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# Determining School District Organization in North Carolina

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# Academic Leadership Journal

## Introduction

Our schools are being asked to educate our children in an ever-increasingly complex and global society. Student achievement is at the forefront of teachers' and administrators' attention and much effort is given to helping students reach acceptable levels on state and national tests. It is imperative that educators understand all the factors that can affect student achievement. While much attention has been given to school reorganization in the last 40 years, little about how superintendents make decisions about district organization or the impact of the district organizational structure on learning is found in the current literature. In a previous study, we sought to understand how North Carolina school districts are organized by studying the organization structure of public school districts in North Carolina (Dunaway & Ausband, 2008). We asked, "What organizational patterns are found in public school districts in North Carolina?" and "How do organizational patterns differ in districts serving different numbers of students?" We created a system of explanatory organizational structures based on school districts' organizational charts. This was a first step in determining how the school district organizational structures came to be.

The current study sought to answer the next question, "How are the organizational structures of North Carolina school districts determined?" We wanted to understand what factors influenced the organization of school district.

## Review of the Literature

### Organizational Structure and Purpose

Very little recent information has been found in the literature describing how school districts are organized and structured. Legislation in the state of North Carolina helps us understand how the authority for public education flows from the state constitution (Uniform System of Schools, 2007) to the school district. The constitution lists 20 duties of the superintendent, but none of these addresses a duty to organize the school district. There are definitions of organizations in the literature that describe what an organization is (Dalton, Todor, Spendolini, Fielding, & Porter, 1980; Meyer & Rowan, 1977), but these do not address how the school district organization developed. Sewall (1999) explained school district organization by dividing school districts into three size groups and then including an organizational chart for each group in an "attempt to show some of the ways in which superintendents have tried to share responsibilities within the school district organization in attempts to facilitate management and to increase available time for the superintendent to work with the board and to attend to community issues and other responsibilities" (p.13). Fensch (1964) discussed school district organization in his textbook and included organizational charts similar to Sewall's. He also posed a number of questions a superintendent must answer in order to organize an effective school system. Other ways of understanding school district organization discussed in the literature include analyzing functions, roles, and policies (Hightower, 2002). While this certainly improves our understanding of school district organization, this information is neither current nor complete.

Elmore (2000) gave an historical perspective of school district organization and noted that over the past century a "relatively elaborate system of administrative overhead at the district and school level,

thought to be necessary for adequate supervision of the relatively low-skill teacher force and relatively large schools” (p. 5) has evolved. The concept of “loose-coupling” (Meyer & Rowan, 1992; Rowan, 1990 in Elmore, 2000; and Weick, 1976 in Elmore, 2000) that comes from the 1960’s and 1970’s was discussed as a way of defining the role of administration in education. Loose coupling was defined as detailed decisions about instruction that “reside in individual classrooms, not in the organizations that surround them.” (Elmore, p. 6).

Therefore, . . . the administrative superstructure of the organization – principals, board members, and administrators – exists to ‘buffer’ the weak technical core of teaching from outside inspection, interference, or disruption. Administration in education, then, has come to mean not the management of instruction but the management of the structures and processes around instruction. . . . Local board members, system-level administrators, and school administrators perform the ritualistic tasks of organizing, budgeting, managing, and dealing with disruptions inside and outside the system, all in the name of creating and maintaining public confidence in the institutions of public education. Teachers, working in isolated classrooms, under highly uncertain conditions, manage the technical core. This division of labor has been amazingly constant over the last century.” (Elmore, p. 6).

The argument could be made that the district organization defines how the work of the district will be done. This gives us a way of understanding the purpose and function of educational administration and district organization, but it does not explain how the decisions about the district organization are made.

Several authors have defined organizational structure. Dalton et al. (1980) explained, “Organization structure may be considered the anatomy of the organization, providing a foundation within which the organization functions. Organization structure is believed to affect the behavior of organization members. . . Behavior in organizations is influenced by the organizing structure” (p. 49). Hall (1997), in Dalton et al., also noted “structure is the setting in which power is exercised . . . decisions are made . . . and . . . the organization’s activities are carried out” (p. 109). Dalton et al. considered various models of organization structures from many authors. Using the work of Campbell, Brownas, Peterson, and Dunnette (1974 in Dalton et al.), they distinguished between “‘structural’ and ‘structuring’ characteristics” (p. 51) in examining these models of organization structures. Structural characteristics are physical characteristics such as “size, span of control, and flat/tall hierarchy” (p. 51). Structuring characteristics have to do with “policies and activities . . . that prescribe or restrict the behavior of organization members” (p. 51). Examples of structuring characteristics are specialization, formalization, complexity, and centralization (p. 50-51). These different models and these two characteristics give us more ways in which to build an understanding of organization structure. Our study considers both structural and structuring aspects of school district organization.

