model, those not interested expressed concern that it just wasn't worth the difficulties suggesting that even with a good relationship, boards working relationship were seen as challenging to the point of discouraging substantial numbers of individuals in the pipeline. As a result, boards need to realize that just getting along with the superintendent is not enough. Many of those watching from the traditional pipeline appear to conclude that just because interpersonal relationships between board and superintendent appear desirable, other dynamics of the relationship result in the position being undesirable. One of the messages of this study is that boards and administrators need to continue to find ways to work together in a manner that provides mutual respect for the difficulty of both positions.

Preparation programs should also consider that the attraction to the position is not in the technical skills of managing budgets and boards, but rather in improving student learning. Clearly, budgets, personnel management, and board and community relationships are essential skills for successful superintendents and have a place in the preparation curriculum; however, this study makes clear that if preparation programs do not address the role of the superintendent in student learning, they may serve to

discourage prospective superintendents. Further study to determine if the substantial numbers of students who become certified but never pursue a superintendency are disillusioned because of a lack of emphasis on the educational role of the superintendency in their preparation programs would be enlightening.

Finally, this study suggests that the traditional pipeline of educational leaders is not overrun with individuals wanting to become superintendents. However, those who do show an interest appear to have a clear understanding of the complex challenges of the position and have both the desire and confidence to make a difference in student learning. So while the pool of candidates may indeed be more shallow than in years past, the overwhelming majority of those who are interested in entering that pool do so with an understanding of the challenges the position presents as well as a commitment to make schools better places for students and learning.

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