

## Chapter 1: Introduction

These are difficult and demanding times for public education in the United States and educational leadership is more important than ever before. There has never been a time in American history when educators have been asked to do more, to fulfill more roles in society and family life than now (Houston, 2004b). The explicit demand that educators provide a platform for the success of all children without exception is imbedded in these roles.

Educational professionals know what work needs to be done, and because it is the right thing to do, they will endeavor to make the necessary but controversial changes (C. R. Maxfield, personal communication, December 22, 2004). In order to achieve this goal, educational leaders will rethink how they organize, how they lead, how they teach, how they support learning, and how they govern public education. The school board and the superintendent are pivotal to this process because they lead change among teachers, students, families, and the community. Partial measures will no longer suffice. Educational leaders are in need of specific outcome data to support the breadth of necessary change. This dissertation will report a

statewide study of superintendents and school board presidents in an effort to supply data on the strength of the relationship between them and what differences that might make for student success.

### *Context*

In the last decade, those who doubt the value of public education have confronted educational leaders with a variety of structural challenges. State regulation and intervention in schools has increased, accountability statutes have been enacted, and forms of quasi-public education have been legitimized. Petersen and Fusarelli detailed this state of education.

The external threat to public education has increased, with the emergence of charter schools, vouchers, [school of choice], contracting out educational services to private contractors, and a re-invigorated home schooling movement...state and federal courts have remained active in educational policy making, and a deepened economic recession has forced districts to do more with less. (Petersen & Fusarelli, 2001, p. 8)

School governance and leadership is no longer simple, obvious, and united; it has become fragmented and confrontational under the

pressure of external challenges and internal shifts of complex organizational needs.

In this light, a more meaningful and empirical look at school governance relationships through a quantitative study was timely. This study collected and analyzed data on the superintendent evaluation process and other influences on the board and superintendent relationship. The effects of these influences and the ability of the school board and superintendent to affect student performance became a focus of the study. The intention was to provide data to support needed structural change. Scholars have recognized the tension between educational leaders and public perception.

During the past several decades, the perception that [public] education had failed the nation's children and jeopardized America's well-being has heightened public concern and launched what is arguably the most comprehensive, intensive, and sustained effort to improve public education in America's history. National commission and task force reports released throughout the reform era (1983-2002) increased expectations for student performance and called for fundamentally changing

classroom instruction, how schools are structured and led, as well as the composition and characteristics of school and district governance. (Bjork, Bell, & Gurley, 2002, p. 294)

The changing times have resulted in stresses upon the board and superintendent relationship often mirrored in the superintendent evaluation process (Lashway, 2002a; National School Board Association [NSBA], 2000). Therefore, superintendent evaluation became one aspect of this study.

### *Purpose of the Study*

This research was an opportunity to get beyond identification of superintendent evaluation methods, frequency, and criteria that have characterized the last twenty years of research (Candoli, Cullen, & Stufflebeam, 1997). The rapidly changing climate of school leadership suggested that researchers begin to gather quantifiable data on the dynamics of the relationship between the board and the superintendent in order to determine the relative effects of those factors and use these data to suggest strategies to support and motivate substantive improvement in district governance. That is the purpose of this study.

This introductory chapter will briefly examine the historical context of the shifting priorities in public education that have resulted in high levels of stress between the superintendent and the board of education. The purpose of the study will be expanded upon and a model of factors that surround and influence the board and superintendent relationship will be introduced. The elements of the model will be discussed. The researcher will briefly describe the research methodology and strategies and will follow these with a discussion of the relevance of the research reported in this dissertation.

### *Shifting Priorities*

Over the course of the last 20 years, there has been a significant shift in the goal of free and public education (Houston, 2004a). The shift was stimulated by the 1983 report of the United States National Commission on Excellence in Education, *A Nation at Risk* (NAR), which heralded the *failure* of American public education. Since the early 19th century, the structure of American schooling has been based on an agrarian calendar. Access to schooling was the goal, and schools accommodated the need for children to work on family farms in agrarian cycles. The goal of access led to the legal requirement that all

children attend public school. American schools have a long history of unequal funding and continued racial isolation in schools, in large part due to their structure (W. J. Price, personal communication, December 15, 2004). In 1954, the Supreme Court decision *Brown v. Board of Education* ushered in the goal of equal opportunity. That meant that separate was not equal and that all public schools must offer quality educational opportunity to all students irrespective of race. Thus, for over 100 years, public education has struggled with the goals of access and equal opportunity while structured in the style of 18<sup>th</sup>-century European elitist educational institutions and timed to accommodate the needs of rural families.