The Council of the Great City Schools (2006) also discussed organizational structure.

“The keys to any effective organizational structure are that it aligns with the vision, mission, and goals of the agency; encourages and facilitates the overall strategic directions of the institution; has a system of accountability; and fosters cooperation, teamwork, and shared responsibility for meeting the organization’s goals” (p.43).

The Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (1994), as well, provided an explanation of the purpose of school district organization structure:

“The school district provides the organizational structure needed to marshal and utilize the resources available for educational programs and services to children and youth. The organizational structure is not an end itself but rather, along with staff members, facilities, equipment and materials, a means of providing the setting in which learning can best take place” (p. 1).

These studies, again, provide us with a deeper understanding of what organizational structure is and the purposes of organizational structure, but still do not inform us how the decisions are made to organize a school district one way or the other. Much of this information is also dated. We need updated information in order to make the best decisions for our students.

## School Districts and Change

Elmore (2000) noted “[S]uperintendents come and go based on their capacity to maintain a working majority on a relatively unstable elected board, rather than on their capacity to focus the institution on its core functions and make steady improvements over time” (p. 8). This describes a common situation found in many school districts: new superintendents introduce new organizational structures to their districts. This begs the question, “Isn’t there a better way?”

Consider this from the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (1994):

As long as the district is able to effectively and efficiently provide for the educational needs of the area it serves, it can be considered a satisfactory unit, but when it is unable to do the job for which it has been created, it traditionally has been modified. School district organization, therefore, has never been permanent or static nor was it even intended to be. Changes in school district organization are a normal, on-going process necessary to keep pace with changing needs, expectations, and conditions (p. 1).

This provides another perspective on change in school district organization. If change in school district organization is inevitable, then, how is it best handled in order to provide the best learning environment for our students? These are questions that are not answered in the literature and are essential for understanding the full impact school district organization can make on the work of the district.

Koberg (1986) studied the organizational behavior of school organizations and found that school administrators have to continually introduce internal organizational changes in order to cope with changes in their environment. She noted, “Size was found to be the single most important factor in determining the frequency of both structural and strategic adjustments” (p. 144) since larger districts are more likely to have the resources to make these changes. Hall (1982) also discussed the relation of organizational size to succession (the change in leadership). He said, “the larger the organization, the less the impact of succession would be. Large organizations are apt to be more complex and formalized, and thus more resistant to change.” (p. 170). This reflects one of the issues we wanted to explore in our study: would organizational decisions in larger school districts be different than those in smaller districts? Most of the literature that addresses this topic is more than 20 years old.

The literature, therefore, provides us with definitions of organizational structure and information about the purposes of organizational structures. Elmore (2000) gave us an historical perspective on school district organizations and there is some research on how school district organization is affected by change. Much of this is outdated and does not provide an explanation of how school district organizations are determined. This shows the contributions of this present study can be helpful in contributing to the body of literature and our understanding in this area of education.

## Method

### Participants

The final sample included 52 superintendents of public school districts in North Carolina, which represents a 66% response rate. Of 52 respondents, 83% were male; 69.2% held a doctoral degree, 28.8% held a educational specialist degree, and 1.9% held a master’s degree; 92.3% held the highest

degree in educational leadership, 1.9% in the highest degree in curriculum, and 5.8% in other areas. The majority of respondents reported having administrative experiences as associate or assistant superintendent (76.9%) and/or Principal (63.5%), followed by superintendent (28.8%), and deputy superintendent (9.6%) (Percentages do not add up to 100% because respondents who reported more than one administrative experience were counted more than once). Other prior administrative experiences (19.2%) included assistant principals, deputy state superintendent, director of curriculum and instruction, and educational foundation direct. The number of years in current position varied from less than one year to 27 years, with the average being 5.1 years.

