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Singing the same tune

Principals' and school board members' perceptions of the superintendent's role as instructional leader

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Abstract *Understanding the multifaceted roles and responsibilities of the district superintendent as an instructional leader has proved to be a long-standing and sometimes elusive endeavor. In spite of the consistency of research findings, instructional leadership remains one of the more controversial characteristics associated with the examination of the district superintendent. The findings reported here are part of a larger study on the role and responsibilities of the superintendent as an instructional leader. Specifically, this investigation examined the covariance between school principals' and school board members' views of the instructional leadership of the district superintendent. Results from this correlational and regression analysis empirically illustrate a statistically significant relationship between superintendent vision and the factors of organizational mission, program and personnel evaluation, principal decision-making and school board/community involvement. The findings also suggest that involvement of professional educators and members of the community in formulating instructional programs significantly affects the success of the district leader.*

Understanding the multifaceted roles and responsibilities of the district superintendent as instructional leader has proven to be a long-standing and sometimes elusive endeavor. In spite of the consistency of research findings, instructional leadership remains one of the more controversial characteristics associated with the examination of the district superintendent (Lezotte, 1994). Even as top ranked programs of educational administration strive toward major reform in the training of school leaders, the bulk of these reforms rarely focused on issues in instructional leadership. Indeed, one mid-1990s study from the influential University Council of Educational Administration (Pohland and Carson, 1992), ranked instructional leadership 17th out of the top 23 subject matter areas offered at the member institutions of UCEA. Even the widely advocated topic of the 1980s, instructional supervision, tied for ninth in this survey. It is because of this that we find ourselves in a field where the theoretical and conceptual base is relatively large but the empirical evidence is in short supply. The current climate and emphasis on the reform and restructuring of the US educational system has placed an enormous amount of political pressure on schools to demonstrate effective leadership at the district level. A critical indicator of that leadership effectiveness is the transformation of the core technology of curriculum and instruction. Districts must provide powerful,

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authentic, and rigorous learning for all students (Carter and Cunningham, 1997).

While a growing body of literature has clearly demonstrated that building principals could and should be instructional leaders (Bamberg and Andrews, 1990; Bossart *et al.*, 1982; Duke, 1982; Bullard and Taylor, 1993; Dwyer, 1984; Heck *et al.*, 1990; Levine and Lezotte, 1990; Murphy, 1988; Ogawa and Hart, 1985; Peterson, 1984; Short and Spencer, 1990; Smith and Andrews, 1989), there are only a handful of studies that have examined the role of the district superintendent on the academic achievement of students (Björk, 1993; Bredeson, 1996; Bredeson and Johansson, 1997; Coleman and LaRocque, 1990; Hallinger and Murphy, 1986; Herman, 1990; Hord, 1993; Morgan and Petersen, in press; Petersen, 1999; Peterson *et al.*, 1987; Wirt, 1990). These studies are competent investigations into self-descriptions of superintendents' administrative work, particularly in the areas of instructional leadership and curriculum, and there is no reason in duplicating once more what they say. Instead, what this article does is to extend and complement those investigations. It takes seriously the significant and influential role district superintendents play in the academic achievement of students through their relationships with their school principals and the boards of education. This investigation examined the covariance between school principals' and school board members' views of the instructional vision of the district superintendent: in particular, the influence of the superintendent's instructional vision on organizational factors such as organizational mission, program and personnel evaluation, principal influence in decision making and school board/ community involvement in the promotion of curriculum and instruction.

Conceptual framework

Leadership can be viewed as a relationship between leaders and followers – an alliance where the leader assumes a supportive role and thinks of employees as constituents (Kouzes and Posner, 1993). In the search for leadership variables that influence the academic success of schools, much of the research has focused on the relationship of the teacher and principal with a considerable amount of the initial research attempting to identify links of principals' instructional leadership practices to student achievement (Andrews and Soder, 1987; Barnett, 1987; Larsen, 1987; Leithwood and Duke, 1999). While extant literature points to the pivotal role of building principals in the academic achievement of students, the formal position of the district superintendent within the school organization often keeps him/her distant from most building level curriculum decisions and classroom instruction (Björk, 1993; Pitner, 1979). "The leadership of the principal has been consistently cited as the most significant factor in the success of campus change efforts. These efforts, however, thrive or die, supported or otherwise, in the wider school setting" (Hord, 1993, p. 16). Consequently, the instructional leadership responsibilities of a superintendent are markedly different in nature from the instructional leadership role undertaken by principals (Björk, 1993). Research in this area indicates the best linkages for instructional improvement are forged through an exchange process in which the superintendent and building administrators simultaneously work with each other (Carter *et al.*, 1993; Peterson *et al.*, 1987; Wimpelberg, 1987). Therefore, investigations should take into account the highly interactive nature of the instructional leadership responsibilities of superintendents and not view their role as a static, hierarchical, and simple description of functions and beliefs (Björk, 1993).

