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Greg Weiss
New Summerfield ISD

Nate Templeton
Texas A&M University, Commerce

Ray Thompson
Texas A&M University, Commerce

Joshua W. Tremont
Laneville ISD

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Superintendent and School Board Relations: Impacting Achievement through Collaborative Understanding of Roles and Responsibilities

Greg Weissⁱ
New Summerfield ISD

Nate Templeton
Texas A&M University—Commerce

Ray Thompson
Texas A&M University—Commerce

Joshua W. Tremont
Laneville ISD

Introduction

One of the most important and influential persons in the governance structure of the local school district is the Superintendent of Schools. Functioning as the CEO of the district, the superintendent is responsible for a myriad of functions. Examples include daily operations inclusive of transportation and finance, curriculum and policy implementation, media relations, and empowering leaders. However, as Meador (2014) contends, a crucial role is that of board liaison. The Superintendent is responsible for keeping the board informed, making recommendations regarding district operations, and setting the board agenda. It is interesting to note that the superintendent does participate in board meetings, but in an advisory capacity. Finally, the superintendent is responsible for enacting all mandates approved by the school board.

The Texas Education Code charges school boards, as governing bodies, with overseeing the management of local school districts. While the school board's primary function is to hire and evaluate the district CEO and approving the hiring of professional personnel, ancillary responsibilities involve broad powers of oversight, such as: goal setting, setting a local tax rate, the hearing of grievances, and approving and monitoring budget expenditures.

Effective school districts are those whose school board and superintendent work together collaboratively in the best interests of stakeholders. Intentional boards network, mentor, and are servant leaders. Given the character of human nature, however, conflict is bound to occur. Therefore, to ensure that the roles of each are respected, the Texas Education

ⁱ Dr. Greg Weiss may be reached at gweiss@newsummerfieldisd.net.

Agency (TEA) describes the role of the school board as governance, while the superintendent of schools is charged with the day-to-day management of resources and personnel. Specifically, the school board and superintendent form a partnership that works together as one unit for the good of students (LeMonte, 2009).

Theoretical Framework

School transformation as reflected in the roles of the school board and of superintendent is a relevant aspect of reform (Starrat, 2001). The author further asserted that due to societal changes and cultural implications regarding academic environment, the relationship between the school board and superintendent cannot be static but rather reforming and transforming. According to Givens (2008), transformational leaders help subordinates imagine appealing future outcomes related to the organization and thereby, collaboratively affect organizational outcomes. Givens further notes that transformational leadership serves to build human capacity within an organization. The task of the educational leaders, then, is to question and critically examine leadership practices if school transformation is to be realized.

Educational Leader Transformation

Tucker (2004) noted that transformation leadership seeks to develop an emotional bond with subordinates, which serves as a source for authentic dialogue and a stimulus for productivity. This bond is achieved through empowerment of all stakeholders by attempting to influence behavior by converging moral values and higher ideals of justice and equality. Transformational leadership is more than creating a dialogue between leaders and stakeholders; it serves as motivation for all to achieve more for the expected good.

Modernism

A study of modernism revealed that it embraced the industrial management model. Codd (1989) described this era of perception as one in which the industrial model, characterized by an emphasis on efficiency, treated educators as workers rather than professionals. This model supported oppressive education that treated people as adaptable, manageable beings. Schools are not factories. Educational leadership is more than management strategies. Educational leadership must be characterized by a commitment to a set of values and principles for practice that affects change between the superintendent and the school board.

Postmodernism

Muth (2002) reported that postmodernism represents a shift of thought, in which learning is viewed as an active process of constructing knowledge rather than just an acquisition of knowledge. This shift, as Muth (2002) noted, from the assembly line to learner-centered instruction, emphasizes “interaction, collaboration, problem solving, and critical

thinking” (p. 73). As relates to the transformation of school leadership, postmodern thought presents the school board and superintendent with a dilemma: how does one function in the midst of such shifts of thought? The challenge for educators, including the school board and superintendent, is to apply scholarship in the transformation of their own practice. In a postmodern, post-formal setting, the school board and superintendent must “grapple with purpose, devoting attention to issues of human dignity, freedom, authority, and social responsibility” (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1999, p. 57). Such a perspective affords a profound influence on the thoughts and actions of school leadership (Beck, 2002).

