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Educational Leadership in the Era of Accountability

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Recent changes in federal legislation, including the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB)*, have placed greater emphasis on accountability via mandated reporting of performance measures. Schools and districts are now held accountable for the provision of a successful educational experience for all students. Under *NCLB*, schools and districts must ensure that students are making “adequate yearly progress” (AYP) on a variety of indicators such as school attendance, disciplinary action (e.g., decreasing numbers of suspensions) and proficiency on statewide tests.¹ Although multiple indicators are used to determine if a school or school district is in good standing with *NCLB*, testing has been at the forefront in most academic literature (Linn, Baker, & Betebenner, 2002) and popular press (Henriques, 2003).

In the current era of high stakes accountability, some stakeholders have expressed concern that the focus on test results and other narrow measures of student success have obscured the educational process (Fuhrman & Elmore, 2004). Other studies have demonstrated that high expectations (such as raising graduation requirements) have had positive effects on previously marginalized students, such as students with disabilities (Johnson, Thurlow, & Stout, 2007).

Although controversy exists, the era of accountability has become a stubborn reality for school district leaders. No matter what their philosophical approaches to accountability are, they are forced to “play by the rules” in order to ensure that funding continues to flow to their districts. For some, the era of accountability has created a need to quickly change practices and focus on areas of need that were neglected in the past. For others, the era of accountability has simply meant continuing activities that began decades ago.

In all educational circles, the word “accountability” is likely to garner strong reactions—either for or against. Often, these reactions are nuanced because education professionals may at once support and

abhor particular portions of initiatives. The purpose of this study was to determine to what extent superintendents’ leadership practices are influenced by the contemporary focus on via *NCLB*. We hypothesized that a national policy as pervasive as *NCLB* would have an impact on how superintendents lead, and we sought to identify specific aspects of leadership that have emerged during the current era of accountability.

Brief Review of Literature

A variety of issues arose in the literature in relation to leadership and accountability, including commentary on the political and instructional ramifications of accountability; emotions of superintendents in a culture of accountability; and accountability and autonomy. Each of these issues is detailed below.

Political and Instructional Ramifications of Accountability

Superintendents are currently tasked with upholding an assessment system that is deemed to be overly narrow by many school personnel. Tests of accountability are only one way of measuring student learning, but school superintendents are increasingly concerned with student success on high-stakes assessments (Harris, Irons, & Crawford, 2006). Harris et al. (2006) noted that superintendents generally believed that working toward building a larger culture of success at the school would increase achievement scores and that creating a larger culture of success began with identifying the impact of assessment at the district and school level. These same superintendents expressed concern that the sharp focus on statewide testing in schools contributed to a loss of instructional time, lack of funding, and a narrowing of the curriculum overall. The superintendent, then, became one who promoted a culture of accountability while worrying about the implications associated with accountability measures.

Emotions of Superintendents in a Culture of Accountability

As pressures of high stakes testing increase, states and districts have tightened their control of instruction and supervision (Marks & Nance, 2007). Many superintendents have grown weary of accountability and assessment mandates and the politicization of *NCLB*. One superintendent interviewed by Harris et al. (2006, p. 199) described his state’s testing policies as “too much, too many, too soon.” Such rapid-fire testing made this superintendent “too tired” to respond to the accountability and assessment mandates of *NCLB*. Mark and Nance’s study revealed that superintendents were committed to facilitating increased levels of student achievement in their districts but were not provided with adequate training regarding assessment and accountability practices. The lack of training exacerbated their feelings of powerlessness and frustration. Furthermore, the superintendents questioned whether assessments were likely to be useful for improving student achievement. Although it was evident that superintendents were invested in increasing their respective district’s academic achievement levels, they felt that specific training regarding how to understand the data being collected and how to communicate this information to their faculty and constituents was needed.

The stress of many accountability activities may be taking its toll on superintendents’ job turnover. McGhee and Nelson (2005) speculated that high superintendent turnover may be one unintended consequence created by policymakers aiming to improve schools. These authors suggested that school leaders whose performance

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was once assessed using a variety of indicators that reflected the complexity of the job are now finding their effectiveness determined in much narrower terms. According to the authors, this has led to an increase in superintendents removed from their positions solely as a result of accountability test scores.

