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Recommended Citation

Cravens, X., Liu, Y., & Grogan, M. (2012). Understanding the Chinese superintendency in the context of quality-oriented education reform. *Comparative Education Review*, 56(2): 270-299. doi: 10.1086/661771

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This article was originally published in *Comparative Education Review*, volume 56, issue 2, in 2012.

[DOI:10.1086/661771](https://doi.org/10.1086/661771)

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Understanding the Chinese Superintendency in the Context of Quality-Oriented Education

XIU CHEN CRAVENS, YARONG LIU, AND MARGARET GROGAN

The implementation of national educational reform in China calls for newer and stronger school administration. Recognizing the need to establish a knowledge base for leadership development, we employ a set of existing US professional standards for educational leaders as a frame of reference to unpack the complex role of Chinese superintendents. Using data collected from two surveys administered to more than 200 Chinese superintendents in 2007, we find that many indicators of leadership considered essential in the United States are also viewed as necessary for effective superintendency in China. Feedback from the superintendents also points out gaps between what is perceived as important and what is in practice. This article contributes to the efforts of building meaningful global dialogues among researchers and practitioners on developing a new generation of education administrators.

China has made strides toward a modern educational system, now providing nine years of basic education to up to 97 percent of school-age children (for a total of about 180 million) and dramatically expanding the number of students in higher education to more than 21 percent of high school graduates (NCEDR 2007). The success in providing access to education has accentuated the need to address educational quality and equity concerns nationwide (Chu 2008; Gu 2010). China's education system is standing at a transformational crossroad both in terms of school management and the core technology of schooling. The growing economy and increasingly diversified society demand graduates who are well-rounded citizens equipped with moral values and creative minds. Meanwhile, employers, parents, and educators are raising serious concerns over the consequences of a tightly controlled and test-based education system that only prepares students to be proficient in exams (Zhou 2004; Gu 2010).

Quality-Oriented Education—*su zhi jiao yu* 素质教育—started as a blueprint promoting holistic student development both academically and socially in the 1980s and gathered more momentum in the 1990s (State Council 1993,

Received February 12, 2010; revised January 21, 2011, and May 16, 2011; accepted June 29, 2011; electronically published February 28, 2012

Comparative Education Review, vol. 56, no. 2.

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0010-4086/2011/5602-0004\$10.00

1999; Gu 2010).¹ Quality-Oriented Education became the hallmark of the nationwide educational reform in 1999 and was fully enacted in 2001 (State Council 1999, 2001a, 2001b). The concept of education aiming for well-rounded quality can be traced back to the Confucian philosophy of education as being for the cultivation of the whole child. This includes moral values, physical and mental health, and intellectual development (Wong 1998).

Quality-Oriented Education mandates reform that involves virtually every step of the current educational process and impacts every level of the nation's educational system. Its new mission greatly expands the purpose of education. It also calls for local control in financial management, curriculum planning, teacher training, and community building (State Council 1999; NCEDR 2007). Most importantly, it calls for student-centered learning outcomes (Chu 2003; Gu 2010). These mandates present both opportunities and challenges to the educational administrators in China today, especially those at the system level overseeing local schools. In this article, we focus on the role of the superintendent—*jiao yu ju zhang* 教育局长—the director of the local educational system that is at the center of a largely centralized governance structure.

The implementation of this nationwide reform calls for leaders with suitable dispositions, knowledge, and skills for effective administration. Selection, preparation, and development are thus essential to achieving the goals of Quality-Oriented Education (Cong et al. 2007; Liu et al. 2007). There is a convergence of strong demands for newer and stronger leadership competencies in China today: for policy makers stressing reform implementation, it is necessary to rely on local administrators who are responsive to societal changes; for the superintendents on the front line, external accountability demands professional capability and credibility (Chu 2003; Li 2007).

Existing school leadership literature from the United States recognizes the importance of identifying major functions and core competencies for system-level administrators.² This literature includes different views on how capacity building may be accomplished. Proponents of establishing high degrees of professionalism for the superintendency (Hoyle et al. 2005; Goldring et al. 2009) emphasize the need for standards to guide and to design new training and development programs. Critics, however, consider professional standards for school leaders as “politically repressive” (English 2000, 159) and at risk of ignoring the “interiority in leadership development” (161) by imposing external standardization on individual traits and uniqueness.

Just as there are debates over leadership standards in the United States, there also are discussions about professional development that is being introduced to China (Zhe 2006; Zhe and Li 2006). Increasingly, government

¹ Though the officially coined English translation for *su zhi jiao yu* is “quality-oriented education,” it may be better interpreted as “well-rounded education.”

² Glass et al. (2000); DiPaola and Stronge (2002); Grogan and Andrews (2002); Sharp, Malone, and Walter (2003).

and government-authorized university entities that conduct training for principals and superintendents are seeking international perspectives. Professional development practices in the United States, the United Kingdom, and other developed nations have attracted Chinese reformers (Chu 2003; Liu et al. 2007). Thus far, research evidence on the viability of transnational learning in educational leadership has been limited. Clearly, there are significant differences in the roles and the contexts of superintendency in China, the United States, and elsewhere. The notion of leadership is immensely complex in any setting. Capturing leadership in a satisfactory and easily measurable form, therefore, is not only challenging but difficult to validate (Rainey and Steinbauer 1999).

In this article, we posit that capacity building for the Chinese superintendency must begin with an in-depth understanding of the leadership dimensions of the position. We report on our study of the Chinese superintendency in the context of contemporary reform. We employ a set of US professional standards as a frame of reference to unpack the complex role of the Chinese superintendents and to test for the possibility of transnational borrowing and learning in educational leadership. Our investigation focuses on three questions:

1. What is the occupational profile of school superintendents within the Chinese political and organizational structure in terms of qualification, responsibility, and accountability?
2. What are the educational leadership dimensions of the Chinese superintendency?
3. Are professional standards for superintendency generated in the United States seen by Chinese leaders to be relevant to their own current practices and the new priorities of the Quality-Oriented Education reform?

The article is organized as follows. We first provide a review of the historical background of the Chinese superintendency, the reform mandates presented by the Quality-Oriented Education format, and the interest in establishing a knowledge base for educational leadership leveraging transnational learning. We then briefly introduce the *Professional Standards for the Superintendency* by the American Association of School Administrators (AASA 1993). We next describe the research design, analytic methods, and data for the study. Subsequently, we present our findings based on the research questions and discuss the applicability of the AASA standards and the views of them by Chinese superintendents. Finally, we discuss the implications and future research ideas.