Transformational Leadership as a Foundation

Transformational leadership serves as a proven model for affecting change in the educational setting. The transformational leader brings a powerful, confident, dynamic presence that encourages change and invigorates followers to greater accomplishments (Morano, et.al., 2005). Likewise, Steward (2006) supported transformational leadership as a means of empowerment, shared leadership and organizational learning. Given the implications of accountability policy, the engagement of transformational leadership theory allows school boards and superintendents the means to understand their respective roles in a climate of change. Essentially, mutually agreed upon goals, trust, and respect are the cornerstones for effective working relationships. Therefore, the purpose of this action research was to influence systemic reform by informing practitioners regarding approaches that lead to effective school board – superintendent relations. The discussion of literature focuses on three themes emerging from an exhaustive review of peer-reviewed scholarly journals: the changing role of today’s superintendent, factors contributing to successful school-board superintendent relations, and the causes of school board-superintendent discord.

The Changing Role of Today’s Superintendent

The superintendent of the twenty-first century is faced with greater challenges as compared to the expectations of the past (Houston, 2001). “While most education reform focuses on accountability, test scores, and standards, the superintendent’s job is actually shaped by issues on a much more macro level” (Houston 2001, p. 430). Kowalski (2013) concurred that the demands of the superintendency have become increasingly complex. Kowalski (2013) asserted that the position of superintendent has evolved into a leadership position of (a) teacher-scholar, (b) business manager, (c) democratic leader, (d) social scientist, and e) effective communicator. Houston (2001) explained that today’s superintendent must completely change their approach to the job from what was once considered a managerial position. “Superintendents of today must be prepared to master the art of connection, communication, collaboration, community building, child advocacy, and curricular choices” (Houston 2001, p. 430). Houston (2001) further suggested that superintendents of the 21st century must

- serve as a broker of services and as an ensurer of equity;
- find a way to share power and engage members of the organization and the community;
- focus on creating learning for children that is individualized and connected to personal interests; and
- Understand that learning is no longer about place, but it is now about process (pp. 420-431).

Factors Contributing to Successful School Board-Superintendent Relations

Hatrick (2010) postulated that the process for recruiting a new superintendent is one of the greatest responsibilities for a school district. Hatrick (2010) noted that school boards put a great deal of time and effort into developing a profile for the school district, listening to what the public is looking for in a school superintendent, interviewing promising candidates and selecting a candidate that they feel will be the most effective leader for their district's students, schools and community. According to Hatrick (2010), regardless if all board members agree on the selection of the superintendent, it does not guarantee a successful long-term relationship. He adds that "personalities and interpersonal relationships play a large role in the success of superintendents and school boards, especially when board members and the superintendent have differences of opinion and cannot reach consensus about the goals and direction of the school district" (Hatrick, 2010, p. 42).

Likewise, Kruse and Richard (2008) claimed that superintendents who possess leadership qualities that promote positive relationships throughout the school and community are most desired by school boards. According to Adamson (2012), "when superintendents and school boards are aligned in common values and purpose, and are engaged in strategic efforts to realize the desirable future of their districts, it leaves minimal opportunities for boardroom friction and community misunderstanding" (p. 10). Adamson (2012) further noted that it is always more difficult to challenge decisions and recommendations that are aligned with a district's values, purpose or vision for the future. "Stressing the importance of professional development ultimately can remove part of the burden from [the superintendent's] shoulders regarding [the] board's generic understanding of education issues" (Adamson 2012, p. 10).

In a related opinion, the research of Kruse and Richards (2008) agreed that continuous education is important for every member of the governance team and that professional development has always played an important role for superintendents. While administrators and staff are encouraged to attend professional development, school board members need to recognize the importance of their own need for professional development, as well (Adamson, 2010). According to McAdams (2009), school superintendents can help prevent trouble when school board turnover takes place. "Board-savvy superintendents should provide new board members with orientation and

training and help sitting board members fold them into the governance team” (McAdams, 2009, p. 6).

