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*Chapter*

## **THE SCHOOL DISTRICT SUPERINTENDENT IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA**

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The role of school-district superintendents in the United States of America has evolved since the introduction of the position during the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Since that time, the pace of demographic and economic change has accelerated. These circumstances not only had a profound effect on the nature of schooling in the nation but also contributed to defining then redefining superintendents' work. As the nation shifted from an agricultural to an industrial economy people migrated in ever-increasing numbers from rural farming communities and small towns to urban centers. Cities increased in size and then grew exponentially following unprecedented waves of immigration. Over the next several decades, these demographic shifts increased the complexity of urban life and altered the way cities were organized, managed and governed—which had a profound impact on the nature of public education. Immigrants arrived with a diverse array of economic beliefs, political experiences and cultural traditions. These differences raised concern among some segments of society but inspired others to find ways to forge common ground and facilitate assimilation. In this crucible of change, the purpose of schooling was redefined, shifting from simply ensuring that students were literate and numerate to broadening access and nurturing understanding of the American society and established values and beliefs.

Economic, social, political and technological changes that ensued over successive eras continued to influence how superintendents' work was defined. Initially, they were regarded as teacher scholars who focused their efforts on academic quality. When the size and complexity of school districts exceeded the capacity of school board members to provide direct oversight of school district affairs, superintendents became managers. In the post-World War I era, when corporate management was in ascendency, school district superintendents assumed the mantle of the chief executive officer (CEO), and school boards mimicked those in the private sector in form and function. After the Great Depression of the

1930s, superintendents embraced the notion of parent involvement as they reclaimed their role in the education of children and youth. This changed orientation required considerable political acumen to negotiate new terrain.

During the post-World War II period, a broad array of influences enhanced the importance of public education including expansion of science and mathematics curricula and the pursuit of desegregation and equal rights in the 1950s-1970s. Beginning in the mid-1980s, a protracted era of educational reform and high stakes accountability—unparalleled in its intensity, duration and magnitude—was launched. Thus, throughout its recent history, the role of superintendent is inextricably intertwined with the changing nature and purpose of schooling. Scholars have observed several important dynamical relationships between context and superintendent roles. First, the nature of their work is intertwined with the economic, social and political shift occurring in the nation, states and local communities. Second, the prominence of roles is variable. Roles that were prominent in one era were eclipsed in another, but none of these roles has disappeared. Rather, they became less conspicuous as dictated by a shift in demands on the office or by the determination of the school boards and communities they serve.

The notion that superintendents' work may be characterized as consisting of five major roles is grounded in historical and empirical evidence. These data indicate the complexity of superintendents' roles and provide a measure of insight into how superintendents may use their position to launch and sustain educational reform. Thus, examining the evolution of the role of superintendents in its historical context and testing the viability of assertions provides a template for understanding the nature of their work, characteristics and responsibilities. To accomplish this, we situate the superintendent in time and place in the American education system, examine educational reform initiatives that are changing the nature of their work, briefly describe the characteristics of those who serve as school district CEOs, and then discuss role characterizations as tested against historical discourse, professional standards and research findings.

## **EDUCATIONAL REFORM REPORTS: IMPLICATIONS FOR SUPERINTENDENTS**

During the past three decades, “widespread concern for the quality of public education launched what is arguably is the most intense, comprehensive and sustained effort improve education in America’s history” (Björk, 2001a, p. 19). Since 1983, national commission and task force reports linked the quality of public schooling to the well-being of the country immersed in a highly competitive, global economy. These reports not only examined the condition of education but also heightened expectations for schooling, called for improving instruction, and contributed to fundamentally altering the manner in which schools are organized, administered and governed. These recommendations for improvement coupled with those emerging from state-level investigations stimulated a wide array of reform measures by federal and state legislatures, departments of education, school districts and schools. Taken as a whole, these recommendations and mandates not only challenged conventional assumptions about the nature of schooling but also increased awareness of the importance of school and district leadership. Since the early 1990s interest in large-scale,

district-level systemic reform heightened interest in the role of superintendents in launching and sustaining educational change. The scope, intensity and complexity of calls for change not only challenged superintendents (Brunner, Grogan & Björk, 2002) but also heightened concerns about how their roles had changed and may change.

According to Firestone (1990), serious efforts to correct school deficiencies began in the late 1970s before release of *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). Although the content and often strident claims made by the authors of *A Nation at Risk* were disputed, media coverage created a widespread public perception that schools had not only failed the nation's children but also triggered the nation's recent economic decline. Citizens, policymakers and parents called for an investigation of public education and demanded that schools be held accountable for student learning. Thus, *A Nation at Risk* is not only credited with launching an era of educational reform but also serving as a metaphor for its vulnerability. Analysts agree that educational reform reports were released in three successive waves, each having distinct yet related themes (Björk, 1996; Björk, Kowalski & Young, 2005; Firestone, Furhman & Kirst, 1990; Murphy, 1990). The first wave of educational reform reports (1983-1986) commenced with release of *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) and followed in rapid succession by similar documents including *Making the Grade* (Twentieth Century Fund, 1983), *High School* (Boyer, 1983), *Action for Excellence* (Task Force on Education for Economic Growth, 1983), and *Educating Americans for the 21st Century* (National Science Board Commission, 1983). These first-wave reports called for increasing student academic performance, holding schools accountable for student test scores, increasing graduation requirements, lengthening the school day and year, and increasing the rigor of teacher licensure requirements. Most states incorporated many of these recommendations through education reform legislation and regulatory controls that often reached into the classroom. Policy analysts often refer to this time period as the introduction to an era of high stakes accountability. It is important to note that these legislative initiatives shifted responsibility for policymaking from local school district boards of education to state-level governmental agencies, which limited opportunities for school-level policymaking, expanded the size and research of state and district bureaucracies, and increased the workload of superintendents, principals and teachers (Björk, 1996).