Professional Development for the Chinese Superintendency

The Chinese educational system is a major branch of the central government. Its division of administrative authorities largely parallels the overall governance structure. Three features in China's administrative structure dis-

UNDERSTANDING THE CHINESE SUPERINTENDENCY

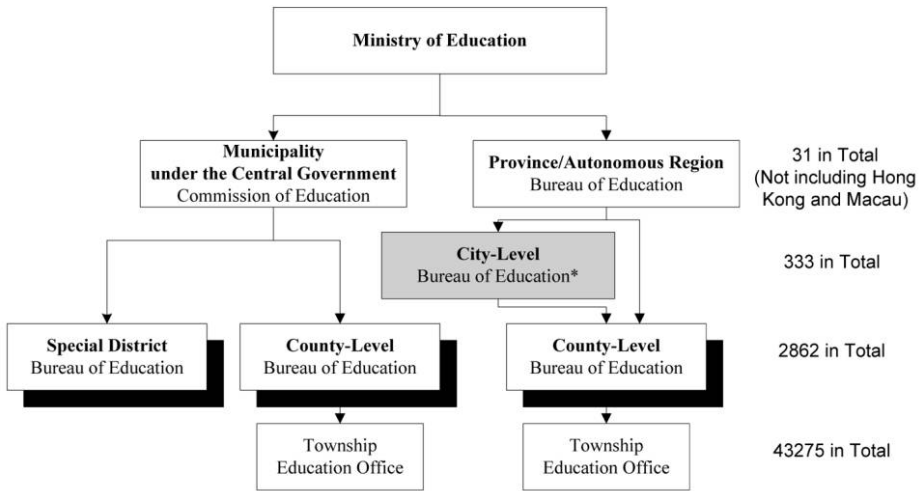


FIG. 1.—Administrative structure of the Chinese education system. Source.—Liu et al. 2007

tinguish the role of its superintendents from their counterparts in the United States and other largely decentralized education systems. First, the function of educational administration exists within the centralized government configuration. The local school system is managed as one of the branches of the local government. Decision making is top-down. There are no school boards. Second, educational administrators—superintendents and principals—are rank-and-file civil-service governmental officials. Third, the fiscal and personnel functions of the school system are controlled by other branches of local government. For example, to obtain permission and allocation for school personnel and building operations, the bureau of education has to work with their counterparts in human resources and finance bureaus.

There are about four levels of hierarchical administrative authority (see fig. 1). At the highest level, the Ministry of Education is the central government's chief branch that sets educational policies and strategic goals for formal schooling. At the next level are the bureaus of education for 24 provinces, five autonomous regions, and four metropolitan municipalities directly under the central government.³ At the highest level, bureaus of education are to interpret and enact Ministry of Education policies and allocate financial resources. Further down the hierarchy are the local bureaus of education that are responsible for providing basic and secondary public ed-

³ Since 1999, Hong Kong and Macao became two special districts of China. They are not included in this article due to the distinctive nature of their education systems.

ucation at the county or city level (shadowed in fig. 1).⁴ There were 2,862 such county bureaus and 333 city bureaus as of 2007 (Liu et al. 2007). The director of the county education bureau—*jiao yu ju zhang* 教育局长—is the superintendent of the local education system and oversees the township education offices within the jurisdiction.

These structural characteristics set parameters around the superintendent positions in terms of qualification, selection, career path, authority, and responsibility (Li 2007; Liu et al. 2007), which may have significant ramifications for leadership preparation and development.

New Challenges to the Chinese Superintendency

The Chinese characters for the term “leader”—*ling dao* 领导—contains both leading and guiding. Education in Mainland China, however, has been regarded largely as a political and ideological apparatus, offering limited autonomy for leaders, especially prior to the political and economic reform period that started in 1978 (Chu 2003, 2007; Gu 2010). Chinese superintendents are appointed by municipal governments. Their responsibilities, as well as their evaluations for possible promotion, are based on rules that apply generally to other government officials. Stipulations of government personnel policies clearly indicated that the superintendents’ main responsibility was to follow the instruction of the provincial and regional government offices, which received their guidelines from the central government in Beijing (State Council 2002). Effectiveness in managing the school and ensuring education quality were vague concepts, while loyalty in implementing government and party policies was the primary area of concern (Huang 2004).

The year of 1978 marked the beginning of the “Thirty-Year Reform Period” (NCEDR 2007; Chu 2008) signified by the restoration of the national examination for those seeking postsecondary education. In the decades that followed, access to higher levels of schooling was purportedly based on merit, mainly on students’ performance in standards-based examinations. Meanwhile, government spending on education was persistently low, both in terms of national-effort and fiscal-effort indicators (Tsang 2002). Economic reform policies since 1978 have also contributed to substantial and ever-widening economic disparities across areas and regions (Tsang 1994). With universal 9-year compulsory education largely accomplished in most areas in China (NCEDR 2007), the focus of educational policy started to shift toward building social cohesion and long-term societal stability. Improving education while balancing efficiency with equity became part of the Quality-Oriented Education reform (State Council 1999, 2001a, 2001b). To implement the new policy imperatives, the central government called for systemwide curriculum reform and site-based management (Chu 2007; NCEDR 2007).

⁴ Some counties are still under the city-level bureaus of education, but the city-level administration is being phased out (Liu et al. 2007).

To the Chinese superintendents, these priorities presented both opportunities and challenges. First, the reform included broader educational goals than academic achievement. Learner-centered educational philosophy and individualized approaches are taking center stage. The reform includes in its definition of “quality of learning” the following features: relating to real life contexts, encouraging hands-on experiences and project-based inquiries, promoting local and school-based content, offering more choices to students (optional modules), and taking into consideration physical and mental health (State Council 2005). Such a multifaceted approach for student development is exceedingly difficult to create, implement, and assess. School systems are stepping into uncharted waters of designing and evaluating new curricular content and working with principals and teachers to change instructional practices. There is a growing concern that many superintendents who have served mainly as government bureaucrats are “outsiders” of teaching and learning and therefore lack the necessary credentials and training to lead the local efforts in implementing reform measures (Zhou 2004; Cong et al. 2007; Zhao and Wang 2007).

Second, local educational systems have to balance reform mandates with pressure from the highly competitive examination system that remained fundamentally unchanged. While junior secondary education has been universalized, those graduates from junior secondary schools seeking to continue their education in senior secondary schools still need to sit for and pass locally organized entrance examinations before admission. College admissions are overwhelmingly based on the national entrance examination. In school year 2006–7, only 66 percent of junior secondary students advanced to senior secondary, while only 23 percent of these graduates were admitted into postsecondary institutions (NCEDR 2007). The competition and grave consequences of failure put immense pressure on all parties involved—students, parents, teachers, and schools. There is little concern for students who are left behind. Superintendents and their staff are caught between the existing testing system that measures school performance in terms of achievement and the enacted accountability scheme that calls for enhanced student ability in both social and academic settings.