Accountability and Autonomy

Under current federal law, schools that fail to meet established benchmarks are potentially subject to takeover and reconstitution. These factors have contributed to schools and districts yielding considerable autonomy to the state for a range of student outcomes (Fuhrman & Elmore, 2004). Although principals and superintendents are central agents of change in the system for improving school performance (Marks & Nance, 2007), school and district leaders under federal scrutiny have reduced autonomy in their instructional decision making. While such reduced autonomy is intended to produce improved results, it may also diminish the influence of school district leaders. At the same time, many school leaders are not prepared to interpret policy or to process and reconcile conflicting policy initiatives (Mark & Nance, 2007). Cibulka (2000) noted that new and less hierarchical approaches to administration may be the antidote to the challenges faced by superintendents. Such leadership approaches may also have implications for a systemic reform movement by encouraging collaborations across the system around core indicators of change. Marks and Nance (2007) suggested that addressing leadership challenges in the ways described above may make administrators be less subject to conflicting demands of accountability measures and sanctions that may be imposed. Furthermore, Cibulka (2000) suggested that research-based innovations contributing to the capacity for organizational learning, (e.g., professional community; data-based and participatory decision making; and transformational, instructional, and distributed leadership) may provide the necessary elements for school improvement to meet challenging accountability requirements.

Methods

It is clear that the age of accountability has had a significant impact on the activities of school superintendents. Our research purpose was to better understand how school superintendents lead and manage locally in an era driven by a pervasive and controversial national policy.

Qualitative data obtained through focus group interview transcripts of superintendents were analyzed for this study using methods frequently used for qualitative inquiry (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992).² Transcripts from interviews were read and coded with one- or two-word codes describing phenomena. Point-by-point coding was used, i.e., each point made by a participant was individually coded. Next, codes were collapsed into larger themes that described the phenomena described by participants. These themes were supported by quotations from the participants themselves.

A rigorous analysis was conducted. First we produced a common code book based on our initial reading of the data. We then individually coded transcripts using NVivo software. The process began with individually coding the entries of one focus group session, identifying themes. We then met, discussed the coding, vetted themes with each other, and developed the first version of the code book. It had seven main codes, with three subcodes under one and two subcodes under a second. We then coded two more focus sessions individu-

ally, meeting to go over the coding, refining codes to create version two of the codebook. We then separately coded the remaining documents, contacting each other if we needed clarification on a code or creation of a new code. The last step of the data coding process was a final review of all transcripts, coming to consensus on codes when there was disagreement.

The final codebook had ten main codes and thirteen subcodes as follows:

- 1 Resource Allocation (RA)
 - 1.1 RA NCLB specific
 - 1.2 RA Overall funding
- 2 Emotion
- 3 Student Achievement
- 4 Impacts on instruction (I)
 - 4.1 I Special populations
 - 4.2 I New programs
 - 4.3 I Time
 - 4.4 Personnel
- 5 Standards
- 6 Politics and leadership (PL)
 - 6.1 PL media
 - 6.2 PL School board
 - 6.3 PL Community
 - 6.4 PL State
 - 6.5 PL Federal
- 7 Leadership
- 8 Data-driven decision making (DDDM)
 - 8.1 DDDM Internal analysis
- 9 Other accountability
- 10 Test validity

Results

Results from this study found that the phenomena that superintendents described in districts were similar to those reported in the literature. Superintendents felt caught between the unintended policy outcome of delimited curriculum because of a focus on “teaching to the test” and a desire to maintain high expectations in schools. This section outlines three themes from superintendents’ work that relate to leadership and accountability: (1) Politics and leadership of accountability; (2) emotion and accountability; and (3) impacts on instruction and accountability. These had the largest number of passages coded (including subcodes) in the transcripts.

Politics and Leadership of Accountability

This theme had the largest number of passages identified (141 passages coded). As we read through the focus group interviews and checked with each other to maintain coding reliability, we recognized the need to create the following subcodes for this theme to indicate the stakeholder group where political interactions were present: media; school board; community; state; and federal.

Conversations on this theme revolved around *NCLB* and its requirements. Several superintendents spoke positively about the intent of the law but followed those statements by with saying that

it is impossible for schools to meet all the requirements; the process is not in place to fulfill all the requirements; and the funding necessary to be successful was not available. Superintendents who were succeeding in the era of *NCLB* still expressed apprehension at being forced or expected to change what they were doing in schools and districts both when they were not succeeding on assessments and when they were not making changes quickly enough to satisfy federal requirements. Stronger emotions were expressed when superintendents described community members' angry responses at schools not making adequate yearly progress (*AYP*); community members asking for clarification regarding *NCLB* requirements; parents wanting schools to do what they think is right for their children; and the difficulty of working with school boards and community members who do not understand *NCLB*.

For many of the superintendents in this study, finding new and innovative ways to meet the needs of marginalized students was a challenge. Superintendents talked about having to make hard decisions with limited funds and about how best to address the needs of diverse student populations to improve their test scores. One superintendent discussed working in a district where no one had been held accountable before, and she was struggling with how to get people on board and create buy-in in an environment of apathy.