Research by Thompson (2007) also concluded that the relationship between school board presidents and superintendents is always changing but, professional development and board training can help build meaningful relationships and trust; thus allowing school boards and superintendents to collectively be more productive and effective. Freely and Seinfeld’s (2012) study of four retired superintendents revealed the critical importance of inspiring and building trust with each of their Boards of Education. The data from the study further revealed that they considered themselves as “teachers” to their Boards and that one aspect of this teaching was establishing guidelines for decision making and consensus building so that there were no surprises.

Moreover, Kruse and Richards (2008) explained how the experience levels of both superintendent and school board members has the potential to impact the perceptions of school board members in regards to superintendents’ leadership behaviors.

“It is not uncommon to find that the relationship between superintendents and school boards is genuinely collegial and represents a professional partnership between the operation and oversight of a school district. However, the relationship must be nurtured, not to artificially manipulate an outcome or to placate the partnership, but rather because the task of oversight and operation exceeds the individual capabilities of one or the other” (Adamson, 2012, p.10).

Furthermore, an analysis of the dynamics between school board presidents and superintendents revealed valuable insights on how to move schools forward and improve student achievement outcomes. Several key areas undergird the relationship between school leaders and the governing bodies elected to oversee the management and operations (Thompson, 2007). Considerations include history, current trends and issues, community relations and strategic planning. Eadie (2008a) noted that strong board president-superintendent partnerships have been supported by superintendents who:

- bring a positive attitude to their working relationship with the board president;
- take the trouble to get to know the board president;
- reach agreement on the basic division of labor with the board president,
- make sure the president succeeds as chair of the board; and
- helps the board president achieve his or her professional objectives (p. 52).

“Board-savvy superintendents pay close attention to learning about the board president’s passionate professional interests and the important imprint the president wants to leave, and what matters ego-wise” (Eadie, 2008a, p. 53).

Finally, Eadie (2008b) emphasized that the process by which the superintendent is evaluated is critical in building and establishing a long-term stable relationship. Eadie (2008) noted that “the most important step is implementing a well-designed and executed process for evaluating superintendent performance (p. 41).” Eadie (2008b) identified characteristics of a highly effective evaluation processes that various school boards throughout the country have implemented. Some of those characteristics included the following: (a) board members conducting an evaluation as a whole team outside of the regular board meeting time, (b) the board setting criteria for evaluating district performance and specific leadership targets, (c) having face-to-face dialogue with superintendent, and (d) going beyond the appraisal process and developing detailed plans and steps to be taken during the coming year.

Causes of School Board-Superintendent Discord

Mountford (2004) explained that when school board members misuse their position to assert control and power, it creates turmoil and conflict that hinders the district’s ability to function efficiently and effectively. She also cited “a school board member’s motivation for membership and the way the school board defines *power* as key components that can lead to “strained relationships” between school board members and superintendents” (Mountford, 2004, p. 706). Mountford (2004) went on to cite other reasons for dissent between the two school entities such as “questionable motives for school board membership and power struggles...” (p. 706).

A study by Moody (2008) surveyed all K-12 public schools superintendents in Nebraska to determine which competencies public school superintendents and school board presidents perceived most desirable for successful employment. The competencies included: “(1) public relations, (2) school finance, (3) personnel management, 4) curriculum development, (5) policy formation, (6) school construction, (7) accomplishment of school goals set by the board, 8) superintendent-board relations, and collective bargaining specific professional competencies” (p. 91). Additionally, school board presidents were asked to indicate if they had been involved in a specific incident that led to contract non-renewal, a request for the resignation of the superintendent, or to the superintendent leaving under duress. Of the 126 school board presidents that responded, 30.16% indicated that they had been involved in a situation in which the superintendent had his or her contract non-renewed, had been asked to resign, or had left the district under duress. Of the total 214 superintendents that responded, 10.75% indicated that they had been in a situation in which they had left the school district superintendency under less amicable circumstances. Out of the nine competencies, the survey revealed that 76.32 % of board presidents and 82.61% school superintendent cited superintendent-board relations most frequently as the cause for the superintendent leaving the district (Moody, 2008).