At the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the focus shifted from access and opportunity to proficiency. The expectation became not only that all children attend schools with equal opportunity but also that all children achieve to a certain standard set by the state and/or federal governments. The American Association of School Administrators (AASA) described this phenomenon.

When No Child Left Behind (NCLB) was enacted on January 8, 2002, public education got a new mission: universal high achievement. That mission was added to the existing missions of

universal access and equal educational opportunity for all students . . . . Absent universal access and equal educational opportunity, universal high achievement is unachievable. (AASA , 2004, p. 2).

The *36<sup>th</sup> Annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools* highlighted the relative importance of the two forgotten missions, getting kids ready to learn and preparing the next generation of Americans to maintain our democracy (Rose & Gallup, 2004). The study undertaken here focused on the current mandates and expectations with the understanding that learning readiness and preparation for citizenship were worthy of further examination at another time.

Public schools are under pressure to produce proficiency, access, and opportunity within schools that are still structured to achieve convenience for the community. There is a distinct “incompatibility between the structure of [school] organizations and efforts to improve student learning” (Lunenburg, 2002, p. 5). Paul Houston, the Executive Director of the AASA, in his remarks to a joint meeting of the Michigan Association of School Boards (MASB) and the Michigan Association of School Administrators (MASA) in August 2004, took this concern a

step further and proposed that school leadership now faces an atmosphere “where poverty and the lack of public will make proficiency impossible, and where unchanging school structure has made life outside the school richer and more relevant than school” (Houston, 2004a). These dichotomies (Structure of Schooling: Student Achievement and Public Will: Relevance) have exacerbated conflict between school boards and superintendents.

Nonetheless, the political and educational communities have grasped proficiency as the new grail. Therefore, public school structure should be redesigned with proficiency in mind (Houston, 2004a). Therein lies a conundrum. Communities find the structural change needed to accomplish proficiency unpalatable and contradictory to their accepted concept of *schooling*. William Spady (2001) explained this phenomenon with Henry Ford’s famous idea that anyone can have a car in any color, as long as the color is black.

[The public perception is that] there is only one way to do *school*: If it doesn’t look like familiar Model T education, sound like familiar Model T education, operate like familiar Model T education, and give you familiar Model T results, it can’t be

*school*, and it can't be called *school reform*. School only comes one way: Model T. (Spady, 2001, p. 4)

At the same time, communities appear to accept the proposition that *proficiency* as measured by high-stakes standardized tests is and should be the new goal. The AASA has taken a proactive role is assessing public opinion.

During the week of September 23, 2004 the American Association of School Administrators' pollsters, IPSOS Public Affairs, asked a random sample of 1,000 adults and an additional over-sample of 200 parents of public school children, "There are two important tasks in public schools today, developing better citizens and improving achievement. If you had to prioritize, which would you say is more critical to the future of this country?" The surprising answer to the question was that 57 percent said developing better citizens, 36 percent said improving achievement and 6 percent said both equally (1 percent did not respond or refused). The public school parents in the study gave similar answers, 58 percent said developing citizens and 38 percent said improving achievement. (Houston, 2004a, p. 1)

These politically fraught contradictions make structural change extremely difficult at best (Spady, 1997). “The governance structure [of schooling] is designed to support the logic of confidence between the public and the schools, not to provide direction to improvement of student achievement” (Lunenburg, 2002, p. 9). In the new millennium, this elementary conflict has precipitated, among educational leaders, an emphasis on the search for change strategies that satisfy both issues.

In the presence of this conundrum, school leaders have focused on what conditions should be present in schools for optimum learning to occur and to what extent those conditions relate to governance and leadership over which they have some control. “This complicated matter involves controversial values; it has not received extensive scholarly study; and it beckons for interdisciplinary analysis of the relationship between formal attempts to educate and the ways that human competence is expressed in non-educational settings” (Newman, Secada, & Wehlage, 1995, p. 8). One relationship central to school improvement is between the superintendent and the school board, which often struggles to overcome the dichotomies of modern public education, resulting in escalated strains and conflict.