The law was supported by several participants. As an illustration, one superintendent (Participant 1, small district, Midwest) supported the *NCLB* legislation because he "[did] not believe that our public schools have been accountable to the public, particularly at the secondary level." He continued:

And I do not believe that our teachers, particularly at the secondary level, have been open to changing their instructional practices to truly meet the needs of kids. I do think they're [still] teaching the way we taught kids back in 1950's and 60's, and the lecture mode is still pretty much the predominant style and that's not the kind of kids we have anymore. And so if [*NCLB*] makes people look at what they're doing and be a little bit more accountable, I'm 100% behind it (Superintendent 1, small district, Midwest).

NCLB created a political storm for superintendents both in and out of their school systems. Overall, superintendents supported the principles of *NCLB*, but found the lack of resources and punitive nature of the law difficult to support. Some of the greatest challenges superintendents faced were with stakeholders who did not fully understand the law but had access to media coverage relating to whether or not schools made *AYP*.

Emotion and Accountability

The political storm led us to probe the superintendents' emotional responses. *NCLB* brought out strong emotions among the participants. The most commonly expressed emotions were stress, resentment, frustration, and disbelief (primarily around the assumption of *NCLB* that all children could be proficient in a content area or that every student could take and succeed on the same assessment). Two superintendents' responses to the pressures of the law illustrated how a variety of emotions were present in their work.

What I want is just one more person who has never run a school to tell me how to do it. That's just high on my list. Y'know, I just love all these people, President Bush included, who never sat in my chair, trying to tell me what my kids

need. That just aggravates me to death. It's the square peg, round hole. You can't legislate ability. You can't legislate home life. You can't legislate background. You can't legislate interest levels. So not every kid comes through that door's gonna be a round peg, and I don't care what *NCLB* says, it's not gonna happen that way. It's just not. Kids are different; you gotta treat 'em different; you can't treat 'em all the same (Participant 2, small district, Southwest and West).

Another superintendent added:

We do have four administrators and our high school principal doubles up as a part-time curriculum [coordinator] also, so he is a person who kind of is able to focus on that. We work closely together with that and it's been a lot of extra busy-work, and I know when [*NCLB*] first came out I just—I was discouraged and gnashing my teeth because it was like you're just being set up for failure; you're being set up to be a target of not doing your job, and I resented that, and I thought it was a draconian piece of legislation and punitive and very unfair in many ways considering how hard I know everyone works to do the very best they can do (Participant 3, small district, Midwest).

In general, it was clear that the superintendents in the study sessions were focused on the challenges of politics and the importance of strong leadership in an era of accountability. It was also clear that emotions were quite close to the surface throughout all of the discussions. One interesting finding, though, was that superintendents in all focus groups went beyond general conversations around accountability to identify exactly how the focus on accountability affected the work of their individual schools and districts.

Impact on Instruction and Accountability

The third largest number of passages were coded on the theme of impact on instruction and accountability (122 passages coded with relevant subcodes). The main code was for passages that spoke about the impact of accountability on instruction. Subcodes were new programs, instructional personnel, instructional time, and instruction for special populations. For the purpose of this study, students who required special attention in schools were considered special populations, and these included students with disabilities; English-language learners; students with persistent academic challenges; and gifted and talented students. Findings for each of these subcodes are presented below.

New Programs. A few superintendents discussed new programs or initiatives that they have implemented in their districts to address the increased focus on accountability. Examples included: Saturday school; extended summer school; and English as a Second Language (ESL) programs. One unique example addressed the needs of a school's large Hispanic enrollment (84%). Each year the majority of Hispanic students went to Mexico for three weeks at Christmas. Rather than attempt to keep students in school during late December and early January, the school simply closed during this period and extended school year later into summer. This particular school was also experimenting with a year-round schedule because the majority of students spoke Spanish at home and experienced a drop in English proficiency over the summer months (Unidentified participant, medium district, Southwest and West).

Instructional Personnel. Many superintendents discussed the need for having the right (or enough) people to provide instruction when focusing on accountability. Superintendents noted that a focus on accountability required schools and districts to train their teachers, especially around data-driven decision-making. One superintendent mentioned, "It's making instructional leaders out of my principals" (Unidentified participant, medium district, Southwest and West). Others mentioned that the focus increased teacher competency to the point where teachers were proud of their ability to teach when their students did well on the assessments. The increased focus on accountability made some districts pay more attention to their paraprofessionals and their qualifications, which was seen as a positive outcome for students. A substantial challenge to school leaders was meeting *NCLB*'s stringent "highly qualified teacher" requirements. A summary of their thoughts follows:

- Highly qualified teachers require a higher salary, which sometimes means other budget lines must be cut.
- High qualifications do not necessarily mean someone is a good teacher.
- Having all teachers be highly qualified is unrealistic because, in many districts, it is hard to find teachers in some content areas, regardless of their qualifications. One superintendent from a medium-sized school district in the Southeast explained, "Does anyone think for a minute that superintendents or principals would not want to hire a qualified person to teach math in a classroom? To me it's absurd to think that we would say, 'Oh, I'm just out here wanting to hire anybody I can.' The issue is this law, this procedure here, *NCLB*, doesn't address what's causing any apparent reasons why you are not attracting people into the field."

