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Novice Superintendents and the Efficacy of Professional Preparation

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The preparation of superintendents is a critical component and essential element of systemic education reform. However, Cooper, Fusarelli, Jackson, and Poster (2002) remind us that, “the process is rife with difficulties” (p. 242), including synchronization of preparation and actual practice, the theory-practice disconnect, the need for life-long learning, and development of an adequate knowledge base.

In light of these complexities, two facts are especially noteworthy: the vast majority of research on the efficacy of administrator preparation programs has focused on the principalship (Kowalski, 2006b) and most doctoral programs in educational

administration have de facto become preparation programs for superintendents, even though some contain little coursework specifically tailored for the position (Andrews & Grogan, 2002).

Scathing reports, most critical of university-based preparation programs, and state legislative interventions have prompted significant changes in licensure for school administrators over the past two decades. This is particularly true in relation to requirements for superintendents (Kowalski, 2004). As examples, nine states no longer require a license for this position; among the remaining

41 states, 54% grant waivers or emergency licenses and 37% allow or sanction alternative routes to licensure (Feistritz, 2003).

Equally disconcerting, recommendations to make administrative licensing voluntary across all states (e.g., Broad Foundation and Thomas B. Fordham Institute, 2003; Hess, 2003) and to discontinue doctoral programs for practitioners (e.g., Levine, 2005) have received an inordinate amount of national media attention.

This study focuses on arguably the most important evidence related to preparing and licensing school district superintendents—the first year of practice in this challenging position. Subjects in this research were novice superintendents in office during January, 2005, in four states: California, Missouri, North Carolina, and Ohio. The primary objectives of this research were to (a) produce a profile of the novices, (b) produce a profile of their employing school districts, and (c) determine the opinions of the novices toward their academic preparation.

Literature on Novice Superintendents

The critical nature of the induction year in professional education has long been recognized in relation to teaching.

Unfortunately, research on novice superintendents and efforts to strengthen the induction year in this pivotal position have not received an equivalent level of attention (Kowalski, 2004). In part, the lower level of concern may be explained by age, education, and experience.

Whereas, first-time teachers typically are 22 or 23 years old, and with the exception of student teaching, totally inexperienced practicing in schools, novice superintendents are usually much older (typically, in their early

50s) and they have had considerable experience as both teachers and principals (Glass, Björk, & Brunner, 2000).

Therefore, age and experience may lessen concerns about superintendent induction (Kowalski, 2006a). However, anecdotal evidence (e.g., Cegralk, 2004; Yeoman, 1991) suggests that such a conclusion is unwarranted; novice superintendents, much like novice teachers, experience uncertainty, anxiety, and feelings of isolation.

Once in office, first-time superintendents usually discover that their new position is quite dissimilar from previous administrative positions they have held (Glass et al., 2000; Kowalski, 2006a).

Knowledge of novice superintendents has been clouded by the failure of some authors to distinguish between “first-year” superintendents and “first-time” superintendents. Defined correctly, the former classification focuses on the locus of employment; that is, it includes both experienced and inexperienced superintendents in the first year of an employment contract with a new employer.

For example, an administrator with 10 years of experience as a superintendent is technically a first-year superintendent when she changes employers. The latter classification focuses on the practitioner; that is, it includes only persons who previously have not been superintendents.

The problem stemming from a failure to separate these populations is axiomatic. For example, an article, titled “Superintendent Rookies” (Lueker, 2002) reported that approximately 20% of all superintendents in 2001-02 were part of the population being studied (based on the article’s title, one would

infer that this was a population restricted to novices).

However, data reported a year earlier in the national study of superintendents sponsored by the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) and conducted by Glass et al. (2000) reported that the turnover rate for all superintendents in 2000 was about

20%. Since persons employed as a result of turnovers are both experienced and inexperienced superintendents, it is not plausible that 20% of all superintendents in a given year would be novices. Consequently, the failure to distinguish between first-year and first-time superintendents probably has contributed to erroneous conclusions about the induction year in this position.

Using data from the 2000 AASA study, Glass (2001) developed a limited profile of first-time superintendents. He then compared these data to data for all superintendents in five areas as shown below:

<i>Variable</i>	<i>First-Time Superintendents</i>	<i>All Superintendents</i>
Women	24.3%	13.2%
Age	slightly over 50	slightly over 50
Racial/ethnic minorities	7.9%	5.1%
Marital status – not married	11.3%	7.5%
Less than 5 years of teaching experience	21.6%	37.7%

Though the title of the article in which they appear refers to “first-year” superintendents, the data above were actually restricted to “first-time” superintendents. However, these data subsequently were not extracted from the data collected from all superintendents; therefore, actual differences between the novices and experienced superintendents are somewhat more pronounced than reported.

Studies clearly show that a trend toward higher levels of formal education among district superintendents. In their national study, Glass, et al. (2000) reported that the percentage of superintendents possessing a doctoral degree had increased substantially between 1971 and 2000—from 29.2% to 45.3%.

