



Effective Superintendents

ECRA LITERATURE REVIEW

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Introduction

The role of the modern superintendent is often analogized with that of an orchestra conductor (see: American Association of School Administrators, 2006; Domenech, 2009), and for good reason: a district leader “conducts” all aspects of the district’s educational, financial, and administrative performance; facilitates the performance of all personnel; and responds to and persuades an audience with varying ideas about the performance and leadership of the district. Like a conductor, he/she guides a shared vision of exemplary performance, manages disparate components and constituents to ensure progress toward that goal, and serves as a model for inspired leadership. The superintendent, in short, personifies the aspirations and responsibilities of the entire organization (DiPaola & Stronge, 2003). It is no wonder that research literature on educational leadership shows a strong correlation between the quality of district leadership and the achievement of said school district (Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2006).

The role of the superintendent, however, is in constant flux. For many years school boards and the school community had defined the superintendency almost exclusively by the leader’s ability to manage fiscal, physical, and personnel resources; recently, though, the emphasis has shifted to *vision*, and the ideal of the current model superintendent is one who communicate strongly, build relationships, and demonstrate political acumen (Glass, 2005). Goens (2009) argues this dichotomous classification—leader or manager—is overly simplistic, failing to account for the “network of relationships, interactions, and protocols” that, while intangible, are critical to the success of the district leader. Indeed, Phillips & Phillips (2007) believe any conception of the superintendency must be relationship-centered, focusing on how leaders demonstrate vision and initiative through the involvement of stakeholders, the fostering of teamwork, and the building of strong relationships. The American Association of School Administrators (2007) agrees and adds that the superintendent, like principals, must also demonstrate a keen understanding of teaching, learning and what works for students. Portis & Garcia, (2007) emphasize the efficient use of resources, personnel, and data to break down resistance and drive systemic change; empower board and personnel to set goals, measure results, develop accountability, and support planning, evaluation, and resource allocation.

In light of these shifting definitions of district leadership, a true definition of the superintendency must reflect a comprehensive and challenging vision of district leadership, a synthesis of managerial and leadership components, interpersonal skills, and strategic action assessment. Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that a consensus is coalescing around the five core responsibilities proposed by Marzano et al. (2006), who hold the district leader responsible not only for managing organizational and environmental capacity and providing results-driven leadership but also for creating a values-driven culture, defining clear instructional focus, and ensuring accountability for results.

Though more reflective of the actual responsibilities and performance of the district leader, these increasingly varied and complex definitions of district-level leadership present a significant challenge to the process of superintendent evaluation. Historically, the evaluation process has been largely unsatisfactory to board members and superintendents alike, defined by overly subjective and vague judgments, little feedback or guidance on performance, and few analytics or relevant metrics to define strengths and weaknesses (DiPaola, 2007). Mandates in the No Child Left Behind and other state-level standards-based reforms have required local education agencies to explicitly define the expectations for the district leader and how they will be evaluated, leading to greater availability of common superintendent performance standards and performance-based assessments; however, the results are far too often the sort of generic “checklist” that assess the superintendent for completion of a task rather than evaluation of performance or growth over the course of a school year. To DiPaola (2007), effective superintendent evaluation must be *formative* in nature—it must guide the superintendent’s professional growth, enhance communications among the superintendent and stakeholders, and contribute to improving the educational performance or overall effectiveness of the district.

ECRA reviewed superintendent evaluation standards from key voices and institutions in the field of education leadership, including standards developed by the American Association of School Administrators (DiPaola & Stronge, 2003) and the principles defined by Marzano et al. (1996) in *Leadership that Works*. An analysis of these standards and instruments led ECRA to incorporate and intersperse the six performance domains of the AASA guidance—policy and government, planning and assessment, instructional leadership, organizational management, communications and community, and professionalism—and the five core components of Marzano et al. throughout the survey instrument. By adopting these standards and performance indicators, ECRA has constructed an assessment that codifies and clarifies leadership behaviors representative of *effective* superintendents.