Furthermore, as part of a trend in the Asian Pacific region, decentralization, marketization, and diversification in education have been gaining in political popularity (Bray 1999; Cheng 2002). Quality-Oriented Education in China promotes local autonomy and ownership to stimulate competition, attract diversified funding, and encourage innovation and customer-centered services. Schools in China are facing more accountability demands from local government and external communities. Rather than relying on bureaucracies, schools need to empower their key stakeholders to participate in decision making. In other words, new types of relationships based on a shared vision to foster innovation and improvement are needed. However, most of the

school systems and their leaders lack the capacity and systemic support to benefit from the newfound autonomy. It has been difficult for the concept of “distributed leadership” (Spillane 2006) to take root in the Chinese culture (Zhe 2006; Zhe and Li 2006), but the development of such leadership is important because it also reflects the pursuit of political democracy in the society at large. The deficiencies today are manifest in a lack of accountability. There is little public scrutiny of school management and little participation by principals, teachers, parents, and students (Li 2006). But the training of independent-minded school administrators conflicts with the fact that they are government representatives, a relationship deeply rooted in the Chinese bureaucratic tradition. Professional educational leadership is still a new concept (Li 2007; Zhao and Wang 2007). In some regions of China, local governments initiated small-scale elections for school superintendents based on qualifications and interviews by locally formed committees. However, these elections were not systemwide, and the vacancies were mostly for assistant superintendent positions (Cong et al. 2007).

New Knowledge Base for Educational Leadership

The research and professional development community, largely composed of publicly funded universities and government institutions, is grappling with the challenge of training a new generation of administrators. They point out that the existing system has had several detrimental effects on school management. First, traditionally appointed educational officials have the strong tendency to treat the schools as an extension of the government and manage the school with top-down approaches. Second, the authoritarian nature of the position creates an atmosphere in the school community that allows little consideration of a student-centered instructional focus or the engagement of key players such as principals and teachers. Third, because seniority matters most for rank and file officials, they rely on their prior experiences to manage their schools without much incentive to gain additional training and support to enhance their knowledge and skills as leaders in education (Huang 2004).

While advocates and researchers in China understand the urgency of capacity building for the superintendency, there is little research in this area. Many existing accounts focus on introducing Western leadership theories and practices. Some suggest that capacity building would do well to examine the evolution of the US superintendency in order to learn how external mandates and pressures have affected the development of the profession (Cong et al. 2007; Liu et al. 2007).

In the United States, standards-based criteria for the superintendency are considered well established and have been incorporated into the practice of preparing, licensing, and developing administrators (Murphy and Louis 1999; Hoyle et al. 2005). In an attempt to define the profession of superintendency,

in 1993 the AASA identified eight professional standards: (a) leadership and district culture, (b) policy and governance, (c) communications and community relations, (d) organizational management, (e) curriculum planning and development, (f) instructional management, (g) human resources management, and (h) values and ethics of leadership. Each standard has a corresponding set of behavioral indicators describing “what a superintendent should know and be able to do” (AASA 1993, 9). These standards are intended “to reflect changing realities of public schooling and superintendent leadership roles, reform superintendent preparation enterprise, focus staff development, provide criteria for reemployment and continuing performance evaluation, and guide state licensure, superintendent evaluation, and regional and national program accreditation” (Hoyle et al. 2005, 11). Following the establishment of the AASA standards, the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) standards integrated the AASA performance standards and several other sets of professional standards for school administrators (Council of Chief State School Officers 1996). The six ISLLC standards cover the leadership domains of (a) vision of learning; (b) school culture; (c) management of the organization, operation, and resources; (d) collaboration with family and community members; (e) ethics; and (f) influence in larger contexts.⁵ The AASA standards for the superintendency, although established much earlier than the ISLLC standards, are considered by some to have a closer connection to the role of superintendents than the ISLLC standards (Hoyle et al. 2005).

Regardless of the specific target audience of the standards, when coupled with professional responsibilities, standards offered by AASA or ISLLC aim to provide a framework for defining the role of educational administrators and serve as a basis for measuring and developing necessary knowledge and skills for their jobs. Furthermore, consistent standards are often employed to strengthen professional status and legitimacy: “Professional standards, when coupled with professional development requirements and a means of gauging quality performance, create a sense at all levels that superintendents are responsible executives worthy of the public trust” (AASA 1993, 5).

The concepts of professional development and standards are by no means uncontested, however, especially within the literature on educational leadership. Critics view standards imposed on public education as driven by proponents of new public management and market-oriented forces (English 2000). Such external pressure, as pointed out by Peter Gronn (2000), could take away autonomy and stifle artful and distributed leadership.

Moreover, critiques of transnational learning of leadership theories and models call attention to the divergent policy landscapes cross-culturally (Chu 2003; Gao et al. 2006). They point out that while educational reforms in

⁵ The ISLLC standards have recently been updated to reflect the “new information and lessons learned about education leadership” (Council of Chief State School Officers 2008, 1).

many countries are heading toward the common goal of improved student learning, they are often at different starting points, with different emphases and under different conditions. Such concerns echo Chi-hung Ng's (2006) caution, in discussing the linkage between educational reform and student learning in the Asia-Pacific Region, that while players from different educational systems may share certain objectives, each reform action will inevitably bring about changes in the norms, membership, and role definitions within each system.

The contextual differences, therefore, lead us to ponder how the affordances and constraints of existing leadership theories, when operationalized by professional standards, may serve as analytical tools for gaining insight into superintendency. In this article, we conjecture that the professional standards developed in response to heightened external accountability in the United States could be beneficial to the Chinese educational community, not as a best-practice model, not for wholesale borrowing, but as a tool to capture key elements of leadership practices and as a starting point for meaningful dialogues. With this framework, we can explore if and the extent to which standards generated in one setting may be constructive in unpacking the complexity of leadership and in forming new concepts and practices elsewhere. In searching for the convergence and divergence of core elements of leadership, we may shed light on the relevance and utility of transnational learning.

Method

Sampling and data collection was the result of collaborative research efforts with the National Academy of Education Administration (NAEA). NAEA serves as the national training entity for educational administrators including county-level superintendents, bureau chiefs at the provincial level, and public university presidents. Traditionally superintendent training offered by NAEA focused mainly on policy and stipulation updates, but in recent years modules addressing management and technical competency issues have gained a greater share of the training agenda (Cong et al. 2007).

To address our research questions, we employed a three-step approach involving two rounds of surveys administered to county-level superintendents and one round of follow-up focus group discussions with some of the survey respondents.

Sample selection

Sampling of the participants took advantage of NAEA's stratified distribution of mandatory superintendency training by geographic location. Specifically, all county-level superintendents in China are required to attend training offered by NAEA once every 5 years. As indicated in figure 1, there are more than 3,000 superintendents at this level nationwide (including the county and city bureaus). Held quarterly, each session is composed of 100–

150 attendees to ensure that all superintendents are covered within the 5-year time frame. For each professional development session, NAEA distributes available slots to province-level bureaus of education proportionate to its share of county/city superintendents in the nation. The provincial bureau then selects the attendees based on a local training rotation schedule (Liu et al. 2007).