### *Board and Superintendent Relationship*

Recent relevant research suggests that the relationship between the school board and the superintendent is pivotal (AASA, 1992; AASA, 1993; Candoli et al., 1997; Dolan, 1994; NSBA, 1996; NSBA, 2000). The importance of the relationship is magnified by district-level control of “conditions for student success:

- 1) Beliefs and priorities,
- 2) Operating principles and processes,
- 3) Organizational structures, and
- 4) Support conditions” (Spady, 1997, pp. 37-39).

Therefore, it is critical to understand the nature of the fundamental interaction between elected representatives and the primary appointed administrator in public education so that proficiency can be more effectively realized in an atmosphere of conflicting demands and political maneuvering.

The relationship between the school board and the superintendent is at the center of school district climate. Dolan (1994), for example, saw it as primary. “How boards and superintendents work together can mean the difference between exhilaration and frustration for both parties and, more important,

between success and failure for the students in our nation's schools" (NSBA, 1996, p. 3). The American Association of School Administrators (AASA) concurred and described the importance of the relationship as key to the "very future of our free and democratic society" (AASA, 1993, p. 1).

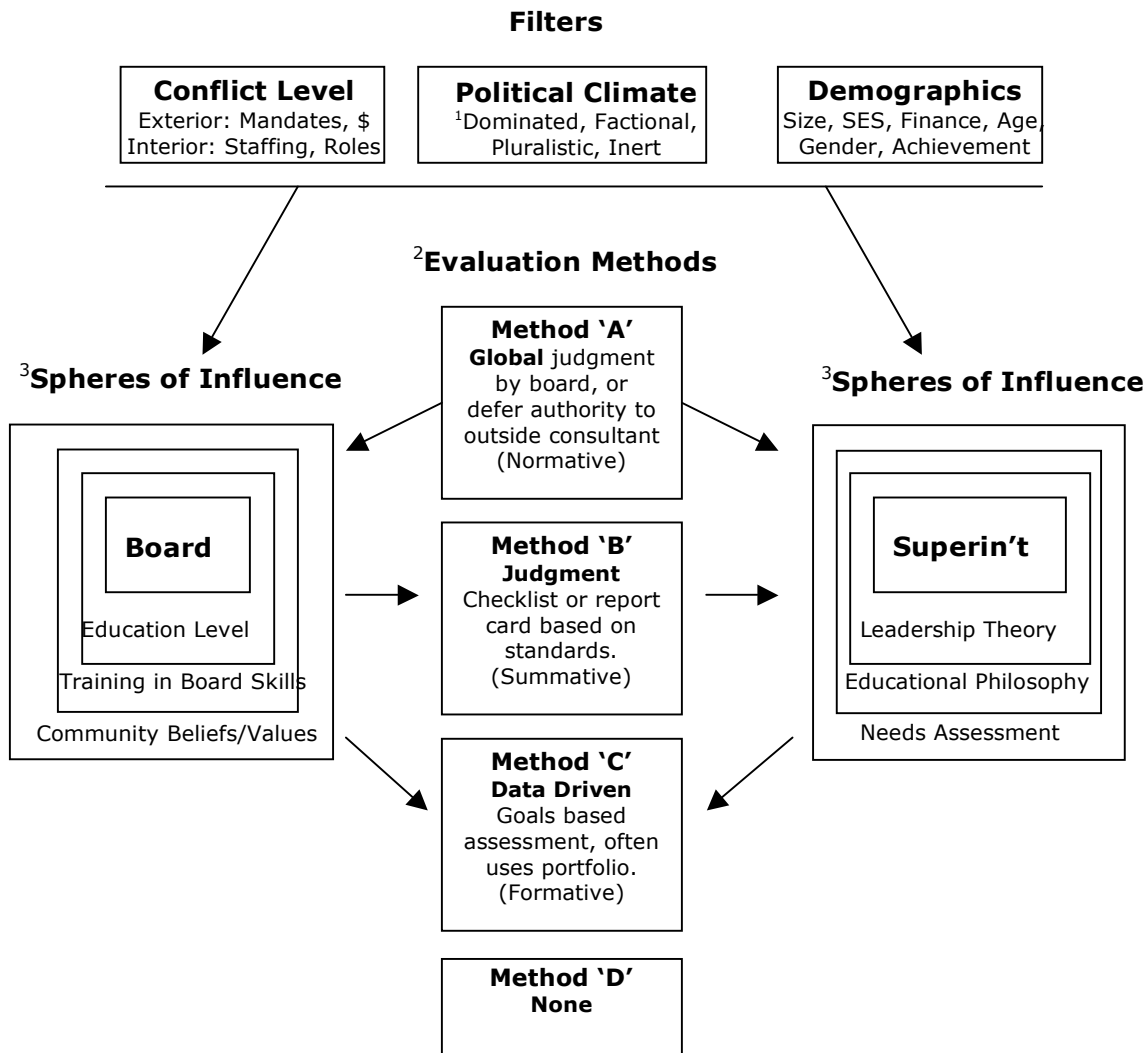
Thematic analysis of the literature concerning board and superintendent relationships suggested that the *method* used by a board to evaluate its superintendent might be indicative of other elements of the relationship. This concept was implied by Candoli et al. (1997) in *Superintendent Performance Evaluation: Current Practice and Directions for Improvement* but never made explicit. It was suggested by the literature of the professional organizations representing superintendents and school boards that both placed deep importance on evaluation as central to the positive relationship between a board and its superintendent.

