

2014

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### Recommended Citation

Nino, Juan M.; Boone, Mike; Aguilar, Israel; and Edwards, Dessynie (2014) "Superintendents and Professional Development: Voices from the Field," *School Leadership Review*. Vol. 9 : Iss. 2 , Article 6. Available at: <https://scholarworks.sfasu.edu/slr/vol9/iss2/6>

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## ***Superintendents and Professional Development: Voices from the Field***

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The primary task of the educational leader is to assure high quality learning environments for all students. Research (Gordon, 2004; Sparks, 2007) supports the proposition that effective professional development contributes to instructional improvement by building educator capacity. Much of the research on professional development focuses in principal leadership in improving instruction (Blasé & Blasé, 2004). But district level administrators, especially the superintendent of schools, also have a role to play in school improvement. Standards for the preparation of school leaders specify competencies for superintendents that include the design and implementation of professional development programs based on sound research, best practices, district-and school-level data, and other contextual information (National Policy Board, 2002). The National Staff Development Council's Standards (2001) also describe a comprehensive set of activities to improve student learning that apply to both campus and district level personnel. But while the research on the instructional leadership role of principals is extensive, comparatively little is said about how superintendents meet their own responsibilities in this area (Dufour, 2000; Hirsch, 2009; Firestone, Manquin, & Martinez, 2005).

This paper focuses on understanding the role of school district leadership, in particular that of the superintendent, in providing quality professional development to improve instruction for all students. We examined superintendent behaviors in six areas: demonstrating leadership for professional development; providing adequate resources for professional development activities; using data to determine professional development priorities; using research to make decisions about the

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content, design, and delivery of professional development; establishing professional learning communities for all adult learners that are aligned with district goals; and enhancing equity for all students through professional development. These themes were developed using the NSDC's Standards for Professional Development (2001).

## **Conceptual Framework**

### *District Level Leadership*

Much of the existing literature on professional development has focused on the centrality of campus-based educators, especially principals, to the learning of students. As Hord (1993) notes, "The leadership of the principal has been consistently cited as the most significant factor in the success of campus change efforts" (p. 16). The instructional responsibilities of the superintendent have traditionally been conceived as fundamentally different in nature from those of the principal, although the instructional leadership responsibilities of the superintendent are expanding (Bjork, 1993; Kowalski, 2013). For example, Herman (1990) identified five instructional roles for the superintendent of schools. These included the appropriate allocation of instructional personnel, organization of the instructional program, support of the instructional program, the development of instructional personnel, and planning for the instructional program. Bredeson (1996) assigned four instructional roles to the superintendent. These included instructional visionary, instructional collaborator, instructional supporter, and instructional delegator. Finally, Petersen (1999) suggests that district leaders contribute to instructional leadership as articulators of an instructional vision, as creators of organizational structures that support instruction, as assessor and evaluator of personnel and instructional programs, and as organizational adapters. Thus superintendents and other district leaders are cast in important, but fundamentally supportive roles, to principals and teachers working to improve instruction for all students.

While the idea that superintendents and other school district-level administrators have little direct impact on student achievement was once generally accepted (Bennett, Finn, & Crib, 1999; Walker, 2007), more recent work by Marzano and Waters (2009), Hightower, Knapp, Marsh, and McLaughlin (2002), and McLaughlin and Talbert (2002) support an active role for district leadership in raising student achievement. Marzano and Waters (2009) set out to answer two questions about district level leadership and student achievement: what is the strength of that relationship; and what specific district-level leadership behaviors are linked to student achievement? Their meta-analysis of existing research discovered a statistically positive relationship between district leadership and student achievement and isolated five district leadership responsibilities that are positively correlated to student achievement. These district leadership responsibilities

include: ensuring collaborative goal setting that includes all relevant stakeholders, especially principals, teachers, parents, and board members; establishing non-negotiable goals in the areas of student achievement and instruction for which all staff members are held responsible; creating board alignment with and support of district achievement and instructional goals to ensure that these goals remain the district's top priority; monitoring achievement and instructional goals to be certain that the goals remain the driving force behind district actions; and allocating necessary resources of time, money, personnel, and materials to support achievement and instruction goals. Marzano and Waters caution that exercising district level leadership responsibilities does not mean:

that the district establishes a single instructional model that all teachers must employ....[I]t does mean that the district adopts a broad but common framework for classroom instructional design and planning that guarantees the consistent use of research-based instructional strategies in each school (7).

Implementing these district leadership responsibilities creates a system of *defined autonomy*, which means that the superintendent expects principals and all district leaders to lead "within the boundaries defined by the district goals" (Marzano & Waters, 2009, 8).