In essence, each superintendent training cohort is a stratified sample with a random start from the national pool. The stratification scheme ensures full representation of provinces in each training cohort, the mandatory nature of training ensures that each superintendent has an equal chance of being selected within each provincial stratum, and the varying provincial rotation schedules serve as random starts within the provincial stratum. With this assumption, each training cohort provides a representative reflection of the national superintendency profile. The national representativeness of each cohort relies strictly on the fidelity of the training selection process, however. Furthermore, because there are no national data to date on the superintendent population in terms of school system characteristics and personal backgrounds, the robustness of sample representativeness cannot be fully substantiated.

We selected superintendents attending two separate training sessions in 2007 as the sample population for the study. Specifically, superintendents who participated in the first-quarter and second-quarter training sessions were asked to respond to the two separate surveys, respectively.

Following the surveys, five to eight superintendents from each group were then asked to join a focus group discussion. The selection of focus group members was purposive and based on the economic development level of the school districts. Eight superintendents from the first group and seven from the second (15 in total) participated in the focus group.

Survey instrumentation

The authors and a team of faculty members at NAEA developed a *Superintendent Profile Survey* designed to address the first research question regarding the role of school superintendents within the Chinese political and organizational structure. The survey included 40 multiple-choice items and was administered in Chinese (see appendix A, shown in its pretranslation format, available in the online version of this issue). The 40 questions are divided into three domains on aspects of the superintendency in China: (a) qualifications and experiences, (b) core functions and responsibilities, and (c) accountability and support measures. This survey was administered to the superintendents who participated in the first-quarter training in 2007.

To answer the subsequent research question regarding the role of superintendents as educational leaders, we constructed a second survey, the *Leadership Standards Survey*, using the *Professional Standards for the Superintendency* established by the AASA (1993). A three-step procedure was used for

the translation of the AASA standards into Chinese to ensure linguistic equivalence: initial translation, back translation by a second party, and independent evaluation by a third language expert (van Widenfelt et al. 2005). Several items were modified slightly for clarification so that the standards and their indicators remain equivalent to the original constructs.

The survey included the eight AASA standards, each with corresponding behavioral indicators, 78 in total. On a Likert response scale of one to five, the Chinese superintendents were asked to rate each item on two dimensions: (1) *reality*, the extent to which each indicator reflected his/her day-to-day practices as a Chinese superintendent (where 1 = not practiced, 3 = average, and 5 = very much part of the practice), and (2) *importance*, the extent to which it was important to his or her school system regardless of whether it reflected reality (where 1 = not important, 3 = average, 5 = very important; see table B1 in appendix B). For each indicator, respondents were also asked to provide optional narrative feedback on its suitability to reflect the Chinese superintendency. In addition, the survey offered an open-ended section soliciting input on other leadership dimensions not covered by the eight standards and their behavioral indicators. This survey was administered to the superintendents who participated in the second-quarter training in 2007.

Data Analysis and Findings

Profile of the Sampled Chinese Superintendents

The *Superintendent Profile Survey* was administered to all of the superintendents who participated in the first-quarter training in 2007. All 140 participants of the training cohort filled out the survey, and among them 124 were valid returns (88.6 percent). The types of counties represented by the survey respondents were diverse in the final sample. Participants were from 28 provinces or autonomous regions. Among the counties, a full range of local economic conditions were represented, from very developed (9 percent), developed (16 percent), developing (36 percent), to poor (39 percent), based on per capita income.

Qualifications and experiences.—Our findings echo the concerns expressed by recent reports (Li 2006; Cong et al. 2007; Li 2007) over the lack of professional qualification and limited on-the-job practice of the average superintendent. Results of the survey show that only 78 percent of the superintendents had formal education that was at or higher than the bachelor degree level. Among the superintendents who attended college, having a bachelor degree was the norm, at 65 percent of the total, while only 13 percent had master's degrees and only one out of 124 was a PhD.

Table 1 provides a summary of occupational backgrounds of the surveyed superintendents. Findings portray the average superintendent with limited exposure to the educational system and administrative experience as the head

TABLE 1
 QUALIFICATIONS AND EXPERIENCE OF SURVEYED SUPERINTENDENTS

	Qualifications and Experience (N = 124)				
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Years as superintendent	<1	1-3	4-6	7-20	>10
%	15.30	47.60	13.70	8.10	15.30
Years of experience in education	<2	3-5	6-10	11-20	>20
%	10.60	7.30	13.00	26.80	42.30
Educational level	High school	2-yr. college	Bachelor's	Master's	PhD
%	7.30	14.50	64.50	12.90	.80
Previous position	Teacher	Principal	Bureau of education	County government	Township government
%	7.50	29.20	20.00	25.80	17.50

of the local school system. Among the 124 respondents, 63 percent had worked 3 years or less in their jobs as superintendents. The lack of experience was more pronounced in smaller and economically disadvantaged counties. The superintendents came from three main work backgrounds: (1) teachers (7.5 percent) and school principals (29.2 percent); (2) the local education bureau (20 percent); and (3) governmental positions outside of education, such as county government (25.8 percent) or township government (17.5 percent).

More than 40 percent of the superintendents came to their current positions from within the government bureaucracy without any background in educational administration. On the other hand, another 40 percent of the sampled superintendents came directly from the schools as former principals or teachers. Furthermore, despite the differences in backgrounds, about 90 percent of the respondents believed that it was very important to have experiences related to the field of education. Academic preparation and teaching experience were also considered essential qualification requirements by the superintendents.

Core functions and responsibilities.—The surveyed superintendents identified their top-four major responsibilities as coordinating the overall educational delivery in the county (85.5 percent), allocating and managing financial resources (54.0 percent), providing guidance and monitoring for schools (43.5 percent), and building relations with all other relevant external entities (37.9 percent). These broadly defined responsibilities in overseeing educational delivery and managing financial resources largely reflect where the education administration is situated within the local government structure. Noticeably, however, fewer than half of the respondents listed providing guidance and monitoring schools as a core responsibility, and even fewer selected working with external entities.

The respondents' top concerns were in four areas: building teacher capacity (71.0 percent), securing financial resources (50.0 percent), promoting equity in education (33.1 percent), and enhancing student character building

and morale (31.5 percent). We see here that the third and fourth concerns reported by the superintendents address the objectives of Quality-Oriented Education, highlighting the respondents' awareness of the necessary alignment with national reforms. However, the responses also drew attention to the superintendents' top concerns over the lack of a quality teaching force and necessary resources to deliver educational services. The most labor-intensive and high-pressure task, according to the superintendents, was to secure sufficient funding for a wide range of needs including infrastructure building, faculty housing, and performance incentives. This concern was particularly prevalent among superintendents from less developed regions in China.

Accountability and support measures.—Superintendents in the sample considered strategic planning, communication, coordination, implementing reform initiatives, and creative thinking as the most critical skills to fulfill their responsibilities. About 50 percent of the superintendents reported being held accountable to one or a combination of four performance appraisal formats: (1) provide regular reports to higher-level officials, (2) receive examination of job performance by their direct supervisors, (3) provide reports to the local community, and (4) provide updates to all educational employees in the school district. However, the respondents reported that performance measures were informal in nature. Only about 20 percent of superintendents reported having formal evaluation systems in place for systemic evaluations.

