



THE SUPERINTENDENT AND SCHOOL BOARD RELATIONSHIP: FUNCTIONING AS A GROUP

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Abstract

This article examines the school board-superintendent working relationship in the area functioning as a group. In this quantitative research method, surveys were mailed to Texas public school board presidents and superintendents. Descriptive statistical analyses were used to determine any differences in the perceptions of the school board presidents and the superintendents in their working relationship. Each survey question was analyzed to discover any questions with a five percent or greater difference in the participant's response. The research concluded that a difference does exist in the perceptions of the school board presidents and the superintendents in their working relationship.

Key Words: Education Administration, Superintendent, Board of Trustees, Relationship, Teamwork

Introduction

Public school boards and superintendents play a critical role in the well-being of four million young people in the state of Texas in the United States of America. How they work together strongly impacts the quality of our children's schools. The school board-superintendent relationship is vital to increasing student achievement in the twenty-first century (LaMonte, 2009). Armed with unprecedented technological, scientific, and education advances, a school board-superintendent relationship that embraces proactive leadership, genuine collaboration, honest and open communication, and unwavering trust is poised to embark on team building that fosters high performing schools (Eadie, 2009; Goodman & Zimmerman, Jr., 2000).

In recent years the working relationship of the board of trustees and the superintendent has been characterized as more complex and stressful due to educational reform and high expectations (Stellar, 2011; Wright, 2002). The National Commission on Excellence in Education, chaired by Secretary of Education T. H. Bell, undertook the task of examining the quality of education in the United States (National Commission of Excellence in Education, 1983). Secretary Bell's report, *A Nation at Risk*, served as a catalyst in a paradigm shift for the board - superintendent relationship, influenced especially by the issue of accountability (1983). This document decried the mediocre condition of education in American by substantiating and addressing systemic educational failure and adamantly advocated sweeping and immediate changes in educational

leadership and for the educational system (1983). John Hoyle (2002) noted that specific challenges emerged by heightened public awareness, as well as demands for excellence in schools and improved student performance. Consequently, intense pressure has been brought upon the relationship of the superintendent and the board of trustees.

Superintendent-School Board Relationship

The school board president holds a unique relationship with the superintendent. The relationship is not a matter of individual strength but one of partnership and teamwork (Ellingson, 2010; Richards, 1997). Richards asserts "the stronger the partners, the greater the progress potential" (p. 86). The school board president serves as a liaison between the board and the superintendent (Smoley, 1999). Specifically, Smoley portrays the school board president as a person who informs both the board and the superintendent of the amount of support for issues, develops compromises, and attempts to ensure that there are no surprises in the working relationship. Mountford (2004) notes that this relationship reflects how the board delegates power and authority to the superintendent. Additionally, this relationship underscores the need to better understand how each school board president and superintendent perceive the effectiveness of their operations and the need to develop relationships that will foster high achieving schools.

Leadership emphasizes a collaborative relationship rather than an adversarial one (Duffy, 2003). In this atmosphere, Duffy advances that trust, respect, and results flourish. Members of school boards and superintendents must genuinely address the status of their relationship.

Theoretical Framework

The superintendent and the school board are spotlighted as key players in implementation and governance of the educational reform movement. Each entity is challenged to demonstrate transformation in their roles and relations in the quest for high expectations for schools in a post-modern era. During the twentieth century, Muth (2002) notes a shift of thought concerning learning, which is viewed as an active process rather than an industrial model of acquiring knowledge and communicating knowledge. Muth emphasizes that the shift focuses on interaction, collaboration, problem solving, and critical thinking and thereby, transforms educational leadership.

Additionally, Muth (2002) advances the notion that transformation of education leadership and practice is the framework that liberates stakeholders to new possibilities, knowledge, and methods of education. Anderson and Saavedra (2002) contend that the theory of transformative leads learners to constantly transform the realities of their everyday lives into meaningful educational experiences. Transformation leadership expects that the school board and superintendent team commitment will develop trust, respect, and interdependence upon one another.