McLaughlin and Talbert (2002) working with school districts in the San Francisco Bay area and the San Diego City School District discovered a strong connection between the behaviors of district level leaders and changes in school level culture that lead to improved student achievement. McLaughlin and Talbert (2002) refer to the districts where district level leadership was able to impact student achievement as "Reforming Districts."

The success of reforming districts demonstrates that school district leadership has an active role to play in school improvement. McLaughlin and Talbert (2002) note that school districts in which district level leaders were successful in raising student achievement shared several distinctive characteristics. These include:

- Identifying themselves as the focus of change and in possession of a clear theory of change for the district.
- Establishing clear expectations for central office-school relations and taking a leadership role in establishing norms of reform across the district.
- Engaging people from all levels of the district to create reform goals and outcomes, to share knowledge of successful practice, and to design change strategies.
- Cultivating strong norms of inquiry among central office staff.
- Maintaining a clear, unitary focus on teaching and learning.
- Responding affirmatively to campus identified student needs.

While not all districts share these specific characteristics, reforming districts do. “Reforming districts invest heavily in school reform, and do so more successfully than most districts, by leading, supporting, and leveraging reform in the central office” (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2002, p. 184). While all district-level leaders may potentially impact student achievement, it is the superintendent of schools who is in the position to exercise the most direct impact on the quality of teaching and learning in the district. One of the ways superintendents exercise leadership to improve learning is by enhancing the capacities of teachers to deliver the best in instruction for all students through high quality professional development.

### *Professional Development*

Professional development is a critical component of a comprehensive school district change effort. But to be effective professional development must be delivered in a coherent manner (Hawley & Valli, 1999). Coherent professional development is characterized by a consistency of focus, devotion of sufficient time to relevant content areas, and modeling the instructional approaches that teachers are expected to utilize with students. Childress et al. (2007) underscore the need for coherence in professional development. Uncoordinated and fragmented professional development efforts disconnect from district instructional goals and ultimately become irrelevant to the work that teachers do daily with students. As a consequence, teachers divorce themselves from district reform strategies and retreat to the security of their classrooms, where they revert to working in isolation. The potential impact of the district reform effort is lost and the knowledge and skills teachers might contribute to the correction of performance problems are wasted. District level leaders are responsible for organizing and monitoring professional development in ways that support teachers as they acquire new instructional skills and avoid the fragmentation that often proves fatal to district wide improvement efforts.

Although there are a variety of definitions of “high quality” professional development and the ways in which it differs from conventional, less effective programs (Knapp, 2003), many scholars conclude that professional development that builds teacher capacity to deliver powerful instruction should:

- Concentrate on classroom teaching that emphasizes rigorous learning standards and evidence of student learning to standard
- Focus on developing teacher’s pedagogical content knowledge
- Model preferred instructional practices both in classrooms and in adult learning situations
- Locate professional learning in collaborative, collegial, and school-based learning environments

- Offer rigorous and cumulative opportunities for professional learning over time
- Align with district reform initiatives (Knapp, 2003, pp. 119-120).

### *Institutional Coherence*

Institutional coherence refers to the ways in which all parts of an organization work together to achieve organizational goals (Childress et. al., p. 2007). Within the context of school reform, institutional coherence describes how school districts organize themselves to maximize teaching and learning for all students. Faced with the need to improve teaching and learning, the district's role is to become "an architect of improvement" (Childress et. al., 2007, 11) that develops the overall improvement strategy and then manages the entire school organization in a manner that strengthens and supports the overall reform strategy. When districts fail to act coherently, reform efforts fail.

Unfortunately, district leadership does not always act in a coherent manner. District leaders may be capable of recognizing learning problems when they arise but conceptualize them as separate issues to be dealt with individually rather than addressed systemically. Instead of a fragmented approach to problems of student achievement, district leaders must "manage their organizations as integrated systems in which challenges are independent parts of a whole that is directly related to the work of teachers and students in classrooms" (Childress et. al., 2007, p. 12).

A coherent approach to professional development would address fewer areas, but in more depth and with appropriate follow up (Firestone, Mangin, Martinez, & Polovsky, 2005). A coherent professional development approach consists of three elements. These are: consistency of focus that supports an in-depth knowledge of new content and pedagogical learning; a distribution of learning time that introduces teachers to new materials and permits sufficient opportunities for teachers to try out new ideas and practices and refine them; and incorporating learning activities that model the new approaches teachers are expected to use. This level of coherence in professional development is often recommended but rarely implemented (Firestone et. al., 2005; Hawley & Valli, 1999).