Importantly, 57 percent of the superintendents saw the need to advocate for educational reform that focused on student development. Many of them (57.3 percent) believed that true change would require a major shift in management philosophy and structure, where the top-down bureaucratic control had to make way for democratic and team-oriented decision-making processes. Getting sufficient feedback from the general public was considered a valuable way of building an effective school system by nearly 70 percent of the superintendents. More than 30 percent of the superintendents supported bottom-up types of approaches to manage and implement local initiatives. About the same number of superintendents also favored the approach of empowering staff with vision and support. However, only about 14 percent of the respondents reported having formal mechanisms in place to support such beliefs. About 80 percent of the superintendents pointed out that implementing any new leadership models locally might be far from reality in the foreseeable future.

Leadership Dimensions of the Chinese Superintendency

While the first survey profiles the superintendency and provides a broad-stroke sketch of the overall capacity of the current superintendency, the second survey probes further into the role of the superintendent as an educational leader. The *Leadership Standards Survey* was administered to all superintendents attending the second-quarter training at NAEA in April 2007,

TABLE 2
Reality—MEASURING CURRENT LEADERSHIP PRACTICES USING AMERICAN ASSOCIATION
 OF SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS (AASA) STANDARDS ($N = 89$)

AASA Standard	Number of Competencies	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Cronbach's alpha	Range of Inter-item Correlations
Leadership and district culture	14	3.65	.50	.83	.54–.66
Policy and governance	5	3.78	.63	.78	.66–.80
Communications and community relations	17	3.73	.55	.91	.47–.78
Organizational management	5	3.62	.65	.91	.57–.80
Curriculum planning and development	10	3.46	.66	.91	.63–.84
Instructional management	12	3.40	.64	.93	.62–.86
Human resource management	9	3.27	.65	.90	.52–.83
Values and ethics	6	3.85	.63	.85	.64–.72

with a response rate of 80 percent. Of the 120 surveyed, 96 filled out the survey, and 89 were complete. Among the final sample, participants were from 25 provinces or autonomous regions. Similar to the first group, among the counties a full range of local economic conditions were represented, from very developed (15 percent), developed (16 percent), developing (43 percent), to poor (26 percent).

Tables 2 and 3 provide summaries of how the sampled superintendents reflected on the leadership dimensions of their role using the AASA standards and their indicators. The reflection is reported from two angles as perceived by the superintendents: (1) *reality*—the level each behavioral indicator is practiced day-to-day and (2) *importance*—the level of attention the same behavioral indicator should receive.

Essentially the *Leadership Standards Survey* examines the validity of using the US standards to capture the leadership dimensions in the Chinese context. Three indices were included to establish preliminary face and content validity of the AASA standards: (1) the average rating among survey respondents for each indicator, (2) a criterion cut score to determine levels of congruence in either current practice or desired importance, and (3) internal consistency analysis using Cronbach's alphas and inter-item correlations. These indices provided useful although preliminary evidence regarding the extent to which the eight core standards and their indicators identified by AASA reflected the existing responsibilities and new priorities of the Chinese superintendency.

Consistent responses on the leadership standards.—The Cronbach's alphas and the inter-item correlations are indicators of the reliability of using AASA standards to capture leadership dimensions by the sampled Chinese superintendents. Overall, our findings show that the reliability of the 78 behavioral indicators that constructed the eight AASA professional standards was consistently high.

Specifically, the Chinese superintendents used the AASA standards con-

TABLE 3
Importance—MEASURING DESIRED LEADERSHIP PRACTICES USING AMERICAN ASSOCIATION
 OF SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS (AASA) STANDARDS ($N = 89$)

Standard	Number of Competencies	M	SD	Cronbach's alpha	Range of Inter-item Correlations
Leadership and district culture	14	3.83	.55	.87	.49–.74
Policy and governance	5	3.86	.61	.74	.56–.76
Communications and community relations	17	3.84	.54	.91	.50–.76
Organizational management	5	3.83	.61	.9	.61–.79
Curriculum planning and development	10	3.74	.62	.91	.58–.83
Instructional management	12	3.65	.61	.93	.60–.80
Human resource management	9	3.56	.65	.90	.66–.80
Values and ethics	6	3.99	.63	.85	.69–.78

sistently to (a) rate whether each indicator reflected the *reality* of their current scope of work and (b) if it was *important* to the success of their school systems despite the reality measure score. Cronbach's alphas, used to measure internal consistency among the multiple indicators for the eight standards, were sufficiently high, ranging from 0.78 to 0.93 for reality and from 0.74 to 0.93 for importance (see tables 2 and 3). In addition, we also included inter-item correlations to check how much each item contributes to the scale as an additional measure of within-scale internal consistency (see tables 2 and 3). All of the average inter-item correlation coefficients were above the appropriate value of 0.40 (Ascher-Svanum 1999).

Differences between reality and importance.—With only a few exceptions, the eight standards received average ratings between three and four for both reality and importance on a Likert response scale from one to five (1 = low, 5 = high). The standard deviations were consistently below 1.0.

Figures 2 and 3 present differences between reality and importance—how much each leadership indicator was practiced compared with the perceived importance—measured by the average rating of each standard. We see that the average ratings for *importance* appear to be consistently higher than the day-to-day engagement reported by the superintendents, the *reality*. Such differences between the two dimensions are more noticeable among the three standards that have relatively lower average ratings for the reality dimension: human resource management, instructional management, and curriculum planning and development.

To further detect the intensity of Chinese superintendents' perceptions on the difference between what was being done and what was considered important to their school systems, we selected a cut score to identify strong behavioral indicators. This process is a rudimentary version of the standards-setting method for test results (Kane 1994; Downing and Haladyna 2006), where an expert panel selects cut scores separating examinees into different performance levels. In this case, the rating of 3.5 was selected based on the

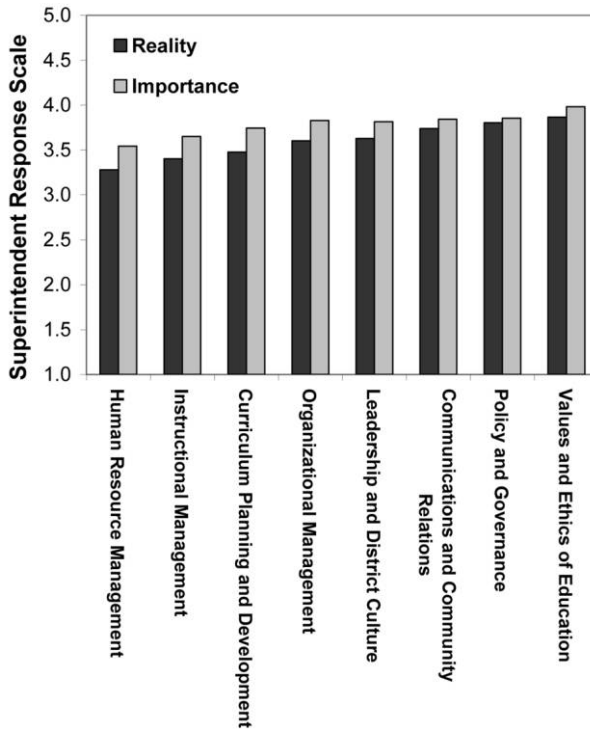


FIG. 2.—Superintendent responses on reality and importance of eight leadership standards ($N = 89$).

response scale (recall that on the scale of 1–5, 3 is average) as the above-average cut score. We identified all indicators that were rated higher than 3.5 on average and compared the distributions of these indicators between *reality* and *importance* for each standard.