The second wave of education reform reports, released between 1985 and 1989, not only fueled the national debate on public education but also reinvigorated reformers. A sample of five prominent reports was selected from those released to illustrate an uncommon level of consistency in thinking about what needed to be done: *Investing in Our Children* (Committee for Economic Development, 1985), *A Nation Prepared* (Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy, 1986), *Tomorrow's Teachers* (Holmes Group, 1986), *Time for Results* (National Governors Association, 1986), and *Children in Need* (Committee for Economic Development, 1987). An analysis of these reports revealed several recurring themes. First, they affirmed the need to institute standards-based assessments to hold individual schools accountable for improving student test scores, used as a proxy for evidence of student learning. Second, recommendations called for an emphasis on higher-order thinking skills, problem solving and computer competency, and cooperative learning. Third, these reports recognized that demographic trends in the nation's population and the percentage of children living in poverty had important implications for learning and teaching. Fourth, the reports collectively made a compelling case for radically redesigning teaching and learning

processes to ensure that all children progress academically—including those viewed as at risk for not achieving (Murphy, 1990). Fifth, these reports concluded that bureaucratic school structures and rigid state regulatory controls had a numbing effect on schools, discouraged creativity, and contributed to low academic achievement and high student failure rates. Consequently, they recommended decentralizing decisionmaking by instituting school-based management councils to increase teacher participation, ownership and professionalism (Björk, 1996).

The third wave of education reform reports, released between 1989 and 2003, was highly critical of previous prescriptive and solution driven recommendations (Clark & Astuto, 1994; Peterson & Finn, 1985) focused on organizational and professional issues rather than on the well-being of students and their learning. Prominent reports released during the third wave included *Beyond Rhetoric: A New American Agenda for Children and Families* (National Commission on Children, 1991), *Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Carnegie Corporation of New York, 1989), *Visions of a Better Way: A Black Appraisal of Public Schooling* (Franklin, 1989), *Education That Works: An Action Plan for the Education of Minorities* (Quality Education for Minorities Project, 1990), *National Excellence: A Case for Developing America's Talent* (U.S. Department of Education, 1993) and *Great Transitions: Preparing Adolescents for a New Century* (Carnegie Corporation of New York, 1995). These reports offered two canons for genuine reform. First, improving education had to focus on children and learning rather than on organizational bureaucracies, administration or teacher professionalism. Second, providing support to parents was viewed as central to enhancing children's capacity to learn. In this regard, they advocated that schools be redesigned to serve as the hub of integrated service systems (Murphy, 1990). Many of these concepts were subsequently embodied in Professional Development Schools, Cities in Schools, Sizer's Coalition of Essential Schools, and Comer's School Development Programs (Fullan, 1983).

Following the third wave of education reform, a series of reports was published, such as *America 2000: An Education Strategy* (Alexander, 1991), and federal legislation was passed, including *Goals 2000: Educate America Act* (1994), and *No Child Left Behind Act* (2002). Despite the considerable media fanfare when released, these offered many recommendations found in previous reform reports. In some instances, new legislation negated improvement efforts in progress, thus creating considerable confusion and frustration for educators and parents (Ravitch, 2010). Nonetheless, policymakers raised concerns anew and called for serious reform. This fourth wave of reform reiterated previous reports on the changing demographic characteristics of the nation's social fabric and confirmed significant implications for learning and teaching, particularly for children at risk. A unique aspect of this reform era, however, was the acknowledged importance of leadership and its centrality to the success of school change.

Although NCLB was heralded as groundbreaking educational reform legislation, analysts and practitioners however take exception to this view. While they concur that its focus on learning for all children is laudable, they decry policymakers' penchant for top-down, coercive mandates (Kowalski, McCord, Petersen, Young & Ellerson, 2010). Contrary to findings from social science research indicating that bottom-up collaboration is central to successful re-culturing and organizational restructuring, NCLB was both highly prescriptive in its requirements and narrow in how progress would be measured. For example, Kowalski and colleagues (2010) observe that superintendents are responsible for "determining the real

needs of local schools and engaging a broad spectrum of stakeholders to determine how those needs would be met” (p.5). This and other NCLB requirements had profound implications for superintendents who were expected to play pivotal leadership roles in its implementation. Further, NCLB implementation coincided with districts experiencing dramatic demographic shifts; unprecedented levels of students living in poverty (Anyon, 2005); greater numbers of immigrant students (Fix & Passel, 2003); political divisiveness and factional opposition to NCLB (Kirst & Wirt, 2009); increasing local crime rates and need for social services resulting in increasing operational costs (Kowalski et al., 2010). The confluence of these circumstances exponentially increased the difficulty of launching and sustaining the NCLB agenda.