## Instrument

The survey instrument was self-administered and web-based. The survey consisted of eight multiple-choice items and six demographic and other background information. Three of the 8 questions consisted of sub questions (6 items for question 6, 3 items for question 7, and five items for question that were scored on a one- to five-point Likert scale where 1 = no extent, 2 = little extent, 3 = some extent, 4 = great extent, and 5 = very great extent. Items were written to determine how the current organizational patterns in public school districts in North Carolina are chosen and/or developed. The questions were developed based on data gathered from the previous study, personal experiences of one of the authors, and information from the literature. 🤔

## Procedure

A pilot survey was conducted with 21 participants in December 2007. The survey was conducted using a commercially available web-based tool. The superintendents included in the pilot study were superintendents from other states drawn from the membership list of the Superintendency Institute of America. The superintendents surveyed represented urban, suburban, and rural districts throughout the U.S. After the results of the pilot survey were reviewed, the order of two questions was changed, and one more choice was added to question two. In March 2008, information about the survey was emailed to the 79 superintendents who participated in the first phase of our study. The email contained the informed consent information and a link to the webpage hosting the survey. In May 2008, the survey was closed.

## Results

### The Current School District Organization

All 52 respondents reported that they, as the superintendents, determined the way their school district was currently organized. When responding to the item regarding the primary purpose of the current organization chart, responses were fairly evenly spread across the options: 28.8% reported that the current organization chart showed levels of authority, power, and responsibility within the district; 25% reported that it showed levels of decision-making within the district; 25% reported that it showed levels of support within the district; 19.2% reported that it described communication patterns within the district; and one respondent (1.9%) chose other indicating that it served multiple purposes of communication, support, and reporting. Forty-four percent reported that the current organizational plan had been in effect for three years or less; 21.2% reported 10 years or more; 19.2% reported 4-6 years; and 15.4% indicated 7-9 years.

### Superintendents' Decision of the District's Current Organization

Table 1 presents the factors that influenced superintendents to determine their current school district organization. Superintendents' experience in another district appeared to have great influence on their decision of the district's current organization, while the other five factors appeared to have little or no influence on superintendents' decision of their district's current organization. Approximately 47% superintendents reported that their experience in another district influenced their decision to a great extent or very great extent. Eighty-four percent of superintendents reported that what they learned in graduate school had little or no influence on their decisions regarding the school district organization.

### Effects of the Current Organizational Plan

Superintendents were asked to indicate to what extent their district's current organizational plan had a positive impact on communication within the district, decision-making, financial and budget matters, instruction and testing, and personal decisions. As shown in Table 2, the majority of superintendents reported

the district's current organizational plan had a positive impact on the aforementioned areas. In particular, of those responding to decision-making, 88.2% reported that the organizational plan had a positive impact on decision making to a great extent or very great extent.

Table 1  
*Factors that Influenced Superintendents' Decision of the District's Current Organization*

|                                                     | <i>N</i> | <i>no extent</i> | <i>little extent</i> | <i>some extent</i> | <i>great extent</i> | <i>very great extent</i> |
|-----------------------------------------------------|----------|------------------|----------------------|--------------------|---------------------|--------------------------|
| Experience in another district                      | 49       | 22.5%            | 4.1%                 | 26.5%              | 26.5%               | 20.4%                    |
| Input from a colleague                              | 50       | 16.0%            | 20.0%                | 44.0%              | 12.0%               | 8.0%                     |
| Input from another superintendent                   | 50       | 26.0%            | 22.0%                | 34.0%              | 12.0%               | 6.0%                     |
| It's the way I found it and it works                | 50       | 32.0%            | 22.0%                | 18.0%              | 18.0%               | 10.0%                    |
| Something I learned in graduate school              | 50       | 54.0%            | 30.0%                | 12.0%              | 2.0%                | 2.0%                     |
| Professional reading outside the field of education | 50       | 28.0%            | 28.0%                | 30.0%              | 12.0%               | 2.0%                     |

Table 2  
*The Effects of the Current Organizational Plan*

|                                   | <i>N</i> | <i>no extent</i> | <i>little extent</i> | <i>some extent</i> | <i>great extent</i> | <i>very great extent</i> |
|-----------------------------------|----------|------------------|----------------------|--------------------|---------------------|--------------------------|
| Communication within the district | 52       | –                | –                    | 19.2%              | 59.6%               | 21.2%                    |
| Decision making                   | 51       | –                | –                    | 11.8%              | 58.8%               | 29.4%                    |
| Financial and budget matters      | 50       | 2.0%             | 2.0%                 | 22.0%              | 58.0%               | 16.0%                    |
| Instruction and testing           | 50       | –                | –                    | 20.0%              | 52.0%               | 28.0%                    |
| Personnel decisions               | 51       | –                | 3.9%                 | 19.6%              | 45.1%               | 31.4%                    |