Statement of the Problem

In this study the problem is that adverse actions and operations by school boards negatively impact the effective working relationship of school board and the superintendent. Bickering between superintendents and members of the board of trustees harms many school administrators' careers and serves as a deterrent to the education of children (Ellingson, 2010; Goodman, Fulbright, & Zimmerman, 1997). Micro-management by school boards results in a battle for the day-to-day operations of the school districts (Clift & Reese, 2004; Glass, 1992). Additionally, trustee with single agenda issues and su-

perintendent “witch hunts” have received priority at the expense of a positive school climate and high student achievement (Clift & Reese, 2004).

Current research, then, is needed to determine the impact of the school board - superintendent relationship upon high student achievement. Intense and persistent pressure is brought about by educational reform for superintendents and school boards to perform well in the accountability system (Mongford, 2004; Goodman, Fulbright, & Zimmerman, 1997; Porch & Protheroe, 2003). High expectations by stakeholders place pressure on school districts to increase student learning at all grade levels (Goodman & Zimmerman, 2000; National Commission of Excellence in Education, 1983). Superintendents are held to a very high level of accountability for improving student achievement. Success in the accountability expectations is achieved when the board of trustees and the superintendent work in tandem (Texas Association of School Boards, 2003).

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this research was to explore the perceptions of Texas school board presidents and superintendents regarding their working relationship. A better understanding of the school board-superintendent relationship allows them to better serve their students and community at large. Tallerico (1989) contends, “The functional relationship between the school board and the superintendent is a critical connection which stands at the apex of the organizational pyramid in education” (p.1). Herein lies the significance of this study; the examination of the school board-superintendent working relationship in the area of functioning as a group. Such an examination can produce solutions for increased relationship in teamwork, cooperation, collaboration, and communication (Smoley, 1999).

Research Question

This research focuses on the school board-superintendent working relationship as perceived by superintendents and the school board presidents from Texas school districts. This research is guided by the question: Is there a difference in Texas school board and superintendents’ perceptions regarding the school board - superintendent working relationship? The sub-question that relates to this overriding question is: Is there a difference in the perception of the school board president and the superintendent in functioning as a group (team)? Functioning as a group relates to the cohesiveness of the board. Members must understand that it is the group, not individual members, which possess the power. It involves the group agreeing on operating procedures. The intended results include an increase in respect and trust, and recognition of each individual’s contributions. Leadership in this area resides with the board president (Smoley, 1999).

The data from this research contributes to the understanding of the school board-superintendent relationship by examining the perceptions held by school board presidents and superintendents on the subject. Specifically, this research endeavors to examine the school board-superintendent working relationship in the area functioning as a group (Smoley, 1999).

Research Methodology

In an attempt to answer the research question, a quantitative study employed descriptive design methodologies. By utilizing these methods, the researcher produced both a detailed description and analysis of the population sample, which consisted of school board presidents and superintendent from a listing of all Texas public school districts, grade levels kindergarten through 12, who received a 2005

accountability rating. The list of school board presidents, who had served in that capacity for the 2004 and 2005 school years, was obtained from the Texas Association of School Boards. A list of school districts was secured from the Texas Education Agency by means of a public information request. This information included the accountability rating, the number of economically disadvantaged students, and superintendents who had been in the district in that capacity for two or more years. The object for this criterion was to pair school board presidents and superintendents.

This research sought two responses from each of the school districts. One was solicited from the superintendent and one from the school board president. The sample for this study was selected from the name of the schools as listed by the Texas Education Agency. Although charter school data was available in this search, these schools were not included in the sample for this study. Participation was entirely voluntary. All participants were given the option to withdraw from the study at any time.

Instrumentation

Permission was obtained to use an existing survey, the Board Self-Assessment Questionnaire (BSAQ), to gather data on six topics related to school board-superintendent relations. The BSAQ was developed by Eugene Smoley. He utilized material originally created by the Center for Higher Education Governance and Leadership at the University of Maryland through a project funded by the Lilly Endowment. Smoley used data from this questionnaire to create his Model for School Effectiveness. The survey is a self-assessment tool that analyzed school board effectiveness through a series of 73 questions. School board performance in six areas of board operations were assessed as follows: making decisions, functioning as

a group (team), exercising authority, connecting to the community, working toward board improvement, and acting strategically. Question responses were ordinal-scaled into four categories consisting of strongly agree, agree, disagree, and strongly disagree. Superintendent and school board president questionnaires were tabulated separately with the results used for comparisons.