More specifically, for each of the eight standards, the higher the proportion of indicators that received above-average mean ratings from the superintendents, the stronger this standard captures the *reality* or *importance*. By examining the intensity, we provide a closer look at the extent to which Chinese superintendents practiced the leadership activities that they considered important to their schools (fig. 3). For example, while the superintendents consider all 12 (100 percent) of the indicators for the standard of Curriculum Planning and Development as *important* (above 3.5 on the rating scale), only 3 out of the 12 (25 percent) of the indicators received average ratings above 3.5 for high engagement in curriculum-related tasks, the *reality*. The largest and very observable gaps, as seen in figure 3, are for the three previously identified standards: human resource management, instructional management, and curriculum planning and development. Here superinten-

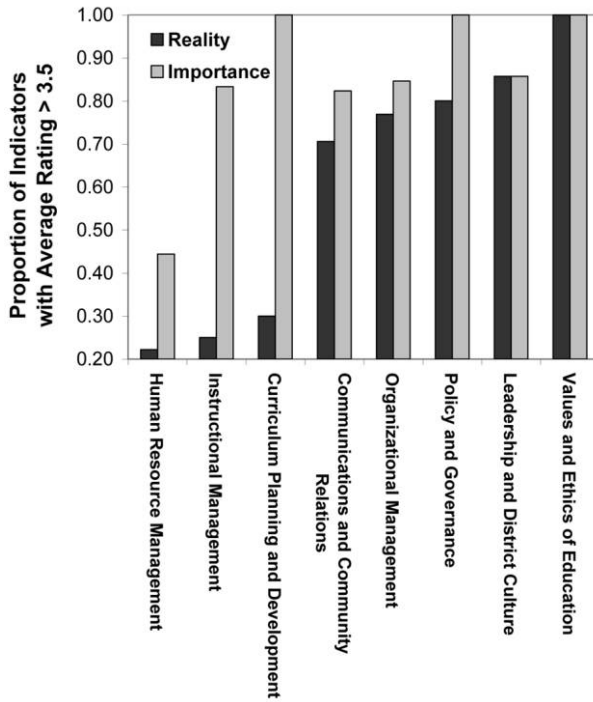


FIG. 3.—Proportion of indicators with rating >3.5 for each leadership standard

dents pointed out that although they highly valued leadership competencies in these three areas, they did not have frequent practice in these areas. On the contrary, there are only minuscule or nonexistent gaps between the *reality* and *importance* measures for the other five standards.

Focus Group

Semistructured questions based on the findings of the two surveys were asked to the 15 superintendents during the focus group session to provide additional clarification and insight on the surveys. The discussion focused on the three areas that appeared to have the least alignment between what was perceived as important and what was in practice: instructional management, curriculum planning and development, and human resource management.

The superintendents pointed out that curriculum standards and instructional materials were based on national standards and central planning. With the pressure of the existing national examination system, there was little room for superintendents to assert their influence on instructional decisions taking place in schools. For example, one of the AASA leadership competencies for curriculum planning and development was to be able to “describe a process

to create developmentally appropriate curriculum and instructional practices for all children and adolescents.” One superintendent from an urban district said: “The standardized curriculum makes it difficult for the principal and teachers to attend to the individual needs of students. It is only possible to help students lagging behind to reach basic proficiency but not to the higher standards in the current environment.” He also noted: “There is too much emphasis on test scores in urban Chinese schools, especially on written examinations.” A superintendent from a rural district in the western region commented: “Addressing diversity would require large amount of resources and energy that we current[ly] cannot afford.” Another superintendent, also from an urban district, added that although the new government policy called for an end to ability tracking during the 9-year compulsory education period, grouping students by test scores was allowed in high schools and widely practiced.

The superintendents described their typical daily routines, summarized their major tasks, and pointed out that more time was spent on administrative meetings unrelated to education, such as securing financial support for schools, and less time on visiting schools, meeting with faculty, and providing guidance on teaching and learning. For example, among the 15 Chinese superintendents, 11 reported that they were responsible for raising funds for the school systems with quotas ranging from approximately \$400,000 to \$9,000,000, depending on the size of the county and local economy.

On human resource management, the Chinese superintendents explained that typically personnel decisions were handled by the human resource branch of the county government and were largely out of the direct control of the superintendents. However, several of them gave examples that such management structure was being gradually modified especially in more developed cities so that the districts would have more autonomy in hiring and firing.

The most insightful discussions occurred when discussing the educational reform directions of Quality-Orientated Education in China and the impact of performance accountability on their role as superintendents. One superintendent talked about the disconnect between school culture building and student learning for well-rounded development. “Too much focus is put on raising test scores,” he said. “There might be calls from the government and from the district level for moral education as a priority for school culture building, but my principals find it hard to follow.”

The superintendents reexamined the terms used in the *Leadership Standards Survey* and shared their understanding of the key concepts. For example, they asked whether “learning” in English covered both studying and developing. Consistently the focus group emphasized that it was important to include the concept of developing and not just the focus on studying for high test scores. But they lamented that the latter was more of a priority for Chinese schools and students. Participants pinpointed several questions that

are at the center of a transforming policy environment. Should professional standards be aligned with the current practice or the policy intent? What if there are gaps between the new standards by which leaders are held accountable and the reality that superintendents are in?

Overall, the survey findings and the focus group discussion highlights are consistent with previous accounts that despite the rhetoric of Quality-Oriented Education, with the pressure of the existing national examination system, curriculum materials and instructional practices remain confined within the test-oriented parameter, leaving little room for superintendents to influence decisions that might deviate from teaching to the test (Li 2006; Cong et al. 2007; Li 2007). In less developed regions, developing local and student-centered materials mandated by Quality-Oriented Education required intensive efforts and expertise that many schools did not possess. Moreover, without fundamental change to the management structure, superintendents had little autonomy in personnel and financial decisions for the school system. In fact, at the end of the *Leadership Standards Survey*, 65 percent of the respondents listed two main responsibilities not covered by the AASA indicators: meeting fund-raising quotas and attending administrative meetings unrelated to education.

Discussion

The national reform for Quality-Oriented Education requires the implementation of learner-centered pedagogy, an ability-oriented curriculum, and decentralized school management. The policy imperatives, in turn, have generated an urgent demand for professional development for China's top school administrators. In the absence of professional organizations and a credentialing process for superintendents, identifying and developing leadership competencies are being implemented by a centralized and government-run training system.