Mountford (2004) described the relationship that often exists between the superintendent and the school board as one of tension and conflict. Likewise, Kowalski (2013) asserted

that when a serious issue or problem arises, philosophical differences between the superintendent and school board surface creating an uncomfortable experience that can damage their working relationship. Interestingly, Fusarelli (2006) stated when superintendents fail to see the importance of evaluating and monitoring the culture of the organization and community, it severely impedes their ability to lead and build relationships with stakeholders. Likewise, Kruse and Richards (2008) explained that governance functions of school boards include protecting the public's interest through selecting a superintendent, setting policies that ensure a quality education, evaluating district performance goals and fiscal responsibility. Findings in this same study concluded, "Inexperienced board members often mistake governance for close supervision and end up meddling in administrative affairs" (p. 14). In Parker's study (1996), almost 20% of superintendents who left their positions opted for jobs other than those of superintendents. In that same study, "overall, respondents ranked 'dissension of the board' third out of 22 items in order of strong importance for not continuing as superintendent in that district" (p. 72). According to Danzberger (1994), "the blurring roles of the role of the superintendent and board made it difficult to define locus of accountability for policy and administration and intensified the pressures that constituents exert on members of the board to become little more than purveyors of constituent services" (p. 75).

Research by Dawson and Quinn (2000) explained how the relationship between school boards and the superintendents they choose to employ could deteriorate rapidly. Moreover, the problem that created bad relationships between school boards and superintendents is explained to be something other than what most people perceive them to be. The issue is a governance process that causes dis-clarity (Dawson & Quinn, 2000). Specifically, role confusion in the governance process created a level of dysfunction that prevented the board and superintendent from being able to properly make the decisions necessary for moving the school forward.

Implications for Professional Practice

The findings of this action research study provide meaningful implications for superintendents and members of school boards. To embrace the concept of partnership between the superintendent and the board, a solid working relationship is most critical (Larsin & Radar, 2006). Three implications of this study emerge that are noteworthy.

First, the role of the superintendent is changing with a growing influence at a macro level (Houston, 2001). Kowalski (2013) noted that the complexity of the superintendent's duties results in diverse leadership skills that required a mastery of communication, collaboration, and consensus building. Consequently, Houston (2001) stated a school board must be cognizant of a superintendent's ability to be a teacher-scholar, business manager, democratic leader, social and cultural scientist, and technologically adept and skillful.

Second, school board-superintendent discord occurs when there is misuse of position. When board members assert control and power, an atmosphere of turmoil and conflict may occur, impeding the efficiency and effectiveness of the superintendent (Larson & Radar, 2006). Additionally, board misuse of power is a key component that leads to strained relationships (Mountford, 2004). Namit (2008) advanced the notion that a school board that conducts annual self-assessment helps to build a stronger team and relationship with the superintendent.

The solution for a tense and strained relationship suggests the need for professional development. Research underscores the necessity of professional development for the superintendent and continuous education of the board as a means to enhance the governance team (Namit, 2008). A fruitful product of this endeavor is the establishment of a long-term stable relationship (Eadie, 2008). Otherwise, role confusion in the governance process creates a level of dysfunction.

Third, the impact that the community has on the superintendent-school board working relationship is dynamic and fluid. As school districts experience rapid population growth with diverse populations, the challenge for the superintendent is to provide instructional leadership focused on student success, especially in the accountability systems. Kruse and Richard (2008) asserted that a superintendent and board are to promote positive relationships throughout the school and community. A strong board-superintendent relationship values and promotes community history and multiculturalism, while advancing educational trends and issues in a learning environment (LaMonte, 2009).

Additionally, providing policies and practices that would encourage community involvement and input at the school board level of operation would help to eliminate areas of confusion, undue pressures, and stress. The pressures and stress reflect themselves in personal agendas. The elimination of the confusion and lack of information can be achieved through training seminars and workshops specifically tailored toward communication and involvement among the school board-superintendent team and the community (Adamson, 2012).

Fourth, the school board, along with the superintendent, has the enormous task of providing a quality education for our children. Student achievement outcomes have become a priority for the school board and superintendent (Eadie, 2008). Namit (2008) advanced the view that embracing an integrated board self-assessment and superintendent evaluation process ensured that student achievement remained a priority. Two essential components of this concept included improving governance and the defining and achievement of mutually agreed upon goals.

While the relationship between the school board and superintendent is sometimes described as strained and tumultuous, this critical relationship can be the driving force of a school district. An effective school board and superintendent relationship is accomplished through continuous training, involvement of community stakeholders, a

commitment to self-assessment of goals and standards, and a strong focus on student learning.

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