### **The Study**

This qualitative work examines the leadership behavior of the superintendent in providing quality professional development to improve student achievement in the school district. Research (Marzano & Waters, 2009; Childress et. al., 2007; Firestone, et.al., 2005; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2002) has established that superintendents have specific tasks to perform as instructional leaders and initiators of school reform. According to McLaughlin & Talbert (2002), these tasks include keeping a clear focus

on teaching and learning across the district, lending instructional support to schools and teachers as they work to improve student achievement, and utilizing data based accountability measures for all stakeholders. As such, high quality professional development is an important pathway to accomplishing these tasks, and the superintendent is at the helm of such practice. Therefore, for this study a team of four researchers employed purposeful sampling to elicit the perspective of five Central Texas superintendents who demonstrated a level of degree in professional development.

### *Participants*

Participants in the study were the superintendents of five public school districts in Central Texas. These districts included a small rural school district enrolling fewer than 1,000 students, a small city school district, a medium-sized school district located in a university community, and two suburban school districts enrolling more than 25,000 students each. The districts selected were typical of the size and demographic composition of school districts in central Texas. All participants held a terminal degree with more than 5 years of experience in the superintendency.

### *Data sources*

Data for the study were gathered through interviews with the superintendents of each district. The participants consisted of three males and two females. Two of those interviewed were Hispanic. The interviews explored the areas of focus for the study (demonstrating leadership, providing adequate resources, using data to establish priorities, using research to make decisions, collaborating with others, and ensuring equity for all students).

The location of all interviews was the office of the superintendent. During the interview, which was very structured, the team only asked questions that solicited facts. We listened carefully and observed the participant's body language while taking notes. By taking notes, we were able to capture significant aspects of the superintendent's life and career that are important to the topic of this study. Additionally, we asked participants to clarify and give examples of their data responses.

After we completed all interviews, which were audio-taped, we transcribed the interviews verbatim. For member checking purposes, interview transcripts were emailed to participants, who then verified that the information was correct. Transcripts were analyzed by the researchers with the goal of identifying patterns, themes, and concepts. Notes were made of the themes that were relevant to answering the research questions and supported the arguments with powerful quotations and examples from the data. We also looked for how participants'

description of her/his experiences illustrated and extended broader theories, as well as how their descriptions of their experiences extend previous research.

Through qualitative inquiry, we entered the world of our participants to get to know them and earn their trust. Aside from “in-depth interviewing” with the participant, we kept a record of what we heard and observed.

Archival data from each district was also examined. These included each district’s annual budget, the district mission statement, district goals and objectives, district improvement plans, and other documents relevant to professional development such as professional development activity schedules. Together the interviews and document helped to construct an understanding of how each superintendent performed his or her role as a leader of professional development for the school district.

### *Analysis*

Before analyzing and interpreting the data, the researchers logged essential information and demographic characteristics for all participants to facilitate the management process, for Saldana (2009) suggests that “good qualitative data management provides essential participant information and contexts for analysis and interpretation” (p.56). For each superintendent’s reference, we included a pseudonym, age, gender, ethnicity, health, time frame of interactions, and district name.

Once demographics were coded and after we collected sufficient data during the initial stage, the researchers immediately started to do preliminary coding to determine if the techniques were guiding the study in the correct direction. Then we used the transcript and field notes to create a three column spreadsheet. In this file, the researchers filled the first column with raw data or excerpts from the transcript and field notes. In the second column, we developed a set of preliminary codes that highlighted some ideas from the raw data. In the third column, the researchers developed the final codes to support a strong overarching idea prevalent in the raw data. After coding data from interviews, observations, and district artifacts, the researchers created categories aligned with the purpose of the study.

### **Results**

The research team examined the transcripts of interviews with five superintendents of public school districts in central Texas for the presence of six themes associated with leadership in professional development. These themes were: demonstrating leadership, providing adequate resources, using data to determine priorities, using research to make decisions about instruction, collaborating with others, and



ensuring equity for all students. A discussion of the results of the study begins below.

### *Demonstrating leadership*

Superintendents who demonstrate leadership in professional development establish policies and organizational structures that support continuous learning for all staff members. They ensure that resources of time, money, and personnel needed for professional development are provided and match district-wide goals for improving teaching and learning. They continuously evaluate professional development's effectiveness in achieving student learning goals and then make sure that employees' annual and daily work schedules provide adequate time for professional learning at the campus and district levels.