Instructional leadership of superintendents

Superintendents understand the importance, complexity, and conflict of their leadership role in curriculum and instruction (Blumberg and Blumberg, 1985; Carter and Cunningham, 1997; Wirt, 1990). A synthesis of the recent research on the instructional leadership of superintendents has outlined instructionally oriented skills and behaviors for district leaders. Herman (1990) articulates five instructional leadership-associated skills and competencies for district superintendents. These skills include the allocation of instructional personnel; organization of the instructional program; support of the instructional program; development of instructional personnel; and planning for the instructional program. Bredeson (1996), in a study that investigated superintendents' descriptions of their involvement in curriculum-development and instructional-leadership, identified four major roles for district leaders: instructional visionary; instructional collaborator; instructional supporter; and instructional delegator. In another recent investigation of instructionally focused California superintendents, district leaders articulated four essential leadership attributes (Petersen, 1999):

(1) articulation of an instructional vision;

(2) creation of an organizational structure that supports that vision;

(3) assessment and evaluation of personnel and instructional programs; and

(4) organizational adaptation .

Findings from these empirical investigations articulate the need for superintendents to set goals and establish standards. They must also possess and model visionary leadership and build an organization through instructional personnel, instructional planning, and evaluation that supports the parameters of their instructional vision. What these investigations also illustrate is that the district superintendent has influence but is also influenced by administrators, teachers, parents, and members of the board of education in focusing on the technical core of curriculum and instruction.

In order to address the organizational relationships necessary for a district superintendent to be viewed as a leader of curriculum and instruction, this investigation examined the covariance between school principals' and school board members' views of the instructional vision of the district superintendent:

in particular, the influence of the superintendent's instructional vision on organizational factors such as organizational mission, program and personnel evaluation, principal influence in decision making and school board/ community involvement. Two major research questions guided this investigation. First, what are building administrators' and board of education members' perceptions of the district superintendent's role as instructional leader? Second, is there a relationship between the instructional leadership of the superintendent and organizational factors related to instruction?

Purpose and methods of the study

Previous investigations by researchers have articulated the importance of superintendent leadership and vision in the academic success of districts (Bredeson, 1996; Coleman and LaRocque, 1990; Herman, 1990; Hallinger and Murphy, 1986; Morgan and Petersen, in press; Petersen, 1999; Peterson *et al.*, 1987). Other work in this area has also established that district superintendents perceived their building principals and school board members as critical linkages in their ability to be instructionally focused (Carter *et al.*, 1993; Petersen, 1999). Therefore, the data reported in this manuscript specifically examines the perceptions of building administrators and members of the board of education concerning the role and responsibility of the district superintendent in their leadership of curriculum and instruction.

Selection of instructionally focused superintendents.

District administrators admit that the managerial reality of the position often forces them to concentrate on issues other than curriculum instruction. Therefore, the selection process of instructionally focused superintendents required the author to use various criteria for singling out these instructionally focused district administrators (Björk, 1993; Blumberg and Blumberg, 1985; Duignan, 1980; Hannaway and Sproull, 1978-1979; Pitner, 1979). The process directing the selection of these superintendents was guided by several factors. Initially recommendations of peers, university faculty, and participants in several pilot interviews and conversations were used to compile a list of potential candidates (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992; Seidman, 1991; Dwyer, 1984). The next step involved contacting the state department of education in order to acquire information on school districts that had received recognition as exemplary schools (e.g. "Full accreditation with distinction in the area of performance"). After a list of superintendents had been compiled based on these criteria, districts were compared according to type (urban, suburban, and rural), size and student populations served. The list was narrowed based on demographic information on total student population, minority student population, and percentages of dropouts for each of these districts. Each district was contacted and asked to provide percentages of students graduating and going on to institutions of higher education or to placement in vocational training. Examination of these data revealed that the five districts in this investigation met the criteria as an academically successful school. They were also similar in size, percentage of minority and LEP students, number of students who did not finish school and students who graduated and went on to two- and four-year institutions and vocational training (see Table I).