Data collection and analysis

Data collection took place over a two-month period during the fall of 2006. Data from returned surveys was entered into the Microsoft Office Excel (2003) software program and then transferred to the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS, 2003) software for tabulation. Data from surveys were sorted into a two groups: school board president and superintendent. Data were entered and coded from the returned questionnaires. A combination of descriptive and inferential statistics, regression analysis, was utilized in this study. The combination of these two statistical treatments enabled the researcher to describe the data in full detail, while addressing the specific statistical significance of the influences of certain dependent variables on the resulting equity measures. The Microsoft Office Excel (2003) and SPSS (2003) statistical software were used to describe and analyze the data.

Surveys were scored using the criteria that Smoley (1999) developed to assess the actions of effective school boards. Functioning as a group was scored from twelve questions based on Smoley's Model for School Board Effectiveness. Underlined questions were scored in reverse: Functioning as a Group – 3, 17, 30, 32, 36, 37, 49, 53, 59, 64, 68, 72 (p.137).

Responses were arranged on a Likert scale (Carroll & Carroll, 2002) with replies consisting of strongly agree, agree,

disagree, and strongly disagree. The questions will be scored as follows: Strongly Agree – 4; Agree – 3; Disagree – 2; Strongly Disagree – 1. Measures of central tendency were performed on the results to determine the distribution of the scores. A table was for the Functioning as a group category and the results were presented. Lastly, additional analysis of the scores was accomplished through the use of SPSS.

Descriptive Statistics

The first step in data analysis was to describe or summarize the data, using descriptive statistics (Gay & Airasian, 2000). Measures of central tendency, measures of relationships, measures of variability, and measures of relative position are among the most common descriptive statistics. Measures of variability include variance, while the relationship between variables was evaluated using correlation statistics (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996). Central tendency was evaluated utilizing mean, median, and mode. Gay and Airasian (2000) defined mean as the arithmetic average, while mode is a frequency statistic that defines the value that is most common among the sample being evaluated.

Exploring differences

Descriptive statistical analysis involved the determination of any difference of five percent or greater that existed between the school board presidents and the superintendent responses for each of the 73 questions. All ratings of the respondents were sorted into the two major groups: 1) school board president and 2) superintendent. Within each group, ratings for each question were sorted into two categories. One category included the strongly disagree and disagree (SD-D) and the other category included ratings strongly agree and agree (SA-A). The sum of the SD-D ratings was divided by the total

number of school board presidents. This same procedure was applied to the SA-A ratings. This process was repeated for the group of superintendents. Once percentages were determined for the SD-D and the SA-A categories for the school board president group and the superintendent group on each question, the mathematical process of subtraction was applied to determine if any difference of five percent or greater existed. The stated difference represented a noteworthy perspective.

Findings

The analysis and resulting findings, which included descriptive statistics for the sample population and the survey responses, were utilized to accept or reject the research hypotheses. The purpose of this research was to explore the perceptions of Texas school board presidents and superintendents regarding their working relationship. This research was guided by the following question: Is there a difference in Texas school board and superintendents' perceptions regarding the school board-superintendent working relationship?

Summary of Descriptive Population Statistics

The population data utilized in this study was a combination of data elements provided by the Texas Education Agency, the Texas Association of School Boards, and the demographic data furnished with the BSAQ. The accountability ratings and data for school count, economically disadvantaged, and ethnicity were obtained for the 2005 school year. The superintendents and school board presidents surveyed were individuals who were in their position for the 2004 and 2005 school years. Forty-six school districts were invited to participate in the study.

Of the school board presidents, 32.61 returned their surveys while 56.52

percent of superintendents returned their surveys. Paired survey returns were 26.09 percent. The mean of the student count was 6,076 students with the smallest school having an enrollment of 155 students and the largest school with an enrollment of 34, 649 students. The mean for the ethnicity of the schools revealed a student body of 47.05 percent non-white and 52.95 percent of white students. The mean for the economically disadvantage student count was 53.52 percent.