The superintendent of a medium sized district described her leadership role this way:

The big focus is building the team, the overall team that looks for the good of the entire district not just their campus. Sometimes I think of myself as an orchestra conductor. You know you have a lot of people with a lot of skills, I don't know how to play this instrument, but my job is to bring it all together so its gets to where it needs to go.

The superintendent of a heavily minority suburban school district addressed the need for leaders to be courageous in confronting issues of student achievement:

You have to be to a courageous leader, you have to make tough decisions and you have to always put students first. It takes a courageous leader to put students first. Being a courageous leader, you are always thinking about what you are doing to enhance the kids' learning throughout your school or throughout your classroom

### *Providing adequate resources*

District resources committed to professional development should be considered as a long-term investment in professional learning for teachers that will pay off in improved student learning in the future. As an investment, resources for professional development should be as protected as possible from the vagaries of district financial circumstances. District resources may be utilized for several professional learning purposes, which include, funding trainers, providing full-and part-time coaches for teachers and principals, supporting external consultants and facilitators who assist school staff in planning and evaluating professional development needs, providing stipends for teacher leaders who serve as mentors to other staff, and funding substitutes for teachers while they participate in professional learning opportunities.

Resources need to be allocated according to student needs, but are frequently inadequate. One superintendent described the importance of matching resources with validated student needs:

We try to put enough funding in our staff development to meet the needs of the kids. That's one area that we try not to cut out. But we try to be real selective in determining staff development; we don't want [just] any staff development. We try to be very prescriptive in our staff development and...we put sufficient funds and provide outside resources. So we let our staff development drive our budget not our budget drive our staff development.

Districts also recognize that resources involve more than dollars. Time is an important resource. The superintendent of a small rural school district remarked that her district provided extra days at the beginning of the year for professional learning and awarded teachers compensatory time for participating in professional development. The NSDC recommends that at least 10% of district budgets and 25% of teacher time be devoted to professional development (National Staff Development Standards, 2001) but none of the districts studied could match those expectations.

#### *Using data to set priorities*

Effective professional development derives from a careful analysis of student learning data from a variety of sources to determine priorities in professional learning. Important sources of data on professional learning needs include, among other things, standard and criterion referenced tests, teacher-made tests, student work samples, and classroom assignments. Other useful sources include grade-level retention rates, high school completion rates, enrollment trends, and changing demographic patterns. Finally, data from classroom observations and annual teacher appraisals can provide important information in making decisions about adult learning needs. Schools exist in a data-rich environment that provides critical information on professional development needs.

Superintendents rely on data to design professional learning activities that meet documented student needs. One superintendent responded:

I am always looking at data. Everything we do has got to be data driven. It can't be what I think, what someone else thinks or my opinion or someone else's opinion; it has got to be what the data dictates; and that drives what our decisions are everyday.

Sources of data for priority setting include results of state accountability examinations, district benchmark tests, and campus and district improvement plans. Several of the districts in the study utilized data management systems such as Eduphoria and INOVA to extract additional details from existing data sets to assist them in setting priorities for professional development.

### *Using research to make decisions about instruction*

It is important that educators become knowledgeable about the wealth of research on student learning and use it appropriately in designing professional development activities. That can be a challenging task because the available research work may vary widely in the rigor of the research methodology employed, the validity of the results obtained, and relevancy to practitioners (Fusarelli, 2008; Schaps, 2008). Unfortunately, the uneven nature of the available research makes administrators and teachers cautious about their reliance on it when undertaking a school improvement initiative. A more productive approach is for educators to equip themselves to make informed judgment about the rigor of research methods when undertaking school reform, utilizing only those practices and programs whose claims are based on sound research methodology and are relevant to district needs. This is a time consuming and painstaking process. But the impact on student learning of solid research-based practices more than justify the effort.

None of the districts in the study appeared to rely on published research from outside sources to make decisions about instruction. Rather, districts tended to rely on in-district resources or curriculum development programs provided by external sources such as a regional educational service center, university faculty, or independent consultants. One of the superintendents reflected this reliance on known sources:

We feel like we have sufficient resources in our district plus our staff members are beginning to read more books and do more research on different things to enhance their learning and skills in this district.

Familiar sources, no matter how limited, are preferred to design and deliver professional development activities. Why educational research plays so limited a role in decision-making about instruction is worth further exploration.

### *Collaborating with others*

Some of the most important professional learning in school districts and schools occurs within the context of a collaborative group. Collaborative work arrangements can provide the interactions that deepen learning and contribute to the creative solution of seemingly intractable problems of teaching and learning. But the

knowledge and skills required to work effectively in a group setting tend to be undervalued and are not often featured in professional preparation programs. Equipping educators with the knowledge and skills needed to work collaboratively is an important aim of professional development. Collaboration among educators at all levels is also a key component in designing professional development activities. Collaborative analysis of student work and other sources of achievement-oriented data is an important consideration in determining the content and structure of school-based professional development.