Participants

While the larger comprehensive study employed both qualitative and quantitative analysis drawn from in-depth and triangulation interviews with district superintendents, building principals and school board members in five school districts whose superintendents had been recognized as instructionally focused superintendents (Petersen, 1999), this article will explore only the responses generated by 46 principals and 32 school board members who completed the Instructional Leadership Personnel Survey (ILPS) in these districts. A demographic account of participants is provided in Table II. Though this sample is not representative of all principals, boards of education, or school districts, it does provide significant insights into the experiences of superintendents, principals and school board members in schools that have been recognized as demonstrating strong academic leadership (Wimpelberg, 1987).

Instrumentation

The ILPS was developed with information obtained from a current review of extant literature, in conjunction with ethnographic interviews of the five participating district superintendents, building principals, and school board members from these districts (Seidman, 1991; Spradley, 1979). The ILPS is a 52-item survey designed to determine the responsibilities of principals and the school board. It also investigates their relationship with the district office in the establishment of instructional goals, and the articulated role and responsibilities of the district superintendent in leading the core-technology of curriculum and instruction. A Likert-type scale, which ranges from 1 = strongly agree to 5 = strongly disagree, is used to collect

District	Number of schools	Student enrollment	Minority student population (%)	Superintendent tenure (years)	Students attending college/tech (%)	District drop-out rate[a] (%)
1	15	9,174	28	6	51.4	13.2
2	9	6,069	20	5	60.0	4.5
3	11	5,541	12	15	44.6	13.2
4	10	9,108	31	6	32.0	15.0
5	15	9,527	41	6	80.0	11.4

Notes: All school districts in this sample were K-12 public school districts; [a]state drop rate for grades 9-12 during this investigation was 15.1%

Table I.
School district characteristics

	n
Gender	
Female	28
Male	30
Position by gender	
School board	
Female	12
Male	20
Administrators	
Female	16
Male	30
Role	
School principals	46
School board members	32
Building levels of administrators	
Elementary	30
Middle/junior, high	6
High school	7
District level	3

Table II. Demographics of principals and school board member respondents

participant reactions. In order to identify underlying elements, these 52 items were subjected to a factor analytic investigation. A principal component analysis using varimax rotation indicated that one main factor accounted for 34 percent of the variance. This factor is best described as superintendent vision. As the data held one main factor, this analysis was followed up by a principal component analysis using an oblique rotation. The data indicated three to six factors as possible using an eigenvalue rule of one and the scree test. These factor models were investigated, with the five-factor solution making the most sense rationally. The five factors seen as most significantly contributing to the academic success of the school district were: superintendent vision, organizational mission, program and personnel evaluation, principal influence in decision making, and school board/community involvement.

Cronbach alpha coefficients were then calculated in order to ascertain the degree of internal consistency exhibited by the instrument. Examination of the reliability analysis indicated that the instrument exhibited moderate to strong internal consistency. The overall alpha coefficient was equal to (0.88). Reliability coefficients for the five identified dimensions are superintendent vision (0.83), organizational mission (0.80), program and personnel evaluation (0.58), principal influence on decision making (0.79), and school board/ community involvement (0.77). Representative examples of items on the questionnaire include:

- The superintendent possesses a clear and focused instructional vision.
- The vision of the superintendent was the improvement of instruction, teaching and learning.
- The professional development programs for the district are influenced by the district mission.
- Assessment programs for the district were influenced by the mission.
- Teacher evaluations conducted by principals are aligned with district instructional goals.
- Collaborative decision making was encouraged among school administrators and personnel.
- The superintendent received input from school board members when formulating district instructional goals.
- The instructional focus of the district superintendent influenced criteria used in personnel evaluations.

Data analysis
The original questionnaire sample consisted of 55 school principals and 35 school board members. A total of 78 usable surveys were returned for an 87 percent response rate. Building principals ($N = 46$) and school board members ($N = 32$) responded to the ILPS, from which data were used to investigate the following research questions. The first question investigated the perceptions of building administrators and board of education members regarding the district superintendent's role as instructional leader. The second question investigated the relationship between building principals and board members' perceptions of the instructional leadership of the superintendent and its influence on organizational factors related to instruction. Three types of analysis were used on the completed surveys. First, descriptive statistics were computed for purposes of summarizing the demographic characteristics of the sample and the ratings for each item appearing on the survey (frequencies, means, and standard deviations). Second, Pearson product moment correlation coefficients were calculated to test the overall strength and the relationship of five components of the model of superintendent perceived behaviors in district curricular and instructional promotion. A composite was formed for each of the five variables. These variables were submitted to regression analysis, with superintendent vision as the dependent variable and organizational mission, program and personnel evaluation, principal influence on decision making, and school board/community involvement as the independent variables.