#### *Concomitant Questions and Conceptual Model*

This context of high demand for change within reluctant communities led to a specific posit of questions about the governance relationship in public schools. What elements influence the way a board works with and evaluates the superintendent? How strongly do

those elements influence the relationship? What other factors influence the relationship? Can the evaluation process strengthen the relationship?

On the basis of prior research, offered here is a new conceptual model of the elements of the board and superintendent relationship. This model is depicted in Figure 1.



<sup>1</sup>McCarty and Ramsey, 1971

<sup>2</sup>Candoli, Cullen, and Stufflebeam, 1997

<sup>3</sup>Price, 1994

*Figure 1.* The association of evaluation method to the relationship between the board and superintendent: Filters and influences.

Figure 1 organizes the critical thinking of other educational researchers into one conceptual model that includes superintendent evaluation method, political climate of the district, conflict levels, spheres of influence on the school board and superintendent, and influence of demographic characteristics of the district. Next, these factors are examined in more detail.

*Superintendent's evaluation method.* After considerable synthesis and study, Candoli et al. (1997) precisely defined the categories or types of evaluation, on the basis of the literature through 1997. The three categories were used throughout this study and form the core of the model in Figure 1.

- *Evaluation Type A (Global).* The board makes broad subjective judgments based on *gut* feeling or defers authority to an evaluator brought in from outside the district. This process is normative. Type A (Global) evaluation is *done to* the superintendent from inside or outside the organization.
- *Evaluation Type B (Judgment).* A checklist or report card is used, often based on the AASA superintendent list of competencies or other lists of standardized duties. It is summative in nature.

Type B (Judgment) evaluation method is the *board doing it to* the superintendent.

- *Evaluation Type C (Data-driven)*. This process is goals-based and often uses a portfolio reporting method. It is a formative process. Type C (Data-driven) evaluation process is *both* the board and the superintendent contributing to *a process* of goal setting and improvement.

Although generally accepted as defining the parameters of superintendent evaluation, these categories are limited in that they are static, whereas school boards and superintendents remain in a state of continuous fluctuation.

*Political climate of the district*. Another significant influence on the school board and superintendent is politics. McCarty and Ramsey's 1971 study of the political dynamics within public school districts suggested four categories of political climate, which were used throughout this study.

- *Dominated*. A school board dominated by prominent citizens or businessmen in the community characterizes this political structure. The superintendent's role is functionary, and the policies of the board provide *basic* education and keep taxes low.

- *Factional.* A school board with continual conflict between agenda-driven factions characterizes this political structure. The superintendent is a political strategist among disputing groups. The policies of the school board change continually as new factions come and go through board elections.
- *Pluralistic.* The status congruent board that characterizes this political structure is quite capable of performing effectively. Its members understand their roles; they do not meddle with or overrule the administration. The superintendent is the professional advisor to the effective board, and board policies are often based on research and community input.
- *Inert.* In inert communities, the school board rubber-stamps the superintendent's actions and sanctions his decisions without much involvement in policymaking. The superintendent is the decision maker.