## **DECENTRALIZED SYSTEM OF EDUCATION IN THE U.S.**

A national, unitary system of education does not exist in the U.S. in the way that it does in most European countries where education is centralized and controlled through a ministry of education and operates under the auspices of provincial or municipal government structures. The U.S. Constitution makes no mention of education; however, under provisions of the Tenth Amendment, it reserves to states all powers not specifically delegated to the federal government or prohibited by the Constitution. This *reserve clause* is the basis for allocating responsibility for public education to individual states (Pulliam & Van Patten, 2006). Education statutes and regulations are enacted by state legislatures and administered by state-level boards of education and state departments of education. The notion of local control of education dates from the nation’s colonial period and remains a powerful concept, particularly when applied to funding public schools and governance. Consequently, state departments of education defer responsibility for district-level governance and administration to local school boards and superintendents. In addition local taxes are levied by school districts, county or municipal government (primarily through real estate taxes) that provide approximately 60% of the district’s annual budget. Thus, in the U.S. there are 50 different state education systems composed of approximately 15,000 local school districts. Although all school districts are required to adhere to federal and state laws and policies, many differences exist among each district within a state because they often promulgate their own philosophy and goals.

## **ROLE OF THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT IN EDUCATION**

The notion of local control is rooted in the nation’s colonial era traditions which explain why schools have always been a responsibility of towns and cities. However, the federal government has always had some say in public education. For example, the general welfare clause of the U.S. Constitution gives Congress the right to act to serve the common good and ensure the general welfare of the nation. The language is broad enough for the federal government to use public tax monies to support specific education programs that Congress agrees serves the broad interest of the nation. For example Congress passed the first Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in 1963, and federal money was used to

advance science and mathematics education during eras known as the Cold War and the Space Race. When Congress passed the Civil Rights Act in 1964, it allowed federal funds to be used in support of school desegregation during the Civil Rights Movement. In addition, Congress passed the Education of All Handicapped Children Act in 1997 (commonly known as PL 94-142), then extended its provisions through enactment of the 1990 Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) to ensure that handicapped children are adequately served by schools. Although the federal government is prohibited from providing for the general support of education (i.e., reserve clause in the Tenth Amendment), the federal government provides approximately 7% of school budgets through state governments that transfer funds to local schools. The U.S. Department of Education, which is administered by a presidential-appointed secretary of education, provides oversight of federal education programs (i.e., distribution of tax funds), collects data on the condition of education in the nation, and supports long-term research on important issues facing schools.

## ROLE OF THE STATE GOVERNMENT IN EDUCATION

Each state in the nation's federal system has its own Constitution, laws and tax codes that provide for the support and maintenance of education within its respective borders. States give local boards of education responsibility for managing school districts, and the public schools within the districts are funded by state allocations that typically amount to approximately 33% of district budgets. Because state legislatures are responsible for schools, they promulgate education laws, determine how state taxes are allocated to schools, and establish the manner in which financial support is provided to local districts.

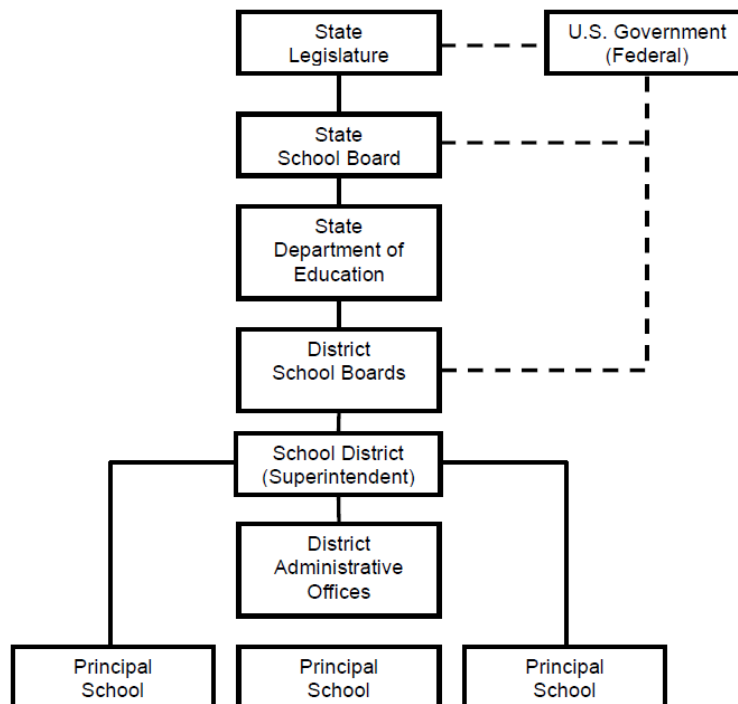


Figure 1. The structure of education in the U. S. A.

In addition, state legislatures set minimum standards for teacher and administrative licensure and personnel salaries, the elementary and secondary curriculum, and special services (e.g., buses, books, programs). Each state's school code is thus a compilation of laws that guide the operation of school districts and conduct of education in states.

State constitutions and laws provide for the establishment of a uniform system of schools and specify how they are governed. The typical state hierarchy includes a school board that may either be elected or appointed by the governor (see Figure 1). The state board of education hires a commissioner or secretary of education to oversee the state department of education. State departments of education are divided into categorical areas that are aligned with different responsibilities defined by state statute (e.g., elementary, middle and secondary schools; special education; student transportation; testing and accountability) and provide oversight of local school operations. The organizational structure of state departments of education will vary state by state.