### The Purpose of District Organizational Chart by District Size

Table 3 presents the results of the purpose of the organizational chart by district size. Of 52 respondents, 44.2% reported the district size of 2,500 to 9,999, followed by 23.1% for less than 2500,

23.1% for 10,000 to 24,999, 3.8% for 25,000 to 49,999, 3.8% for 50,000 to 99,999, and 1.9% for more than 100,000. Of 23 respondents in a district of 2,500 to 9,999, approximately 70% reported that the purpose of district organizational chart was to describe either levels of authority, power, and responsibility within the district (34.8%) or support within the district (34.8%). Of 12 superintendents in a district of less than 2,500, 36.4% reported that the district organizational chart described communication patterns, followed by support (27.3%), decision making (18.2%), and authority, power, and responsibility (18.3%). Of 12 superintendents in a district of 10,000 to 24,999, responses were generally spread across the options, with the greatest response being 33.3% who reported the chart showed levels of decision making. For large districts (25,000 students or more), the district organizational chart tended to describe levels of decision making or levels of authority, power, and responsibility. One superintendent in a district of more than 100,000 reported that the district organizational chart served multiple purposes of communication, support, and reporting.

Table 3

*The Purpose of District Organizational Chart by District Size*

| <i>District Size</i> | <i>Total N</i> | <i>Purpose of the District Organizational Chart</i> |                        |                                               |                |              |
|----------------------|----------------|-----------------------------------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|----------------|--------------|
|                      |                | <i>Communication patterns</i>                       | <i>Decision making</i> | <i>Authority, power, &amp; responsibility</i> | <i>Support</i> | <i>Other</i> |
| less than 2,500      | 12             | 36.4%                                               | 18.2%                  | 18.2%                                         | 27.3%          | –            |
| 2,500 to 9,999       | 23             | 8.7%                                                | 21.7%                  | 34.8%                                         | 34.8%          | –            |
| 10,000 to 24,999     | 12             | 25.0%                                               | 33.3%                  | 25.0%                                         | 16.7%          | –            |
| 25,000 to 49,999     | 2              | –                                                   | 50.0%                  | 50.0%                                         | –              | –            |
| 50,000 to 99,999     | 2              | –                                                   | 50.0%                  | 50.0%                                         | –              | –            |
| more than 100,000    | 1              | –                                                   | –                      | –                                             | –              | 100.0%       |
| <b>Total</b>         | <b>52</b>      | <b>19.2%</b>                                        | <b>25.0%</b>           | <b>28.85%</b>                                 | <b>25.0%</b>   | <b>1.9%</b>  |

#### The Purpose of District Organizational Chart by Gender

Table 4 presents the results of the purpose of district organizational chart by gender. For male, the greatest percentage (30.2%) reported levels of authority, power, and responsibility as the primary purpose of the district organizational chart, while for female the greatest percentage (44.4%) reported decision making as the primary purpose of the district organizational chart.

Table 4

*The Purpose of District Organizational Chart by Gender*

| <i>Gender</i> | <i>Total N</i> | <i>Purpose of the District Organizational Chart</i> |                        |                                               |                |              |
|---------------|----------------|-----------------------------------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|----------------|--------------|
|               |                | <i>Communication patterns</i>                       | <i>Decision making</i> | <i>Authority, power, &amp; responsibility</i> | <i>Support</i> | <i>Other</i> |
| Male          | 43             | 20.9%                                               | 20.9%                  | 30.2%                                         | 25.6%          | 2.3%         |
| Female        | 9              | 11.1%                                               | 44.4%                  | 22.2%                                         | 22.2%          | –            |
| <b>Total</b>  | <b>52</b>      | <b>19.2%</b>                                        | <b>25.0%</b>           | <b>28.9%</b>                                  | <b>25.06%</b>  | <b>1.9%</b>  |

## Discussion

That little research has been done on the actual organizational structures of school districts is a statement with which most knowledgeable people in K-12 education and in academe would disagree. Logic would dictate that the school district, as a most basic American educational institution, has been studied to the point that future study would, of necessity, need to be very specific in its nature. Remarkably, this was not what we found, and, therefore, our study looks not at the minutia, but at the large schema.

The research question for this study was, "How are the organizational structures of North Carolina school districts determined?" This study assumes the structure of a school district organization significantly affects the ultimate product of the organization – student learning. This supposition is based on the logic that the core product of any organization, whether it is automobiles, patient health, or student learning, is based in large measure on how well the organization is structured to accomplish its mission.