Other instructional personnel issues included low morale; high stress and anxiety levels for teachers; additional professional development requirements for staff; choices between teacher salary increases to keep teachers and funds for other programs; and the perception that state departments were monitoring agencies instead of support organizations.

Instructional Time. Another impact of accountability measures on instruction was how schools unconsciously (or consciously) changed instructional time to match subjects tested on accountability assessments. Specifically, superintendents mentioned spending much more time on paperwork, public relations, and "drilling down and making sure your curriculum and your professional development is aligned properly" (Participant 8, medium district, Midwest). Two focus groups (Medium district, Midwest; and medium district, Southwest) had long conversations about what content areas were sacrificed in their districts due to an increased emphasis on mathematics and language arts that came with *NCLB*.

Instruction for Special Populations. The subcode under impacts on instruction that was coded for the highest number of passages was special populations. Almost a third of the passages coded for the impact for special populations spoke about the requirement that all students can meet rigorous academic standards outlined in *NCLB*. Passages coded under this code can be further divided into three categories: positive effects of accountability on special populations; specific ways in which certain groups are disadvantaged; and ways in which schools and districts are disadvantaged by special populations being part of the accountability movement.

Superintendents stated that there were positive impacts of an increased focus on accountability for many special populations, especially subgroups who were not previously in the spotlight, such as students with low socioeconomic status, ethnic or racial minority groups, and English-language learners. Teachers of these groups were challenged to change their instructional techniques in order to meet the diversity of needs in their classrooms.

Although many superintendents spoke of the advantages for some special populations that stemmed from an increased concentration on accountability, they also listed ways in which some groups were disadvantaged. English language learners were disadvantaged because the tests are in English, even if the content is not English-specific. Gifted and talented students were disadvantaged because time, people, and focus were taken away from them (and their instructors) to serve other populations not performing well on mandated assessments. One superintendent believed that students on the margins were disadvantaged because money for hiring highly qualified teachers meant less funding was available to hire assistants for classrooms. These assistants generally provided one to one support for students at risk of failure.

According to *NCLB*, all subgroups must be proficient on state-wide assessments. Superintendents whose schools and districts had large numbers of special education or low-performing students felt that their schools were unfairly penalized because the schools were unable to reach AYP based on results of subgroups. Some districts also had high rates of student mobility or high numbers of children in need, which superintendents also felt disadvantaged schools regarding rankings and AYP.

Summary

Results from focus groups indicated that *NCLB* has had tremendous impact on the work of school superintendents. The political dimensions of the Act have tapped into the emotions and actions of superintendents. Components of *NCLB*, such as high-stakes testing, requirements for highly qualified teachers, and success of all subgroups on *NCLB* measures have been some of the greatest challenges. Despite these challenges some (not all) superintendents supported all or part of the Act's intentions and procedures. It was evident from superintendents' comments that implementation of national policy at the local level was complex and layered.

Conclusion

NCLB was not the first, nor will it be the last national policy in education in the United States that mandates fundamental changes in schools and districts. Despite its historical context, beginning as the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965*, *NCLB* has dominated the political landscape of public education for the first decade of the new millennium. Challenging accountability requirements (including success on statewide assessments and teacher qualifications) have forced school districts to examine their day-to-day activities in order to avoid sanctions laid out as part of *NCLB*.

For superintendents, the challenge is clear: meet the requirements of the law or lose much-needed federal funding. For leaders who depend on such funding to ensure a high-quality education experience for their students, the potential for anxiety is also clear. Superintendents are often the first to be blamed when accountability requirements are not met. There was great concern about specific

characteristics of *NCLB*. It was clear that the ramifications of high stakes testing (including perceived unrealistic goals for special populations and narrowing of curriculum) and personnel issues (including highly qualified teacher requirements) were of great concern to superintendents. These concerns appeared to generate the superintendents' most emotional responses.

As the number of schools and school districts not meeting annual *NCLB* requirements grows, leaders who have survived sanctions appear to be those who can leverage highly challenging external requirements into internal actions that improve achievement. We may again have an era of education where leaders can shape decentralized visions of the teaching and learning process. For now, however, superintendents must act as facilitators who can transform strong external demands into manageable processes of teaching and learning.

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Endnotes

¹ Note that although some states required and administered academic achievement tests prior to 2001, with the passage of *NCLB* all states were required to administer such tests. States with pre-existing tests had to gain federal approval to continue these tests or modify them to meet federal requirements. States without such tests were required to develop them and secure federal approval.

² See the introduction of this special issue for descriptive statistics on the superintendent sample and focus groups.