*Local school districts:* The local school district is the basic administrative unit in state education systems (Björk, 2005). It exists at the pleasure of the state, which has complete control of its boundaries, jurisdiction, funding and defining powers of the board of education. Local school boards are elected, and members hold staggered terms to ensure continuity of decisions over time. A local school board typically has 5-9 citizens elected by local residents; however, cities may have school boards composed of 12-15 members. Historically, they have served as the primary point of access for citizens and parents to influence education policymaking. Although a local school board serves as a forum for mitigating differences, outcomes must comply with the Constitution of the United States of America, respective state constitutions, applicable court decisions as well as state rules, regulations and policies. The primary responsibility of each local school board is legislative—particularly, making policy and providing oversight of school district operations. Because citizens who are not experts in school affairs are elected members of boards of education, they must ensure that school district personnel carry out these responsibilities. Local school districts may provide education at several levels including pre-schools, elementary schools (grades 1-5), middle schools (grades 6-8), high schools and vocational schools (grades 9-12). The school board oversees school district operations through its hiring of the superintendent.

*District superintendent:* The superintendent serves as CEO of the district and manages its day-to-day affairs. They are typically hired on multiple-year contracts (usually three years in length) and serve in two to three districts over an average career spanning 16 years (Kowalski et al., 2010). They have a central office staff (middle management) that varies in size according to population of the community served. The variation in district size thus influences the degree to which the superintendent engages directly in activities within individual schools or oversees the work completed by central office staff (Björk, 2005; Browne-Ferrigno & Glass, 2005).

As the CEO of the school district, the superintendent is responsible for ensuring that legislated mandates, policies and regulations are implemented properly and for providing oversight and support to local schools. Their duties thus include:

- advising the board of education on education and policy matters;
- making recommendations to the board regarding personnel hiring;



- ensuring compliance with directives of state and federal authorities;
- preparing district budgets for board review and adoption;
- leading long-range planning activities;
- providing oversight of instructional programs and student performance;
- determining the internal organizational structure of the district; and
- making recommendations regarding school building maintenance and new construction needs (Kowalski, 2006).

In sum, superintendents must be cognizant of a wide array of economic, social and political changes unfolding in the nation as well as the state where they serve; be well-versed in national, state-level and local policy initiatives; and have the capacity to translate that knowledge into a systemic implementation plan that will withstand the rigors of continuous public inspection and criticism. Consequently, the nature of superintendents work is as complex as it is intense, requiring multiple and diverse roles (Björk, 2005).

### **EVOLUTION OF THE AMERICAN SUPERINTENDENT: A DISCURSIVE ANALYSIS OF ROLES**

The position of school district superintendent in the U.S. was created during the late 1830s. By 1850, 13 large city school systems already had employed an administrator in this capacity with the first district superintendents being appointed in Buffalo, New York and Louisville, Kentucky (Grieder, Pierce & Jordan, 1969). By the turn of the century (1900), most city school districts had appointed a district administrator. Scholars concur that this action was in response to numerous conditions including the consolidation of rural school districts into larger ones, an establishment of state-mandated minimum curricula, passage of compulsory attendance laws, demands for increased financial accountability, and the press for efficiency (Kowalski & Keedy, 2005).

Some discrepancies in historical accounts of the evolution of the office and role of superintendents are noted by Petersen and Barnett (2003, 2005) who attribute differences to three conditions: (a) use of different historical sources, (b) differing interpretations of historical accounts, and (c) variances in the analytical approaches used. For example, some scholars (e.g., Tyack & Hansot, 1982) relied on a developmental or linear approach that is grounded in the notion that superintendent's role matured over time. On the other hand, Callahan (1966) employed a discursive analysis that relied on rhetoric and writings to define role expectations. Brunner, Grogan & Björk (2002) acknowledged merits of both approaches, but they concluded that the discursive approach provided a more detailed account of superintendents' work and consequently resulted in a greater number of developmental stages. They also closely examined the debate over the earliest role conceptualization of the district superintendent and note that they as well as Carter and Cunningham (1997) identify it as being a school board's clerk. This role characterization is thought to have existed for several decades prior to 1850 and is predicated on the belief that big city school boards were reluctant to relinquish power. Consequently, they relegated their superintendents to performing modest clerical and administrative tasks. Historical evidence also suggests that

this role was temporary, a condition that may explain why some historians (e.g., Callahan, 1966) did not view it as being relevant to contemporary practice.

## **SUPERINTENDENTS' ROLE CHARACTERIZATIONS**

Five role conceptualizations are addressed in this chapter to demonstrate how the position of district superintendent evolved and to show why none has become irrelevant to modern practice (Kowalski & Björk, 2005). The first four roles emerged from a review of the literature described by Callahan (1966): *teacher-scholar* (1850 to early 1900s), *organizational manager* (early 1900s to 1930), *democratic leader* (1930 to mid-1950s), and *applied social scientist* (mid-1950s to mid-1970s). The fifth role, *communicator* (mid-1970s to present), was recently added by Kowalski (2003, 2005, 2006). He argues persuasively that in practice, separating these five characterizations is impossible because practitioners often assume two or more of them at any given time. In other words, the five roles are woven into the fabric of superintendents' work. Taken together, these role conceptualizations provide an important framework for understanding the complexity of the position as well as define the knowledge and skills required for effective practice. An examination of findings from historical discourse on the superintendency (Brunner, Grogan & Björk, 2002) and data reported in the last two ten-year studies authorized by AASA (Glass, Björk & Brunner, 2000; Kowalski et al., 2010) were used to inform the discussion of the nature and validity of the five role conceptualizations in the context of contemporary practice.