However, district size was found to be an important factor; 83% of superintendents in very large districts (i.e., those with over 25,000 pupils) and only 17% in the smallest districts (i.e., those with fewer than 300 pupils) had a doctorate. A study published one year earlier (Cooper, Fusarelli, & Carella, 1999), reported that 64% of the participating superintendents had doctorates.

Regardless of education level, superintendent ratings of their professional preparation have remained consistently high between 1982 and 2000. In 1982, 74% of all superintendents nationally rated their preparation as being excellent or good; in 1992 and again in 2000, that percentage remained the same (Glass et al., 2000).

Nonetheless, these and other findings pertaining to professional preparation have been largely ignored by anti-professionists wishing to deregulate the superintendency.

Instead of refuting empirical evidence, they have consistently offered anecdotal accounts of non-traditional superintendents (i.e., those with no professional degrees and experience in teaching and school administration) employed in large, urban school districts. Hess (2003), a leading critic of professional preparation and state licensing, admits that isolated examples from large school systems may not be universally relevant.

Conceding that some professional superintendents may be necessary, he wrote: “In those schools or systems where no one else is available to work with teachers on curricular or instructional issues, it is obviously essential that a school or system leader be willing and able to play this role” (p. 8). He then incorrectly asserted that “such situations are quite rare” (p. 8). In fact, less than 2% of the nation’s school systems have 25,000 or more students but 71% enroll fewer than 2,500 students.

Even more noteworthy, 48% of all districts enroll less than 1,000 students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002). Since district enrollment usually determines administrative staffing, we can estimate half of all school districts in this country provide neither superintendents nor principals with regular access to curriculum and instruction specialists. Rather than being rare, the schools Hess identifies as requiring the services of a professional superintendent are the norm.

Study Methods

The study population was identified from records obtained from the state departments of education or the superintendent state associations in California, Missouri, North Carolina, and Ohio. It was defined as all school district superintendents in the four states, employed at the beginning of the 2004-05 school year, who had no previous experience as a superintendent.

Each person in the population was sent a packet of materials via regular mail in 2005; it included: (a) a cover letter explaining the nature of the study and inviting the recipient to participate, (b) a two-page survey (see Appendix A), and (c) an addressed return envelope.

The survey was developed by the authors and content validity was addressed by having two former superintendents evaluate the clarity and purposes of the questions and statements. Statements in the survey pertaining to the adequacy of academic preparation were developed from five widely-accepted role requirements for the superintendency: teacher-scholar, manager, statesman, applied social scientist (Callahan, 1962; 1966), and communicator (Kowalski, 2001).

Data were tabulated by research associates at the University of Dayton. Open-ended items were tabulated by assigning a numeric value to responses and then ranking the responses according to total points.

Findings

The number of local districts located in the four states differs markedly, both because of

substantial variance in state populations and because one state (North Carolina) has only all-county school districts. Collectively, there are 2,316 superintendents in the four states—or approximately 17% of all superintendents in the United States. Of these, 7.5% were first-time superintendents and two thirds of them (117 superintendents) participated in the study. Of the 117 respondents, 38% were from California, 34% were from Missouri, 23% were from Ohio, and 5% were from North Carolina.

The typical novice superintendent was a male (76%) and a mid- to late-career professional (the modal range was 46 to 55). He was experienced in both teaching (95% with four or more years of experience) and administration (92% with four or more years of experience), had an advanced graduate degree

(only 1% had less than a master's degree and 36% had a doctorate), and had completed an approved academic program for superintendent licensure (82%).

The typical employing district was rural (62%) and enrolled fewer than 1,000 students (46%). Two-thirds of respondents (67%) were employed in districts that had below average district wealth (determined by the amount of taxable property supporting each student enrolled in the district in the respective states). A majority (58%) were employed in districts in which less than half of the school board members were college graduates and in which the average board member tenure was four to six years. Profiles of the typical novice superintendent and typical employing district are shown in Figure 1.

Novice Superintendent

- ✓ Male (76%)
 - ✓ Mid-career (68% over age 45)
 - ✓ Professional prepared* (82%)
 - ✓ Experienced teacher (95% had 4 or more years of teaching experience)
 - ✓ Experienced administrator (92% had 4 or more years of administrative experience)
 - ✓ Highly educated (only 1% with less than a master's degree; 36% with a doctorate)
- *Defined as completing an approved program of student for a superintendent's license.

Employing District

- ✓ Rural (62%)
- ✓ Small enrollment (46% fewer than 1,000 students)
- ✓ Below average taxable wealth (67% below respective state average)
- ✓ Average board member tenure (approximately 5 years)
- ✓ Board member education level (58% had a majority of board members without a college degree)

Figure 1. Profiles of the typical novice superintendent and typical employing district.

Opinions regarding professional preparation were obtained by having the novice superintendents express their level of agreement with seven statements. Overall, the responses reveal positive opinions. The

outcomes are summarized in Table 1. Only two of the statements had agreement levels below 60% (preparation to work effectively with board members and preparation for engaging in political activities).