This focus on best practices acknowledges the multifaceted role of the superintendent while prioritizing the instructional focus and school guidance responsibilities that commonly define the 21st century district leader.

Vision and Values —Items in this category measure the district leader’s vision and commitment to excellence; the alignment of district programs to the broader mission, vision, and philosophy of the district; and the promotion and upholding high expectations for all stakeholders, including his/her own professional behavior.

Core Knowledge Competencies—Items in this category measure the district leader’s subject matter expertise in the various instructional, managerial, legal, financial, and personnel issues superintendents must face and respond to every day.

Instructional Leadership—Items in this category measure the district leader’s ability to plan, implement, and evaluate the efficacy of the school or district’s instructional and assessment programming, as well as to use that data and other sources of external research to inform district improvement practices.

Community and Relationships—Items in this category measure the district leader’s ability to involve stakeholders, particularly school personnel and the school board, in realizing the district’s vision and improve student achievement.

Communication and Collaboration—Items in this category measure the district leader’s performance as the voice of the district, both in the way district performance is communicated to the school and external community and how superintendent provides feedback to whom he/she collaborates.

Management – Items in this category measure the district leader’s effectiveness in aligning district systems and operations (e.g., budgeting, compliance) and organizational performance to the goals and values of the district.

Vision and Values

Goal setting, initiative, drive, high expectations, and accountability are defining qualities of district leaders and their leadership teams—they lead, as Phillips & Phillips (2007) suggest, *for results*. The successful superintendent value change and guide change efforts by developing and articulating a vision and a clear direction for the district, ensuring that the mission of each school within his/her district aligns to this vision (American Association of School Administrators, 2009; Portis & Garcia, 2007; Waters & Marzano, 2007). To enable and implement positive change, the district leader implements and oversees effective strategic planning processes to ensure a continual focus on what matters most to all stakeholders served by the district (AASA, 2006; Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2006). The superintendent sets goals that are rigorous yet attainable, aligns these goals with the district's existing plans and initiatives (e.g., special education, professional development), and includes meaningful success/progress indicators and annual performance targets to review and revise goals as reform is implemented (Bennett, 2009; Waters & Marzano, 2007). As a result, the district leader commits the district to continuous improvement: he/she stipulates clear and non-negotiable priorities; builds progress monitoring tools into the routine process of each school in the district to determine the effects of district decision making on teaching, student learning, and the personnel implementing them; and establishes a district culture in which personnel are invested in the process and outcomes of change (Domenech, 2009; DuFour, 2007; Waters & Marzano, 2007). Not surprisingly, the effective district leader maintains high expectations for school performance and for all participants involved in this achievement—students, personnel, and the community—and maintains a relentlessly positive approach to helping others realize their potential (Lukaszewski, 2008; Waters & Marzano, 2007).

Core Knowledge Competencies

Because the superintendent is accountable for overall district performance educationally, financially, and administratively, he/she must be a subject matter expert on many areas of educational leadership—and continually update this knowledge as trends and mandates change (Eadie, 2003; Phillips & Phillips, 2007). The district leader must pay close attention to what data and research say about learning and achievement, and apply new leadership frameworks and practices to ensure improved student achievement (American Association of School Administrators, 2007). It is also critical that the superintendent have significant knowledge of legal issues affecting education; they must also keep abreast of changes to mandates, legal requirements, and compensation/retirement systems at the state level (Glass, 2005).

- What is the superintendent's level of expertise in the various instructional, managerial, legal, financial, and personnel issues?
- What is the district leader's ability to plan, implement, and evaluate the efficacy of the school or district's instructional and assessment programming?