### **SUPERINTENDENT AS TEACHER-SCHOLAR**

Since the turn of the 20th century, the primary foci of district superintendents were (a) implementing a minimum, mandated state curriculum and (b) supervising teachers. Having district schools deliver a set of uniform subjects and courses enhanced efforts to assimilate children into the American culture; however, this goal of commonality required increasing levels of centralization and standardization to ensure compliance (Spring, 1994). In this context, the earliest superintendents were basically master teachers (Callahan, 1962). In addition, superintendents in larger school districts were often viewed as intellectual leaders who authored professional journal articles about philosophy, history and pedagogy (Cuban, 1988). Some district supervisors eventually became state superintendents, professors and college presidents, which not only affirmed their role as teacher-scholars but also enhanced prestige of the profession (Petersen & Barnett, 2005).

The superintendent role as teacher-scholar was summarized in an 1890 report on urban superintendents by Cuban (1976a):

It must be made his recognized duty to train teachers and inspire them with high ideals; to revise the course of study when new light shows that improvement is possible; to see that pupils and teachers are supplied with needed appliances for the best possible work; to devise rational methods of promoting pupils. (p. 16)

Early superintendents were astute and used the aura of their professionalism to shield themselves from rough and tumble politics of the era and to deflect efforts by community power elites who wanted to usurp their authority. In other words, superintendents diligently avoided being cast as politicians or managers. Conceptualization of the district superintendent as teacher-scholar waned after 1910, but it never become totally irrelevant. Over the past century, expectations that superintendents should serve as instructional leaders fluctuated. However, since the early 1980s, school reform initiatives not only have heightened these expectations but also made it an enduring aspect of their work. Currently, superintendents are expected to provide visionary leadership and planning necessary to produce academic gains at the school district level. In many instances, districts and states have incorporated improving student academic test scores as part of superintendent evaluations and contract renewal criteria (Kowalski & Björk, 2005).

The AASA report by Glass, Björk & Brunner (2000) found that the teacher-scholar role is increasing in importance. For example, in 2000 over 40% of superintendents responding to the AASA survey indicated that the school board's primary expectation of them was to serve as an educational leader. Among the superintendents responding to the AASA survey administered ten years later (Kowalski et al., 2010), 60% reported that their school boards placed a substantial emphasis on the superintendent serving as an instructional leader. Additionally, the 2000 data indicate that this role expectation was more pronounced in larger districts, particularly those serving more than 3,000 students, and by gender. Among female superintendent respondents, 51.4% viewed being educational leader as their most important responsibility. Further, the responsibilities associated with the teacher-scholar role were prominent among challenges faced by superintendents in 2000 (Glass, Björk & Brunner, 2000).

## **SUPERINTENDENT AS ORGANIZATIONAL MANAGER**

During the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (1890s), community elites who served as district school board members expressed reservations about the ability of superintendents to administer large city districts. These concerns focused primarily on a perceived lack of managerial knowledge and skills. Heated debates ensued and "the lines of argument crystallized over whether the functions of a big-city superintendent should be separated in to two distinct jobs, i.e., business manager and superintendent of instruction" (Cuban, 1976b, p. 17). Interestingly, this aspect of the debate resurfaced in 2010 when the Chicago Public Schools adopted a bipartite model.

During the late 1800s, an era characterized by an infusion of industrial concepts of scientific management and efficiency into public education, debates centered on whether or not schools operated efficiently, at least not in comparison to successful businesses (Kowalski, 1999). Over the next two decades, many leading education administration scholars, such as Ellwood Cubberly, George Strayer and Franklin Bobbitt, promoted the adoption of scientific management in public schools (Cronin, 1973). Efforts to reconfigure the role of superintendents as district business managers were criticized by mayors, city council members and members of other political parties because they were apprehensive that it would increase the stature, influence and power of superintendents (Callahan, 1962). Conversely,

some leading scholars opposed adoption of the managerial role because they believed that a shift towards adopting principles of industrial management would be accompanied by notions of board authority and executive control that were perceived as ill-suited to education organizations. Concern centered around the issue that corporate management models would erode the public's belief in ownership of schools and influence in how their children were educated (Björk & Gurley, 2005; Glass 2003).

Notwithstanding, business-dominated school boards assigned superintendents several management responsibilities (e.g., budget development and administration, standardization of operation, personnel management, facility management). Adoption of the business model for school administration was increasingly criticized after 1930 for three major reasons. First, the stock market crash and Depression of the 1930s tarnished the aura of the efficiency of captains of industry. Second, many parents objected to their perceived loss of involvement in the governance process (Kowalski, 2006). Third, earlier proponents of scientific management, including George Sylvester Counts, openly criticized the infusion of business values into school district administration, claiming it incongruous with the core values of democracy (Van Til, 1971). Several decades later, educators and policymakers compromised, noting that effective administrators had to be both managers and instructional leaders (Kowalski, 1999).