Results
The dependent variable for this study was superintendent vision ($M = 5.31$, $SD = 2.08$). Descriptive statistics for the four independent variables, including Pearson product moment correlations, are presented in Table III. Inspection of

these correlation coefficients indicates a significant correlation among all five variables. There were high correlations between superintendent vision and organizational mission ($r = 0.65, p < 0.01$), between organizational mission and program and personnel evaluation ($r = 0.60, p < 0.01$), and between principal influence and school board/community influence ($r = 0.54, p < 0.01$). Moderate correlations existed between superintendent vision and program and personnel evaluation ($r = 0.41, p < 0.01$), between superintendent vision and principal influence in decision making ($r = 0.40, p < 0.01$), between superintendent vision and school board/community influence ($r = 0.49, p < 0.01$), between organizational mission and program and principal influence in decision making ($r = 0.33, p < 0.01$) and between organizational mission and school board/ community influence ($r = 0.36, p < 0.01$).

Before interpreting the results of the regression analysis, the variables were examined for potential multicollinearity. Although there were several moderate-to-high bivariate intercorrelations, the tolerance values for all variables exceeded the 0.1 cutoff value. Additionally, all values for variance inflation factors (VIF) were safely below the "critical" value of 10. These results indicate that multicollinearity was not a problem within this regression analysis (Pedhazur, 1997; Stevens, 1996).

Results of the regression analysis are displayed in Table IV. These findings indicate a significant predictable relationship ($R = 0.688$; $R^2 = 0.473$; $F(4, 75) = 0.16.8$, $p = 0.000$) between the four independent variables and the dependent variable. This value for R^2 – and its associated F-test – indicates that the district's organizational mission and school board/community influence were significantly related to superintendent vision. These outcomes suggest that the articulated instructional vision of the superintendent appears to have influence over the organizational factors involved in the promotion of instruction. They also suggest that the vision require members of the community and the school

Table III. Means, standard deviations, partial correlation coefficients, reliabilities (on the diagonal). and variance inflation factors (independent variables only) for organizational mission, program and personnel evaluation, principal influence on decision making, and school board/ community involvement

	Means	Standard deviation	A	B	C	D	E	VIF
(A) Superintendent vision	5.31	2.08	0.83	0.65**	0.41**	0.40**	0.49**	
(B) Organizational mission	7.44	2.48		0.80	0.60**	0.33**	0.36**	2.99
(C) Program and personnel evaluation	4.56	1.49			0.58	0.22*	0.24*	1.99
(D) Principal influence on decision making	7.54	3.04				0.79	0.54**	8.76
(E) School board/community involvement	8.33	3.13					0.77	6.22

Notes: [a] VIF = variance influence factor; significance levels for correlations $^{*}p < 0.05$, $^{**}p < 0.01$

board to be involved in the planning and formulating of district instructional goals.

Discussion

Findings

In an era of academic accountability, greater knowledge of district leaders who have been recognized as leading and facilitating academically successful school districts will benefit both researchers and practitioners. Such investigations will broaden our conceptual understanding of instructional leadership as well as more clearly define the leadership and managerial activities of the district superintendent (Björk, 1993). The purpose of this investigation was to explore perceptions of principals and school board members regarding the leadership role of the district superintendent in curriculum and instruction. More specifically, the author wanted to know if there was a relationship between the superintendent's instructional vision and organizational factors that influence the academic success of the school district. The conclusions of this study are limited in their generalizability because they were derived from a survey instrument based on the extant literature and hypothesis generating interviews and used only in five non-randomly selected medium-sized school districts. Nevertheless, results of this investigation support previous work in this area (Coleman and LaRocque, 1990; Hallinger and Murphy, 1986; Peterson *et al.*, 1987), but also suggest some new conceptual areas concerning the role of the district superintendent as a leader of curriculum and instruction.