Instructional Leadership

The effective superintendent embraces his/her function as the primary instructional leader for the district, prioritizing student achievement and effective instructional practices as the foremost goals of the district (DiPaola & Stronge, 2003; Waters & Marzano, 2007). More than simply a cheerleader of good pedagogy, the superintendent hones a clear and collaborative vision of teaching and learning, one whose goals for student achievement and the instructional program represent a synthesis of relevant research and the specific needs of the district (Portis & Garcia, 2007; Waters & Marzano, 2007). Moreover, the superintendent plays an active role in evaluating the implementation of district instructional programming: he/she clearly and regularly communicate expectations for learning to faculty, monitors district progress toward student achievement goals, and embeds professional development and coaching into the school day (AASA, 2007). As instructional leader, the superintendent also must be a leader of data-driven practice: he/she uses student achievement data to identify gaps in learning, examine instructional practice, and inform future curricular and instructional decision making (AASA, 2006; Waters & Marzano, 2007).

Community and Relationships

Recent research literature on the superintendency shares a conception of significant and effective leadership that is, at its core, about and defined by *relationships* (see: Goens, 2009; Phillips & Phillips, 2007; Portis & Garcia, 2007). Coalitions, collaborations, and motivation determine the efficacy of outcomes and initiatives—so the district leader must build trust, focus attention to process, and employ political savvy to ensure buy-in (Goens, 2009; Phillips & Phillips, 2007). The superintendent also needs to discern community values and expectations; they must establish early-on and consistently nurture relationships with key stakeholders (AASA, 2009; Banks et al, 2007). To do so, the effective district leader involves key constituents in the goal setting process, shares and publicizes relevant school data, mobilizes parents and community members, builds local- or state-level coalitions, and communicates timely and relevant information to personnel (AASA, 2006; Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2006).

The model superintendent recognizes that effective leadership is shared leadership, one in which teams and ongoing collaborations help define and commit to a common vision, to a culture of respect and openness, and to methods for decision making that ensure every child gets the best possible education (Blankstein, 2004; Weast, 2008). The district leader can promote this transformation by ensuring principals have the resources and opportunities to function as true instructional leaders, rather than merely as site managers (AASA, 2009). Quality school board-superintendent partnerships are also essential to effective governance in a school district: the results-driven superintendent works side-by-side with board members during the goal-setting process to determine performance targets and monitor progress (Banks et al, 2007; Eadie, 2003; Waters & Marzano, 2007). Finally, the good superintendent will develop their own constituency among business and civic groups, thereby enlisting the support of the wider community (Portis & Garcia, 2007).

Communication and Collaboration

The successful superintendent communicates timely and relevant information—particularly student achievement data—to all stakeholders (parents, community, media, et al.) with great clarity and great frequency so that the mission of the district is understood and supported (AASA, 2006; AASA, 2007; Waters & Marzano, 2007). By being a proactive communicator, the superintendent builds trust, provides actionable guidance on personnel and programs he/she supervises, and demonstrates responsiveness to situations that arise (McCullough, 2009).

A true definition of the superintendency must reflect a comprehensive and challenging vision of district leadership, a synthesis of managerial and leadership components, interpersonal skills, and strategic action assessment.

Management

Though the focus of superintendent evaluation has in recent years shifted from management to leadership, Glass (2005) argues that managerial imperatives and leadership imperatives cannot be separated from one another. That is, a superintendent is a strong leader only when they effectively allocate time, money, personnel, and resources in ways that align with the goal of achievement for all students (Portis & Garcia, 2007; Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2006). To do so, the superintendent must employ a system-wide, district-centered approach to manage both the millions of taxpayer dollars invested annually in the district and the ever-increasing array of demands resulting from federal- and state-level centralization of education policy (e.g., NCLB). Essential managerial duties of the role therefore include *fiscal responsibilities*, such as setting spending priorities, distributing funds, and forecasting projected revenues; *regulatory responsibilities*, such as ensuring compliance to accounting and auditing systems; *operational responsibilities*, such as facilities management, purchasing and contracting, property and supply management; and *personnel responsibilities*, such as labor relations, salary and wage management, and hiring policies—all of these resources and services must be effectively planned and coordinated to support short-term and long-term district needs (Glass, 2005; Waters & Marzano, 2007). To ensure efficient usage of tax dollars and a smoothly functioning management base, the district leader must also balance setting clear, non-negotiable goals about how the district is to be operated while providing school leadership teams with the responsibility and authority for determining how to meet those goals (AASA, 2007).

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