Some level of collaboration on setting professional development priorities occurs in the districts examined. In the smaller districts, collaboration usually involved the superintendent, principals, and instructional support staff. The superintendent of the smallest district in the study reported “I [meet] with the three principals and our elementary assistant principal who is also a half-time curriculum coordinator” to assess district professional development needs. A further level of collaboration occurs between principals and teachers on individual campuses. “The real work...is done [by] the principal and teachers.” In this instance, district size facilitates the ease of communication between superintendent, principals, and school staff. Superintendents do value collaboration with others. One superintendent summarized the importance of collaboration this way: “...the best ideas don’t come from my brain. They come from other people I work with and I need to be listening to folks to know what is happening out there.” Collaboration with others in determining professional development goals and activities was a constant across all five school districts.

### *Ensuring equity for all students*

Equity is a multifaceted concept. It includes an understanding and appreciation for all students; the provision of a safe, orderly, and supportive learning environment for all students; and holding high expectations for the academic performance of all students. Equity is an important goal for the professional learning of educators. It is particularly important for educators who are engaged with students from different backgrounds than their own, or who work with students of color or from families of poverty. High quality staff development prepares educators to vary instruction based on individual differences and to understand their own attitudes toward racial, class, cultural, and linguistic differences.

While the superintendents in the study expressed concerns about issues of equity, most addressed that concern in terms of eliminating test score gaps between groups of students. One superintendent noted that in her small district “we have closed a lot of gaps.” The enrollment of this particular district is two-thirds Hispanic and nearly seventy percent economically disadvantaged. Another superintendent noted that striving for equity was often controversial: “You might have to spend more time

with [some students] to get them where other students are. That is hard for some parent to understand, why are you spending all your efforts with that child instead of my child?" Teachers also find this situation hard to understand, a situation that can be addressed through professional learning.

## **Discussion**

The information gathered in this study suggests that when it comes providing professional development to enhance teacher capacity to improve learning for all students, superintendents with whom we spoke are far from remote figures with only indirect ability to influence learning outcomes. Although active in different ways, the superintendents demonstrated leadership for professional development through collaboration with others, through use of data based decision making, and through the allocation of resources for instructional improvement. Superintendents in this study were active proponents of professional development to improve instruction in their own districts. This work underscores the importance of the superintendent as an influential actor in the school improvement process who has the authority to deploy the resources needed to move schools forward and who uses professional development to build instructional capacity in teachers and principals. Superintendents can and do act to bring about significant change in instruction and learning

## *Implications*

Based on a literature review on the role of the superintendent, there is an exhaustive listing of responsibilities, behaviors, and traits superintendents should possess. The data from this study suggests that school superintendents are not removed figureheads even though they are indirectly involved in the allocation of resources. Instead, the superintendents in this study demonstrated to be active proponents of school improvement by building collaboration amongst professionals and their district. They all used collective leadership to build collaboration, used data to plan instructional programs, and valued good communication to foster relationships that influences school improvement. As such, superintendent leadership is essential to support instructional programs that will properly serve all students equitably.

For aspiring superintendents, we believe the results of this study suggest that superintendents *can* promote school improvement in their districts *if* he/she supports a leadership style of collaboration, communication, and use of data to determine instructional programs as a form of professional development. Further, this study has implications for practice as it indicates that a superintendent does not need to explicitly state she/he is about facilitating school improvement, nor have even a department for school improvement to have an impact. These are promising and important findings with

implications for superintendents who seek to facilitate school improvement in a time of high stakes testing and accountability.

Furthermore, this study has merit and relevancy that helps contribute to the literature on the superintendency. People understand superintendent's interactions that facilitate school improvement. According to Schmoker (2006), the superintendent must be active in working with building administrators in improving instruction. Data from this study helps support the notion that the superintendent should focus district efforts on team based instructional improvement (Schlechty, 2002), since the single most important task is to become the instructional leader of the school district (Kowalski, 2013) where he models and exemplifies the mission and vision of the schools s/he serves.

## Conclusion

This qualitative study serves as a way to better understand the role of the superintendents as a professional developer in Texas school districts. The data presented offers a new perspective on how superintendents' interactions have in creating and sustaining school improvement. As schools and communities are held more accountable, superintendents' interactions will continue to be under scrutiny; however, this research highlights the collaborative culture of five Texas superintendents that is worth learning about.

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