Superintendents' management role remains a core aspect of their work (Browne-Ferrigno & Glass, 2005; Kowalski & Glass, 2002). For example, more than a one-third (36.4%) of superintendents responding to an AASA survey indicated that their school board members expected them to be an effective manager (Glass et al., 2000). Nonetheless, superintendents also reported that management-related issues posed challenges, such as inadequate financial resources (96.7%), student-learning accountability (87.5%), and compliance with state and federal mandates (82.2%). These findings affirm that the superintendent's management role is an integral aspect of their work.

## **SUPERINTENDENT AS DEMOCRATIC-POLITICAL LEADER**

The role conceptualization of superintendent as democratic-political leader is grounded in the political reality of their work. Since 1923, inadequate financial support for public education has been perceived as being the most significant challenge facing superintendents. As the intensity of competition between public education and other public agencies for scarce resources increased, the nature of superintendents' political role became more evident. Although politics was regarded as an anathema during previous decades (Björk&Lindle, 2001; Kowalski, 1995), in the turbulent 1930s such convictions were displaced by the need for district superintendents to serve as lobbyists and political strategists to secure financial support and engage communities and parents bent on restoring democracy in the larger school districts that had adopted corporate models of management and governance (Melby, 1955). In essence, superintendents were urged to galvanize policymakers, employees and other taxpayers to support their districts' initiatives (Howlett, 1993) and mitigate interest group political pressure (Björk & Lindle, 2001; Kowalski, 1995). Through a national AASA survey study, Glass et al. (2000) found that 58% of superintendents acknowledged that interest groups tried to influence them and school board decisions, which tends to be more prevalent in large school districts than small districts. In addition, 83% of superintendents identified

administrator-board relations (i.e., micro-politics) as one of the greatest challenges they face. Collectively, these outcomes demonstrate that working with the board and public remains a primary role expectation. Since the 1930s, it has been evident that the issue facing superintendents was not whether they should be politicians, but rather how they carry out that role and responsibilities (Björk & Gurley, 2005).

## **SUPERINTENDENT AS APPLIED SOCIAL SCIENTIST**

The view of superintendent as applied social scientist largely has been defined by both societal conditions and professional dispositions. Several societal forces were identified by Callahan (1966) such as (a) a growing dissatisfaction with democratic leadership after World War II that ignored realities of practice and (b) the emergence of findings from social science research applicable to organizations including public education. In the professional sphere, Callahan acknowledged the contributions of support during the 1950s from the Kellogg Foundation that enabled professors of school administration to conduct social science research and build a knowledge base for the profession, which is often referred to as the theory movement. In addition, he noted a resurgence of criticism of public schools during the early 1950s that focused on persistently inadequate schooling for large segments of the nation's economic underclass and minority, which suggested that administrators failed to use social science data on the condition of schooling and learning. According to Argyris (personal communication, 1982), this linked to the emergence of the information society in which previously unavailable data on organizations shed new light on public and private entities. It not only shattered long-standing organizational myths but also and most notably contributed to a decline in public esteem for the profession.

Two additional elements influenced acceptance of the superintendents' role as applied social scientist. First, concurrent with the Kellogg Foundation supported research during the 1950s, superintendents and principals were portrayed as applied social scientists and leaders in the field. They pushed to make school administration an established academic discipline like business management and public administration (Culbertson, 1981). Consequently, courses shifted away from internal organizational operations (i.e., practical aspects of school administration) to those that reflected social science research and theory (Crowson & McPherson, 1987).

In this new preparation milieu, practitioners were expected to embrace notions of empiricism, predictability and scientific certainty in their research and practice (Cooper & Boyd, 1987). Second, interest in systems thinking and relationships among events in internal and external environments of organizations grounded efforts to link legal, political, social and economic dimensions to enhance administrator effectiveness (Getzels, 1977). The intent was to create a new normal for practice for superintendents; that is, they were expected to apply scientific inquiry to identify and solve problems of practice.

More recently, the notion of the superintendent as applied social scientist captured the interest of critical theorists. They conclude that the social sciences provide a foundation for understanding the relationship between society and schooling and eradicating social injustices in public institutions (Johnson & Fusarelli, 2003). Consequently, school superintendents are expected to be aware of contextual issues such as changing demographics, poverty, racism,

drugs and violence (Fusarelli & Fusarelli, 2005; Kochan, Jackson & Duke, 1999) and ensure that schools are simultaneously socially just, democratic and productive (Goldring & Greenfield, 2002; Sergiovanni, 1992; Starratt, 1991).

## SUPERINTENDENT AS COMMUNICATOR

The nation's emergence as an information-based society in the mid-1950s (Kowalski, 2001) directly heightened expectations for superintendents to master the art of communication and support the use of technology in learning, teaching and administration. By the 1980s, the era of administrators working in isolation ended as educational reform and restructuring emphasized collaboration, organizational restructuring and distributing leadership. System-wide reform required broad-based stakeholder engagement and systemic thinking that is explicated by the social systems perspective (Chance & Björk, 2004; Murphy, 1991; Schein, 1996). As noted by Schlechty (1997), "systemic thinking requires us to accept that the way social systems are put together has independent effects on the way people behave, what they learn, and how they learn what they learn" (p. 134). Thus, highly effective superintendents reframed school-district change as holistic and developmental.