Table 1

Opinions about Professional Preparation

Preparation area	Disposition	
	Disagree	Agree
<i>My academic program prepared me to</i>		
Be an instructional leader	15.4%	84.6%
Manage resources	21.7%	78.3%
Be a democratic leader	8.2%	91.8%
Conduct action research	27.8%	72.2%
Communicate effectively	19.6%	80.4%
Work effectively with board members	42.3%	57.7%
Engage in political action	58.8%	41.2%

The novices also were asked to identify the three greatest strengths, weaknesses, and omissions in their preparation. School law and finance were most commonly cited as strengths of preparation programs; others cited include: networking, internship, research, data-driven decision making, personnel administration, and intellectual stimulation.

Least beneficial aspects included over-reliance on theory and a lack of professors with experience as superintendents. When asked how preparation programs could be improved, superintendents recommended that greater coverage be given to school finance, law, school board relations, politics of education, and collective bargaining.

Opinions regarding former professors also were positive. Results are contained in Table 2. Overall, more than three-fourths of the novices agreed that the professors set high standards for students, integrated contemporary

issues into course content, understood the practical challenges facing superintendents; effectively blended theory and practice, and were intellectually stimulating.

Table 2

Opinions about Former Professors

Professor attributes	<u>Disposition</u>	
	Disagree	Agree
<i>My former professors</i>		
Understood the challenges of contemporary practice	22.7%	77.3%
Blended theory and practice	23.7%	76.3%
Set high standards for students	12.3%	87.7%
Integrated contemporary issues into their courses	12.4%	87.6%
Were intellectually stimulating	15.5%	84.5%

Discussion and Conclusions

The purposes of this study were to develop demographic profiles of novice superintendents and their employers. The following are pertinent comments on the findings:

- *Erosion of state licensing.*
Approximately 17% of all the novices who participated in the study had not

completed a prescribed academic program for licensure. In most professions, this outcome would be alarming. Even more noteworthy, there is a distinct possibility that many of the novices who opted not to participate in the study are unlicensed practitioners; that is, the focus on academic preparation may have dissuaded them from responding.

- *Age.* The age profile for the novices is generally congruent with the limited data that exist on this topic (e.g., Glass et al., 2000). Relatively few individuals entered the superintendency before age 35; more commonly, they first became a superintendent at the late-middle or late stages of their careers in education (i.e., over age 46).
- *Doctorate.* Nationally, about 45% of all superintendents report having an earned doctorate (Glass et al., 2000); in this study, that figure was only 36%. The lower finding here is likely due to two factors. The first is the nature of the employing districts; that is, most novices were employed in rural, small-enrollment, and below average wealth districts.

Superintendents with doctorates are least likely to be found in this type of district (Glass et al., 2000). Second, some superintendents complete the doctorate after entering the position (Kowalski, 2006b) and hence, the percent of all superintendents having this degree would be higher than the percent of novices having the degree.

- *Experience.* The novices had considerable experience as teachers and administrators prior to entering the superintendency. Again, this outcome is generally congruent with the findings from the AASA national study (Glass, 2001).
- *Board members in employing districts.* Only about one in four novices was employed in a district in which 75% or more of the board members were college graduates. The average tenure for board members was four to six years

and this suggests a moderate level of instability (i.e., most board members serve between one and two terms). If one considers board member education and continued service to be positive factors, many novices may be employed in positions generally considered “less desirable.”

- *Adequacy of professional preparation.* Contrary to the findings of reports critical of university-based preparation programs (e.g., Hess, 2003; Levine, 2005), the novices reported that their preparation programs were largely effective. Since most were employed in small districts with limited resources, their experiences were arguably more normative than those of non-traditional superintendents employed in large urban districts.
- *Professors.* The novices generally had very positive perceptions of their former professors. Some, however, expressed concerns about instructors who lacked practitioner experiences.
- *Implications for licensing policy.* Data collected here confirm that the vast majority of novice superintendents are employed in small-enrollment and/or rural school systems. Conversely, advocates for deregulating superintendent preparation and licensing (e.g., Broad Foundation and Thomas B. Fordham Institute, 2003; Hess, 2003) almost always base their case on anecdotal evidence of superintendents practicing in large districts.

The need for superintendents to be both instructional leaders and organizational managers is greatest in

districts where little if any support staff is available to assist in district operations.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions reported in this study, the following recommendations are made with respect to preparation, licensing, and additional research.

Preparation

In light of the fact that practice in the superintendency and in the principalship have become increasingly dissimilar, and in light of the fact that there is no national curriculum for superintendent preparation, effort should be made to establish minimum curricular

standards to ensure that novices employed in small-enrollment districts have the basic skills required in work environments where there are no professional support staff for district administration. Exposure to one or more professors who have been superintendents should be deemed essential.

Licensure

Future policy affecting school district superintendents, including licensing, should be predicated on the realities of practice. More precisely, the job requirements in small and predominately rural districts should be a major factor in determining both academic and professional experience criteria for state licensing.

Author Biographies

Theodore Kowalski holds the Kuntz Family Chair in Educational Administration, an endowed professorship, at the University of Dayton. A former superintendent and college dean, he is the author of 31 books and more than 190 other publications.

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Lance Fusarelli is associate professor and chair of educational leadership at North Carolina State University. A leading scholar in the area of policy and politics, he formerly was on the faculty at Fordham University.

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