With this working assumption, our study focused specifically on how the decisions to employ a particular organizational structure were made. In other words, if there is a direct connection between the structure of the organization and the success of the organization in learning to produce the expected results, then the factors influencing how the decision on a particular structure was made is of critical importance in understanding how to improve the structure.

In a straightforward question, our survey asked superintendents, "Who determined the way the current organization was chosen?" Each of the 52 responding superintendents indicated that it was a decision of the superintendent. According to North Carolina school law expert, Ann McColl, North Carolina superintendents' contracts routinely give the superintendent the authority to determine the organization of the district (personal communication, October 28, 2008). If one accepts the assumption that the structure of the organization profoundly affects the ability of the organization to accomplish its core purpose, then one must ask if the placing of this decision in the hands of one person is a wise choice on the part of school boards.

The impact of the decision concerning the structure of the district is even more disquieting when looking at how the superintendents acquired the knowledge that led to their decisions to employ a superintendent-centric organizational plan. Eighty-four percent reported that what they learned in graduate school had little or no impact on their decision of organizational pattern. Almost half (47%) indicated that experience in another district had the greatest influence on their decision. While the latter response is rather as expected, that no graduate program represented by the 50 respondents had a significant impact on the choice of school district organizational plan certainly merits significant concern.

In the era of educational accountability residing at the school level, not the district level, we did not anticipate that an overwhelming majority (78.8%) of the respondents would indicate the very traditional purposes of the organizational plan as representing authority, power, decision-making or communication levels. Only a quarter of those surveyed indicated that the organizational structure showed levels of support within the district. Support for the schools to carry out the core mission is much more consistent with current accountability expectations. Perhaps this lack of district support as a



perceived purpose of the organization by superintendents points to a potential reason so many schools continue to struggle to meet accountability goals.

Not surprising was the effect of district size on the purpose of the organizational pattern. In the smaller districts, support showed up as often as any other purpose. But as the size of the district increased, levels of authority and power emerged as the primary indicated purpose. Again, this is actually counterintuitive in the school-based era of accountability, since organizations with greater numbers of levels of authority inherently lack the organizational ability to support the lower levels in accomplishment of the core mission of the organization. Yet, it is precisely the lowest level of the organization, the school, which is being held accountable.

Limitations of the study and implications for further research

It should be noted that this study was limited to school districts in North Carolina. Therefore, the results cannot be generalized to other school districts in other states. This study, however, does provide a model for similar studies in other states. It would be interesting to see if superintendents make similar organizational decisions in other states. It would also be interesting to see if our results concerning the effect of district size on the purpose of the organizational pattern are the same in other states. If there are commonalities in how districts are organized and by whom, and in the effect of the district size on the purpose of the organizational pattern, then this has a tremendous implication for the importance of the district organizational pattern on the mission of the district in this age of accountability. This would indicate the district organizational pattern might be an important factor in the successful implementation of the core mission of schools. Further studies similar to this one are needed to confirm this.

Recommendations

First, that no respondents indicated that their graduate studies had even a moderate effect on their decisions about the organization of the school district is a clarion call to North Carolina university-based superintendent preparation programs to assess the content and direction of their programs. Organizational Theory, a typical course in superintendent preparation programs, might be followed by a second advanced course in organizational structure, development, learning and improvement.

Second, school districts must assess the ability of current organizational structures to deliver the direct and uncompromising support that schools must have to meet accountability expectations. Elmore (2000) rightfully asserts that the loosely-coupled organization which was affirmed in this study by the 75% of respondents who indicated the purpose of the organizational structure met the traditional purposes of power, decision-making, and communication. School districts have many responsibilities, but the core purpose of the district organization must be to support the unit of the district being held accountable for results – the school.

Third, school boards and school board attorneys should assess whether or not the decision as to the organization of the district is a policy function, a management function, or a combination of the two. At a minimum, superintendents and boards should seriously consider the obvious Machiavellian-like decision to place this critical mission function solely in the hands of one individual. Finally, school boards must assess the impact on the mission of changing the organization of the district each time the superintendent changes rather than embracing a succession planning process that maintains a productive organizational structure.

It is incumbent upon educational leaders to understand the variables that contribute to providing quality learning experiences for students. Understanding school district organization, including deciding upon about the type of organization a district will have, is one of these variables that deserves more study. A further question for a subsequent study is "How does the organization of a school district affect student achievement?"

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