The education level of the school board presidents surveyed was 26.67 percent with a bachelor's degree and 33.33 percent with a master's degree. Twenty percent of the school board presidents surveyed had only a high school diploma. Of the school board presidents surveyed, 67.67 percent had two years of service as a school board president and 33.33 percent had three to seven years of experience.

The education level of the superintendents surveyed reveals that 53.85 percent held a master's degree while 46.15 held a terminal degree. Sixty-one percent of the superintendent's age fell within the range of fifty to fifty-nine years. Of the superintendents surveyed, 57.69 percent had served as a superintendent for three to seven years in their current position.

Descriptive Survey Response Analysis: Factor Analysis

Factor analysis is a statistical technique that may be used to explain variability among variables in terms of fewer variables known as factors. A factor analysis was conducted on the BSAQ for the purpose of determining if the questions factored together to measure what the inventory and the sub-sections within the BSAQ intended to measure for the study. Written permission was obtained from Dr. Eugene Smoley, Jr. to use the BSAQ in this study. Surveys were scored using the criteria that Smoley (1999) developed to assess the ac-

tions of effective school boards. Questions were divided into six sub-sections or categories based on Smoley's Model for School Board Effectiveness. Underlined questions were scored in reverse.

Functioning as a Group – 3, 17, 30, 32, 36, 37, 49, 53, 59, 64, 68, 72

The factor analysis revealed that the indexes were not unidimensional. Since indexes must be unidimensional, a description analysis of each question was utilized to analyze the survey responses instead of the planned regression analysis.

Each question was treated as an individual variable and each question was treated in the same fashion. Responses are presented as percent and are grouped into categories of strongly agree-agree and strongly disagree-disagree. This grouping was purposefully decided for clarity of distinguishing the response differences. A five percent difference of statistical analysis was considered worthy of notation. Inferential statistics were not used because the sample sizes for both the school board presidents and superintendents were too small for such calculations (Neuman, 2003). Of the 12 questions in the sub-section, *Functioning as a Group*, seven or 58.33 percent, met the criteria establishing a difference between the school board presidents' and superintendents' perceptions. The greatest difference, which was 42.31 percent, in school board presidents' and superintendents' perceptions were in question 3, which stated: "There have been occasions where the board itself has acted in ways inconsistent with the district's deepest values" (Smoley, 1999, p. 131).

The results of this study indicated that data suggests that there was a difference in Texas school board and superintendents' perceptions regarding the school board-superintendent working relationship.

Conclusions

The research data suggested that there is a difference in Texas school board and superintendents' perceptions regarding the school board - superintendent working relationship. The question studied the difference in the perception of the school board president and the superintendent in functioning as a group (team). As indicated in the 58.33 percent difference between the school board president and superintendent responses, the findings suggested that there is a difference in the perception of the school board president and the superintendent in functioning as a group (team). The differences were in the areas identified as inconsistent actions of the board with district values, public disagreement, and the lack of discussion on values. These differences represented a disparity in group dynamics and communication (Glass, Bjork, & Brunner, 2000). I conclude that inconsistent actions by board members create a degree of uncertainty and trust in the working relationship of the school board and superintendent.

Conclusions are formulated from this research. First, I conclude that the relationship of the superintendent and school board is very complex. Second, I conclude that the superintendent and school board relationship is not static but rather changing and transforming. Third, I further conclude that the issue of change is an element that must be continually factored into

the updating and revising of the training topics and material.

Fourth, I conclude that school boards develop a meaningful self-evaluation process that addresses the functioning board members. Fifth, I conclude that school board conduct affects tenure. A healthy school board-superintendent relationship is more likely to exist when lengthy tenures of superintendents and board members are expected and encouraged.

Sixth, I conclude that school boards and superintendents must develop processes and practices to connect with the community in a meaningful manner. The concept of effectively connecting with the community holds the prospect for significant benefits, which will result in student achievement. The vision and voice of the community must have a viable, convenient, and credible avenue for expression.

In summary, this study continues to reveal that a significant breach exists between the school board and superintendent when acting as a group. Too often a reluctance on the part of school board members is evident in the effort to realistically deal with conflict in the superintendent-school board relationship. The resulting frustration, which is experienced by the superintendent, can be eliminated when a spirit of teamwork on the part of superintendent and school board exists to focus on student outcomes and achievement.

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