A detailed discussion of the McCarty and Ramsey (1971) categories is provided in chapter 2.

*Conflict levels.* Conflict arises between boards and superintendents from sources both internal to the relationship and from outside. External influences include state and federal mandates

for education, such as curriculum standards, national standards of achievement, federal requirements of No Child Left Behind and, in Michigan, Education YES. Compounding the external influences are the funding issues that arise from unfunded mandates and legally limited per-pupil revenue. Internal conflicts arise from financial constraints as reflected in conflict over staff negotiations and hiring decisions. The respective roles of the board and the superintendent can cause considerable conflict. The “lack of congruity between superintendents’ roles and board power structure may, in part, explain why conflict is an enduring problem in the superintendency” (Bjork, Bell, & Gurley, 2002, p. 301). Educational leaders clearly make the connection between board political structure and conflict with the superintendent.

*Influences on the school board.* The board of education is an elected governing body. The composition of a school board can change with every election. Members of the school board come and go from one success in election to the decision to run for re-election. How the members execute the roles and responsibilities of a school board depends on a variety of factors, including (a) the educational level of the members, (b) extent of training in, and practice of, boardmanship

skills, (c) the beliefs and values of the community they serve, and (d) their individual political agendas (Price, 1994; Lunenburg, 2002).

*Influences on the superintendent.* The superintendent, on the other hand, occupies a role that is redefined continually. Issues arise and are resolved. The composition and politics of the school board fluctuate. State and federal mandates dictate changes in focus. District and community goals evolve. How the duties of the shifting role are executed depends on a number of influences, including the superintendent's (a) style and practice of leadership, (b) personal educational philosophy, (c) professional assessment of district needs, and (d) public perception (AASA & NSBA, 1980; Price, 1994; Lunenburg, 2002).

*Demographic characteristics of the community.* To complete the picture of the community, demographic characteristics were included in the model depicted by Figure 1. The core demographics used in this study were district size represented by headcount, socioeconomic status as measured by the level of free and reduced-priced lunches, per-pupil expenditure, and student achievement as represented by Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP) test scores

(Standard & Poor's, 2003). Age and gender of board members and superintendents were included for consideration.

The relationship between the school board and the superintendent is a kaleidoscope of multilayered interactions and motives. The model developed in Figure 1 reflects the complex realities of modern school leadership. This study attempted to measure the relative influences and strength of relationship with the intention of correlation of those factors with district-level descriptive indicators, evaluation type, and political climate type.

### *Research Questions*

Governance and leadership style and the relationship between the school board and its superintendent control the conditions for student success (Spady, 2001). Superintendent evaluation appears to be a key factor in setting the tone of that ever-changing relationship (AASA, 1992; NSBA, 2000; Price, 1994; Lunenberg, 2002).

Because of the importance of this pivotal relationship to student success, this study examined specific research questions derived from the model in Figure 1. What factors influence and to what relative degree do they influence

- The relationship between the school board and the superintendent?
- The choice of superintendent evaluation method?
- The level and type of conflict between the board and superintendent?
- The leadership style of the superintendent?
- The local, state, and national political climates?
- The training level of board members?
- The predominate style of teaching and learning?
- The demographic characteristics of the community?

What is the degree to which these elements influence the relationship?

The research hypotheses presented in chapter 3 derive from an exploration of the above factors as suggested by the review of relevant literature in the following chapter.

### *Research Methodology*

In order to find answers, the researcher gathered data from school board presidents and superintendents in Michigan's public school districts. A comprehensive survey (153 variables, 55 questions) was developed and administered online for a period of 6 weeks in the spring of 2004. A robust response rate (99.5%) was achieved with the

support of the Michigan Associations of School Administrators and School Boards. Through analysis of the responses, the researcher created the “Strength of Relationship Scale” to quantify the relationship areas centered on the research questions, thus creating a mechanism for in-depth descriptive statistical analysis of conditions and influences on the board and superintendent relationship. In brief, the scale rated responses to each variable on a scale from -3 to 3 and then compared mean scores with independent variables to establish correlational relationships between variables.