Scholars concur that communication and organizational culture are reciprocal relationships. According to Conrad (1994), "Cultures are communicative creations. They emerge and are sustained by the communicative acts of all employees, not just the conscious persuasive strategies of upper management. Cultures do not exist separately from people communicating with one another" (p. 27). Further, Axley (1996) asserts that "communication gives rise to culture, which gives rise to communication, which perpetuates culture" (p. 153). As such, culture influences communicative behavior, and communicative behavior is instrumental to building, maintaining and changing culture (Kowalski, 1998). In the case of local school districts, normative communicative behavior for superintendents is shaped largely by two realities: (a) the need for them to assume leadership in the process of school restructuring (Björk, 2001b; Murphy, 1994), and (b) the need for them to change school culture as part of the restructuring process (Heckman, 1993; Kowalski, 2000).

Superintendents' communicator role is shaped by two conditions—the need to restructure school cultures and the need to access and use information in a timely manner to identify and solve problems of practice. Among respondents to an AASA national survey (Glass et al., 2000), nearly all superintendents (95%) acknowledged that they were their board's primary source of information. Moreover, a majority of superintendents reported having engaged regularly in communication-intensive interactions with parents and other citizens, such as setting district objectives and priorities (69%), strategic planning (61%), fundraising (60%), and curricular and program decisions (60%). In this era of emerging technologies, superintendents are compelled to communicate more adroitly using social media (e.g., electronic mail, blogs), engage a broader range of stakeholder groups, and deliver performances of unprecedented quality (Kowalski & Keedy, 2005).

## SUPERINTENDENT CHARACTERIZATIONS AND PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS

These five role characterizations discussed have been affirmed by Kowalski and Björk (2005) using historical data and findings from two national studies sponsored by the AASA (Glass et al., 2000; Kowalski et al. 2010). A summary of knowledge and skills associated with each of the superintendents' role conceptualizations is provided in Table 1.

**Table 1. Knowledge and Skills Associated with Superintendent Role Conceptualizations**

Role	Pertinent Knowledge and Skills
Teacher-scholar	Pedagogy; educational psychology; curriculum; instructional supervision; staff development; educational philosophy
Manager	Law; personnel administration; finance/budgeting; facility development/maintenance; collective bargaining/contract maintenance; public relations
Democratic leader	Community relations; collaborative decision making; politics
Applied social scientist	Quantitative and qualitative research; behavioral sciences
Communicator	Verbal communication; written communication; listening; public speaking; media relations
Multi-role *	Motivation; organizational theory; organizational change and development; leadership theory; ethical/moral administration; technology and its applications; diversity/multiculturalism; human relations

\* This category includes knowledge and skills pertinent to all or nearly all roles.

\*\* From Kowalski & Björk (2005).

In addition, superintendent role conceptualizations were examined using the *Professional Standards for the Superintendency* (Hoyle, 1993) promulgated for superintendents by the AASA and later incorporated into the Interstate School Leadership Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) *Standards for School Leaders* (Council of Chief State School Officers [CCSSO], 1996). In 2005, Hoyle, Björk, Collier and Glass published a research-based textbook focused on the knowledge and skills aligned with the AASA standards required for superintendents to become high performing CEOs. Both sets of standards are widely regarded as being comprehensive and highly relevant for guiding preparation, state-level licensure and evaluating superintendents' performance. Thus, they provide a useful template for examining the interface between knowledge and skills associated with licensure and practice. It is evident that the role conceptualizations discussed in this chapter are closely aligned with AASA and ISLLC standards (see Table 2 and Appendix A). A consequence of testing the authenticity of these role conceptualizations against historical and empirical data as well as professional standards is gaining confidence that, taken together, they reflect the reality that superintendents' work and roles are highly complex.

## CHALLENGES FACED BY SUPERINTENDENTS IN THE U.S.A.

Examining the characteristics and challenges faced by American school district superintendents provides insight into who serves as school district CEOs. Findings from the most recent decennial study of the superintendency supported by AASA (Kowalski et al., 2010) affirm that superintendent career patterns remain similar over the past three decades and identify three main paths to the office. The majority (49%) of superintendents moved from being a classroom teacher to assistant principal or principal and then to a central office administrative position before assuming a position as a school district CEO.

**Table 2. Interface of Knowledge and Skills and the AASA and ISLLC Standards**

Pertinent knowledge/skills	ISLLC	AASA
<i>Teacher-scholar</i>		
Pedagogy	6	2
Educational psychology	6	2
Curriculum	5	2
Instructional supervision	6	2,5
Staff development	6, 7	2
Educational philosophy/history	2	5
<i>Manager</i>		
School law	2, 4, 7	3, 6
Personnel administration	7	3
Finance/budgeting	4	3
Facility development/maintenance	4	3
Collective bargaining/contract maintenance	4, 7	3, 5
Public relations	3, 4	3, 6
<i>Democratic leader</i>		
Community relations	3	1, 4, 6
Collaborative decision making	1, 2	1, 4
Politics	1, 2, 8	1, 6
Governance	2	6
<i>Applied social scientist</i>		
Quantitative and qualitative research	4, 5	1
Behavioral sciences	1, 8	4, 6
Measurement and evaluation	5, 6	2
<i>Communicator</i>		
Verbal communication	3	1, 4, 6
Written communication	3	1, 4, 6
Media relations	3, 8	6
Listening	3	1, 6
Public speaking	3	1, 6
<i>Multi-role *</i>		
Motivation	5, 6, 7	2
Organizational theory	1, 2, 7	1, 2, 5