Our study first addresses the question regarding the occupational profile of the Chinese superintendency. We find that while the driving force for capacity building is the national reform and is mainly external, survey results highlight the superintendents' self-awareness of deficiencies and their desire to gain professional competencies in educational leadership. The survey results also indicate that superintendents in China demonstrated strong support for educational reform and building leadership capacity. Most superintendents in the sample were college educated and valued knowledge and skills relevant to teaching and learning. These are important conditions for promoting and implementing professional development for superintendency.

In examining the leadership dimensions of the Chinese superintendency, we explore the suitable pathways to transnational learning of educational theories and models. To understand the Chinese superintendency, we explore the extent to which prevailing US professional standards can be used as a tool

to illustrate the dimensions of system-level school leadership. In the United States, the forces driving professional development are both internal and external. Internally, the drive for professionalism stemmed from the need to establish occupational values and norms and to provide guidelines on must-have knowledge and skills for stronger professional credibility and legitimacy (Elmore 2007). Externally, superintendents are challenged to defend their role as “guardians of public education” (Glass et al. 2000, 6) and must improve school performance that is largely measured by standardized assessments for student academic achievement (Darling-Hammond et al. 2005). In China, the push for professionalization comes from government-run training entities that are commissioned by the central government for educational policy planning and implementation (Chu 2003; Liu et al. 2007). We see a purposeful government attempting to improve its leadership force in order to maintain China’s competitiveness (Mok 2003).

Chinese superintendents are lifelong civil service employees of the municipal government in a centralized system. However, despite the varying contexts, the responsibilities and required qualifications of Chinese superintendents are becoming more similar to those of their counterparts in more decentralized educational systems. Recent educational reforms in different educational systems are taking place under seemingly very different conditions. For example, US superintendents must now be more accountable to federal and state standards (Linn 2000; Grogan and Andrews 2002), while Chinese superintendents are given more autonomy and must rely more on their own leadership skills and actions (Chu 2003; Cong et al. 2007; Liu et al. 2007). In fact, the Chinese reform for Quality-Oriented Education presents a seemingly reverse policy intention compared to what is taking place in the United States. As the US accountability scheme increasingly gauges school performance by student performance on standardized tests, the Chinese reform aims to deemphasize test scores and broaden the notion of learning.

Our study underscores the importance of taking into consideration the developmental stages of leadership theories, established occupational paths, and professional development practices in specific national contexts. The research community has cautioned against intellectual imperialism and the damage that may be caused by wholesale importation of theories and practices (Hallinger and Leithwood 1996; Dimmock and Walker 2000). On the other hand, we must also recognize that educational theories and models are being transmitted globally via multiple channels. For example, an increasing number of young Chinese researchers are being trained in leading US institutions and are eager to apply the knowledge acquired abroad (NCEDR 2007). Every year the Chinese government sends cohorts of public administrators to overseas universities for professional development, among them school principals and system-level superintendents (Cong et al. 2007).

Our research addresses the concern over the viability of transnational learn-

ing in the field of educational leadership. Our findings suggest that identifying the convergent and divergent elements of leadership roles in distinctive settings may be valuable for setting the foundation for such learning. We find some initial evidence that US *Professional Standards for the Superintendency* consistently reflect many of the major responsibilities and priorities of their Chinese counterparts. In other words, there is preliminary support for the notion that educational leadership domains contain culturally invariant elements, which may enable transnational comparison and learning in knowledge, skills, and abilities for school leaders. We also find that among the standards that are recommended to US superintendents, Chinese superintendents consistently rated the importance of the standard indicators as higher than the extent to which they practice the same activities, particularly in human resource management, instructional management, and curriculum planning and development. These differences may indicate that current superintendents are not engaged in some of the very powerful leadership behaviors that lead to better student learning—namely, teacher development, rigorous curriculum development, and effective instructions, even though they are considered important. The existence of the “reality gap” is more than informative. The discovery of what is lacking may provide the necessary push for building systemic support for professional development. Future research may focus on developing a deeper understanding of the sociopolitical nature of the gap (e.g., the role of cultural beliefs or political conflicts in deterring implementation) and, more important, on the establishment of professional standards and training programs that will close the gaps. Moreover, should there be professional standards for Chinese superintendents, they will need to reflect the major educational reform efforts taking place in China that emphasize social learning, creative thinking, and physical health.

There are several limitations to our research. First, to understand more fully whether the US professional standard indicators have the same meanings in China, a cognitive interview may have confirmed that the indicators actually refer to the intended behaviors in different cultural contexts.⁶ While we ensured the translational accuracy of the survey, and survey results of the Chinese superintendents indicated reliable clustering of leadership behavioral indicators around a designated AASA professional standard, future research on examination and interpretation of transnational learning should go beyond the narrow context of just the translation or adaptation of content. Second, our analysis is limited to the domain of the AASA standards. We did not delve into the responsibilities and priorities for the Chinese superintendency that may exist beyond the AASA standards and indicators, although our open-ended

⁶ Cognitive interviews are designed to augment psychometric measures of validity and reliability with more qualitative measures to be sure that respondents are interpreting questions in the same way, or that the full range of appropriate responses is captured. Typically the cognitive interview requires respondents to “think aloud” as they work through a questionnaire, providing the researcher with a play-by-play of their cognitive processes.

questions allowed superintendents to generate responses. Overall, this article underscores the importance of considering all parts of the instrumentation and data analysis with cultural and language differences in mind (van de Vijver and Leung 2000; Hambleton et al. 2005).

Adding to the complexity, transnational learning tends to be further complicated by the inevitable gaps between the intended policies and conditions of implementation on the ground (Steiner-Khamsi 2010). China is a huge country, with immense diversities and disparities in terms of its peoples, geographical areas, cultural practices, religious beliefs, and socioeconomic development. Educational development is likely to vary by region. A uniform educational policy is often not applicable across the country; local adaptation and modification are necessary. Cultural and contextual concerns tell us that it is not necessarily the “language of leadership” (e.g., vision, ethics, curriculum planning, etc.) but the meaning and enactment of these elements that actually matter.

Often reform initiatives turn into inertia when faced with decades of institutional bureaucracy and resistance to change by career governmental employees. Moreover, many of the Chinese educational reform mandates are yet to be implemented and cannot be fully achieved without significant changes to the current national examination system. For example, instructional leadership with innovative, student-centered pedagogy has little chance to succeed under the immense pressure for students, teachers, and parents to focus on preparing for the exams. As Meyer and Rowan pointed out (1977), much myth rests beneath the formal structure of institutionalized organizations. Performance goals established based on professional standards that do not have systemic support will be impossible for leaders to reach, making such standards meaningless, even potentially harmful, in improving student learning. In other words, the adoption and modification of professional leadership standards cannot happen without a relatively stable policy environment with well-established reform objectives. Superintendents remain as state-patronized and controlled civil servants and do not have autonomous professional communities in China today. If China’s interest in leadership theories and professional standards is being driven by globalization and isomorphism, it would be important for future research to consider whether they would serve to improve the technical core of Chinese education or mainly serve as a symbol of global institutional legitimacy.