A self-selected sample ( $n_{\text{respondents}} = 1047, 99.5\%$ ) responded to the survey. Only “complete” data were used in analyses, which, when tested, provided a representative sample by region and district size that was statistically no different than the expected population.

#### *Delimitations and Limitations*

The study was not intended to replicate the research conducted in the 1980s and 1990s, which focused on defining methods, purpose, frequency, and criteria of superintendent evaluation. This study was designed to build on prior research and to establish empirical data about the influences on the board and superintendent relationship relative to student learning, as suggested by earlier research.

### *Relevance of the Study*

*Scarcity of current research.* The existing research on superintendent evaluation was sparse and the scope of the research extremely narrow. From 1943 to 2002 (a 59-year period), 53 studies dealt directly with superintendent evaluation, 41 of which were written after *A Nation at Risk* was published in 1983. No research went beyond identification of evaluation method, purpose, frequency, or criteria during this time period. Subsequently, four published and one unpublished major research studies formed the basis of the most recent literature on superintendent evaluation: Robinson and Bickers (1990) examined the purposes of superintendent performance evaluation; Candoli et al. (1997) conducted a meta-study of all studies on superintendent evaluation up to 1997; Glass, Bjork, and Brunner (2000) reported the results of the AASA periodic nationwide survey of the conditions of superintendency; DiPaola and Stronge (2003) explored evaluation methods nation-wide; and Marcus, Mayo, and McCartney (2003) surveyed superintendent preferences for evaluation and perceived fairness of the process. Only a handful of dissertations broached superintendent evaluation; most focused on pre-1997 questions of identification of evaluation method, purpose, frequency,

or criteria. These studies will be discussed in great detail in the review of relevant literature. The scarcity of empirical data in large part motivated the detail of this study.

*Standardized competencies.* In the midst of the school reform and accountability debate, which is directly connected to the paradigm shift to proficiency, AASA and NSBA (1990) took a proactive role and defined the terms of superintendent evaluation with the issuance of *Professional Standards for the Superintendent* (AASA, 1993) and *Roles and Relationships: School Boards and Superintendents* (AASA, 1990; NSBA, 1990). These documents legitimized the three evaluation methods defined by Candoli et al. (1997) and focused superintendent evaluation on lists of duties and on specified competencies. The definition of national standards diverted superintendent evaluation from whether the superintendent led in a way that achieved the needs and goals of the district to whether the superintendent met national standards and competencies (Duvall, 2002). This diversion may be at the core of conflict between superintendents and their boards.

*Self-assessment scale.* The lack of research that probed beneath the surface of board and superintendent relations became evident in

the course of this study, which led this researcher to adopt a more comprehensive approach. This current study represented an attempt to move beyond the effort to define criteria, purpose, frequency, and method of evaluation. This study gathered data on methods of evaluation used in Michigan's public school districts and identified the relative strength of influences that affect the school board and superintendent relationship. The study devised a "Strength of Relationship Scale" that might be used by school boards and superintendents to self-assess their relationships and guide intentional structural choices in order to achieve higher student performance.

*Replication nationally.* The study may be replicated on a national level and might develop a deep and meaningful data set on superintendent and school board relationships. Structural reform was the missing element from the previous two decades of reform efforts (Spady, 1997). This study led to the creation of an instrument and assessment scale with the potential to motivate deep and prolonged conversation between boards and superintendents and might lead to lasting structural reform efforts. This study has quantifiably clarified a process of superintendent evaluation that can model authentic learning and assessment district-wide, create lower levels of conflict,

and overcome disadvantages of the political climate. In turn, it is proposed that the process can be adapted up through the buildings and classrooms and stimulate higher levels of student success.

### *Summary of Chapter 1*

This chapter introduced the research study in terms of the wider context of public education that affects the everyday relationship of the board and superintendent. It reiterated the role of superintendent evaluation in creating a positive relationship at the level of governance and leadership. This chapter briefly described the methods used to gather data from Michigan's school board presidents and superintendents and outlined the relevance of such research in the current climate of education reform. Subsequent chapters will review the relevant literature, describe the research design and methodology in detail, report specific results of the data analyses, and discuss conclusions and inferences from the findings.