Superintendent vision and the organization. The results of the correlational analysis suggest that there exists a significant relationship between the articulated instructional vision of the district superintendent and the district's ability to become academically successful. When the composite for superintendent vision was regressed over the components of organizational mission and school board community involvement, the analysis revealed that the mission and goals of the district and participation of the community in

Table IV. Regression coefficients, standard error, t-test, multiple correlation, and F ratio for the regression analysis of superintendent vision on the instructional leadership variables of organizational mission, program evaluation, principal influence in decision making, and school board/community involvement

Variable	Regression coefficient	Standard error	t-test	Significance	R^2	F	p
Intercept	143.14	1.45	0.681	< 0.01	0.473	16.8	0.000
Organizational mission	0.412	0.86	4.81	0.00			
Program and personal evaluation	2.40	0.13	0.18	0.875			
Principal influence on decision making	7.10	0.65	1.13	0.269			
School board/community involvement	0.129	0.63	2.03	0.046			

instructional planning were significantly related to instructional vision of the district superintendent. The findings suggest superintendent behaviors that are reflective of and different in identifiable ways from behaviors reported in previous studies examining the role of the district superintendent (Björk, 1993; Carter and Cunningham, 1997; Kowalski and Oates, 1993). What this investigation reveals is a larger organizational picture of the importance of superintendent and his/her relationships with school and community personnel in leading an academically successful school district. A principal contribution of this study lies in the fact that building principals who have been identified as the key actors in the academic success of the school district, as well as board members who have the ability to form and direct policy to address educational reforms, perceive the importance of the articulated and modeled instructional vision of the superintendent in the academic success of their district. More important is their view of the significant relationship between this vision and programs, planning, and overall community involvement in formulating goals that are directly targeted to the academic success of the district.

Why is this important? As educational reform shifts in form and texture (Murphy, 1990) strongly voiced arguments for issues such as site-based management, teacher empowerment, parental choice coupled with reforms aimed at school curriculum, graduation requirements, the testing of teachers and students and a growing disenchantment with bureaucratic forms of school management have brought significant challenges to the superintendent's authority and leadership (Grogan, 1996; Norton *et al.*, 1996). Responding to calls for greater involvement of school administrators, teachers, and parents, district leaders often find themselves in a position where they must support and facilitate school-based decisions, shared leadership and other site-based approaches to school leadership (Carter and Cunningham, 1997; Crowson, 1987). This investigation empirically illustrates the importance of the establishment and maintenance of a positive professional relationship and shared decision making with key stakeholders in instructional leadership of the district. Previous investigations have suggested that district leaders in high performing districts often create and sustain a positive district ethos through their relationship with their principals (Bredeson, 1996; Coleman and LaRocque, 1990; Hallinger and Murphy, 1986). Other research has indicated that the association of the district superintendent and board of education also has far-reaching leadership and policy implications that greatly affect the quality of a district's educational program (Odden, 1995; Nygren, 1992). While findings from this investigation support this line of inquiry, the conclusions drawn here demonstrate the critical importance of the superintendent's individual action and modeling of an academically oriented vision on the district's ability to focus on the academic achievement of children. Particularly it illustrates that this vision offers opportunities for collaborative decision making and that participation in the development of instructional goals by school administrators, board members, teachers and community members is critical not only in appearance, but in the creation of an instructionally focused district culture.

Finally, the world's future is inextricably linked to the quality of its schools, its K-12 educators, and the leadership of its superintendents. Despite the crush of competing agendas, superintendents must position themselves to cultivate an ethos that enables teaching and leadership through the connections with the board of education, school administrators and the community (Carter and Cunningham, 1997). Given the exploratory nature of this investigation, the superintendent relationship with building administrators, board members and the community should be considered a starting point in investigating the instructional leadership of the superintendent. The empirical work conducted in this area is still relatively limited, and the process by which superintendents influence decision making is not clearly understood (Petersen and Short, in press). These findings also raise pertinent issues regarding participatory democratic leadership of the district (McCurdy, 1992).

Therefore, it is important to note that these findings do not suggest that articulation of an instructional vision by the district superintendent will necessarily translate into an academically focused district. Rather, these results demonstrate that superintendent vision has a significant, dynamic effect on the organizational mission and goals and involvement of community members in leading an organization focused on the academic achievement of students. More importantly, the data reveal that individuals critical to the formation of district policy and the implementation of curricular programs see the systemic relationship of superintendent behaviors and their influence on district outcomes.

A final note regarding the title of this article. A school board president was asked to describe the relationship of the superintendent with the board of education in promoting curriculum and instruction. The board president simply said, "A superintendent and school board can't sing two different tunes and then expect the public to hum along."

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