Organizational change and development	1	1, 4, 6
Leadership theory	1	1, 2, 5
Ethical/moral administration	8	5
Technology and its applications	3, 4, 6	2, 3
Diversity/multiculturalism	1, 3, 8	1, 2, 4
Conflict management	1, 2	1, 4, 6

\* This category includes knowledge and skills pertinent to all or nearly all roles.

Note: Numbers in the AASA and ISLLC columns refer to the standards number. See Appendix A for reference.

Originally published in Kowalski & Björk (2005).

The second pattern indicated that 31% of surveyed superintendents also moved from teacher to assistant principal or principal, but they were then appointed as a superintendent (i.e., became CEO without central office administrative experience). The third career path was reported by approximately 9% of superintendents; they acquired district responsibilities by moving from the classroom to the board office. The last two patterns are more common in small, rural school districts that have a limited number of central office (i.e., middle management) positions that enable prospective superintendents to gain relevant management experience.

According to survey data, the median age of superintendents is 55 years, and their careers typically encompass the last 18 years of their professional lives. They typically serve two or three districts for six years in each location (i.e., they complete two 3-year contracts). Most respondents (70%) hold at least a master's degree in educational administration (Glass & Franceschini, 2007), which is reasonable as most states require a graduate degree for administrator certification or licensure. During the past four decades, the percent of superintendents holding a doctorate—either a Doctor of Education (EdD) or Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)—has increased significantly moving from 29% in 1971 to 45% in 2010 (Kowalski et al., 2010). Perhaps the most startling aspects of demographic data on superintendency are that 76% are male and 94% are Caucasian (Kowalski et al., 2010). These statistics are disturbing in a nation in which more than half of the population (50.9%) is female and over one-fourth identify themselves as members of racial groups other than Caucasian (e.g., African American, Asian, Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander) (U. S. Census Bureau, 2010).

Superintendents face a number of problems, many of which are persisting and intractable. Data from the 2010 decennial study commissioned by AASA (Kowalski et al., 2010) identify these issues. They are listed in rank order with those being most important at the top: (a) financing schools, (b) school board relations, (c) assessment of student learning outcomes, (d) planning and goal setting, (e) changing priorities in the curriculum, (f) management problems, and (g) accountability and credibility. Interestingly, inadequate financial support for schools has been listed as being the most serious issue facing superintendents since the 10-year studies were instituted in 1923. In addition, maintaining good working relationships with school district board members remains a concern for CEOs, especially as school district meetings often serve as public platforms upon which contested state and national issues are debated. The remaining issues taken together (i.e., student assessment, planning and goal setting, changing priorities in the curriculum, system accountability) directly reflect decades-long emphasis on launching and sustaining school reform. Addressing these multiple and

diverse issues while simultaneously managing schools is often described as trying to build the plane while it is in flight.

The history of the superintendency suggests that the superintendent's roles and responsibilities are defined by emerging social, economic and political conditions, which in turn establish performance expectations for schools and students that are aligned with perceived national needs and transformational efforts. In large measure, historical events have defined an American system of public education framed by federal, state and local community expectations. How those are structured, funded and governed and how the superintendent's roles are defined influences the trajectory of career patterns and issues faced. During the last two decades, the rise of a global economy heightened concern for the future well-being of the nation, fueled demands for improving education, and stimulated interest in the role of superintendents in large-scale, system-wide reform. This brief description of the school district superintendent in the United States may prove useful as a starting point in making cross-national comparisons; however, we caution that while superintendents may share some characteristics with regard to roles and work responsibilities, contexts matters significantly. Consequently, it is incumbent upon international scholars to ascertain where commonalities converge and where their work is unique in time and place. Working collaboratively offers a singular opportunity to advance our understanding on a global scale.

## APPENDIX A

### Superintendent Preparation and Licensing Standards

#### *American Association of School Administrators (Focused Specifically on Superintendents)*

- Standard 1: Leadership and district culture
- Standard 2: Policy and governance
- Standard 3: Communications and community relations
- Standard 4: Organizational management
- Standard 5: Curriculum planning and development
- Standard 6: Instructional management
- Standard 7: Human resources management
- Standard 8: Values and ethics of leadership

#### *Interstate School Leadership Licensure Consortium (Focused on All School Administrators)*

- Standard 1: A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by facilitating the development, articulation, implementation and stewardship of a vision of learning that is shared and supported by the school community.

- Standard 2: A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by advocating, nurturing and sustaining a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional growth.
- Standard 3: A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by ensuring management of the organization, operations and resources for a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment.
- Standard 4: A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by collaborating with families and community members, responding to diverse community interests and needs and mobilizing community resources.
- Standard 5: A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by acting with integrity, fairness and in an ethical manner.
- Standard 6: A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by understanding, responding to, and influencing the larger political, social, economic, legal and cultural context.

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