Appendix B

TABLE B1
SUPERINTENDENCY STANDARDS ALIGNMENT ANALYSIS SURVEY BASED ON *Professional Standards of Superintendency* (ACTUAL SURVEY IN CHINESE)

Superintendency Standard	Please Rate How Much You Are Engaged in These Tasks at Your Current Position					Please Rate the Importance of These Tasks for Your School District (In Your Opinion)				
	Never = 1	A Little = 2	Some = 3	Much = 4	Very Much = 5	No = 1	A Little = 2	Some = 3	Much = 4	Very Much = 5
I. Leadership and district culture										
1. Formulate a written vision statement of future direction for the district										
2. Demonstrate an awareness of international issues affecting schools and students										
3. Promote academic rigor and excellence for staff and students										
4. Maintain personal, physical, and emotional wellness										
5. Empower others to reach high levels of performance										
6. Build self-esteem in staff and students										
7. Exhibit creative problem solving										
8. Promote and model risk taking										
9. Respect and encourage diversity among people and programs										
10. Manage time effectively										
11. Facilitate comparative planning between constituencies										
12. Conduct district school climate assessment										
13. Exhibit multicultural and ethnic understanding										
14. Promote the value of understanding and celebrating school/community cultures										
II. Policy and governance										
1. Describe the system of public school governance in our democracy										
2. Describe procedures for superintendent–board of education interpersonal and working relationships										
3. Formulate a district policy for external and internal programs										
4. Relate local policy to state and federal regulations and requirements										
5. Describe procedures to avoid civil and criminal liabilities										
III. Communications and community relations										
1. Articulate district vision, mission, and priorities to the community and mass media										

2. Demonstrate an understanding of political theory and skills needed to build community support for district priorities
 3. Understand and be able to communicate with all cultural groups in the community
 4. Demonstrate that good judgment and actions communicate as well as words
 5. Develop formal and informal techniques to gain external perception of a district by means of surveys, advisory groups, and personal contact
 6. Communicate and project an articulate position for education
 7. Write and speak clearly and forcefully
 8. Demonstrate group membership and leadership skills
 9. Identify the political forces in a community
 10. Identify the political context of the community environment
 11. Formulate strategies for passing referenda
 12. Persuade the community to adopt an initiative for the welfare of students
 13. Demonstrate conflict mediation
 14. Demonstrate consensus building
 15. Demonstrate school/community relations, school business partnerships, and related public service activities
 16. Identify, track, and deal with issues
 17. Develop and carry out internal and external communication plans
- IV. Organizational management
1. Define processes for gathering, analyzing, and using data for informed decision making
 2. Demonstrate a problem-framing process
 3. Define the major components of quality management
 4. Develop, implement, and monitor change processes to build capacities to serve clients
 5. Discuss legal concepts, regulations, and codes for school operations
 6. Describe the process of delegating responsibility for decision making
 7. Develop a process for maintaining accurate fiscal reporting
 8. Acquire, allocate, and manage human, material, and financial resources to effectively and accountably ensure successful student learning
 9. Use technological applications to enhance administration of business and support systems
 10. Demonstrate financial forecasting, planning, and case flow management
 11. Perform budget planning, management, account auditing, and monitoring
 12. Demonstrate a grasp of practices in administering auxiliary programs, such as maintenance, facilities, food services, etc.

TABLE B1 (Continued)

Superintendency Standard	Please Rate How Much You Are Engaged in These Tasks at Your Current Position					Please Rate the Importance of These Tasks for Your School District (In Your Opinion)				
	Never = 1	A Little = 2	Some = 3	Much = 4	Very Much = 5	No = 1	A Little = 2	Some = 3	Much = 4	Very Much = 5
13. Demonstrate planning and scheduling of personal time and organization work										
V. Curriculum planning and development										
1. Develop core curriculum design and delivery systems for diverse school communities										
2. Describe curriculum planning/future methods to anticipate occupational trends and their educational implication for lifelong learners										
3. Demonstrate an understanding of instructional taxonomies, goals, objectives, and process										
4. Describe cognitive development and learning theories and their importance to the sequencing of instruction										
5. Demonstrate an understanding of child and adolescent growth and development										
6. Describe a process to create developmentally appropriate curriculum and instructional practices for all children and adolescents										
7. Demonstrate the use of computers and other technologies in educational programming										
8. Conduct assessments of present and future student learning needs										
9. Develop a process for faculty input in continued and systematic renewal of the curriculum to ensure appropriate scope, sequence, and content										
10. Demonstrate an understanding of curricular alignment to ensure improved student performance and higher-order thinking										
VI. Instructional management										
1. Develop, implement, and monitor change processes to improve student learning, adult development, and climates for learning										
2. Demonstrate an understanding of motivation in the instructional process										
3. Describe classroom management theories and techniques										
4. Demonstrate an understanding of the development of the total student, including physical, social, emotional, cognitive, and linguistic needs										
5. Formulate a plan to assess appropriate teaching methods and strategies for all learners										
6. Analyze available instructional resources and assign them in the most cost-effective and equitable manner to enhance student outcomes										

7. Describe instructional strategies that include the role of multicultural sensitivity and learning styles
 8. Exhibit applications of computer technology connected to instructional programs
 9. Describe alternative methods of monitoring and evaluating student achievement based on objectives and learning outcomes
 10. Describe how to interpret and use testing/assessment results to improve education
 11. Demonstrate knowledge of research findings on the use of a variety of instructional strategies
 12. Describe a student achievement monitoring and reporting system
- VII. Human resource management
1. Develop a plan to assess system and staff needs to identify areas for concentrated staff development
 2. Demonstrate knowledge of adult learning theory and motivation
 3. Evaluate the effectiveness of comprehensive staff development programming to determine its effect on professional performance
 4. Demonstrate use of system and staff evaluation data for personnel policy and decision making
 5. Diagnose and improve organizational health/morale
 6. Demonstrate personnel management strategies
 7. Understand alternative benefit packages
 8. Assess individual and institutional sources of stress and develop methods for reducing stress (e.g., counseling, exercise programs, and diet)
 9. Demonstrate knowledge of pupil personnel services and categorical programs
- VIII. Values and ethics of leadership
1. Exhibit multicultural and ethnic understanding and sensitivity
 2. Describe the role of schooling in a democratic society
 3. Demonstrate ethical and personal integrity
 4. Model accepted moral and ethical standards in all interactions
 5. Describe a strategy to promote the value that moral and ethical practices are established and practiced in each classroom and school
 6. Describe how education undergirds a free and democratic society
 7. Describe a strategy to ensure that diversity of religion, ethnicity, and way of life in the district are not violated
 8. Formulate a plan to coordinate social, health, and other community agencies to support each child in the district

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