

Research base shallow for judging superintendents' success

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STANDARDS EXIST for nearly every part of the education community, except the top. Although faced with huge obstacles and tenuous futures, superintendents have few guidelines for doing their jobs well, meeting their own goals or others' expectations. Likewise, school boards and communities have few firm measures by which to gauge how effective their school leaders are. And student achievement, which has become the basis for teacher merit raises, school viability and curriculum changes, is rarely a standard by which superintendents are judged.

Being a school district superintendent is a tough job. In large urban districts, especially, superintendents routinely inherit situations that make success difficult. They often face students with dismal test scores, buildings in need of great repair, teacher shortages and a myriad of other problems compounded by inadequate budgets. At the same time, their jobs are highly political as they must work with school boards, teachers' unions and many other groups with special interests.

It's easy to see why turnover is high. Urban superintendents serve an average of 2.5 years; the national average for all districts is 6.2 years. Some superintendents burn out, but many are fired or otherwise dismissed when they do not produce positive results after only a year or two.

Yet, experts say this is a time when strong, effective leadership is an important part of school success. What makes a superintendent effective? On what principles is he or she judged? What must superintendents accomplish—and how—to be effective? What makes them ineffective?

Answers to these questions are different for every district. While the quality of leadership is a concern for most school districts, how to measure that quality—or lack of it—is questionable.

Research is little help. Studies on effective school system leadership are sparse, and inconclusive, a review of education literature shows. “Contemporary research rarely focuses on examining the effectiveness of educational leadership at the district level. As a consequence, examples of effective school system management are few,” writes Janet Y. Thomas of Johns Hopkins University, author of *The Public School Superintendency in the Twenty-First Century* (No. 55), a technical report published recently by CRESPAR.

What studies do exist do not set forth guidelines that aim to lead a school system executive to success. They do not even look at high-performing districts for clues to effective leadership. Is there a difference between superintendents in districts with consistently high achievement outcomes and those in districts with low-performance indicators? The jury is still out.

Most studies provide only anecdotal evidence about leadership style, as well as a superintendent's ability to withstand political pressure and maintain good relations with the school boards that hire them.

History offers some clues, but no definitive answers. “When the foundations for public

schooling were laid, there were no specific guidelines for evaluating the effectiveness of school leaders,” according to the report. “Yet the quality of superintendent leadership was always an area of concern.”

In the 19th century, schools and learning were linked to religion, and leadership in public education was seen as more of a calling than a profession. There was little training in leadership at the university level and Christian knowledge and values were favored over academic achievement.

Toward the end of the 19th century, schools faced the challenges of industrialization, immigration, and urbanization. Communities wanted their schools to have more structure and their school leaders to be more like businessmen—able to use school resources wisely and make decisions well for different groups of people. After World War II, school focus changed again; educators adjusted curricula to prepare students for everyday life. Many people said the schools had lowered their standards. At that time, key leadership roles began to shift toward principals and questions arose over who should be educated and who the educators should be.

The principals continued as key leaders in the 1980s, when school reform became popular, and beyond. The focus continued to shift away from superintendents.

Through all of these phases, little was determined about the management practices of superintendents in high-performing districts. Did they lead differently than superintendents in low-performing districts? Was leadership linked to performance? Could leadership determine or influence student performance?

Many of these questions remain unanswered. Superintendents find few guidelines in education literature to help them with their tough jobs and, likewise, school boards find few standards by which to judge their superintendents’ effectiveness.

This review shows that public education needs a set of guidelines, “establishing a level of excellence toward which all public school administrators should strive.” These guidelines should include fixed standards—such as student attendance and graduation rates—for assessing the superintendent. They should also look at the superintendent in his various roles. How effective is he, for instance, as an educational leader, as a politician and as an organization manager?