

Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusions

Introduction

Earlier chapters discussed the context of leadership in public education, reviewed the relevant literature in the field, detailed the methodology employed for this study, and reported the findings. This final chapter will begin with an overview of the significant findings of the study with regard to each hypothesis. The findings are discussed and related to existing research. Two sections conclude this discussion: Implications for Further Study and Implications for Professional Practice.

Overview of Significant Findings

Hypothesis 1: Evaluation Method. Method of evaluation of the superintendent is a significant indicator (either positive or negative depending on the type of evaluation) of the strength of relationship between school board and superintendent.

Hypothesis 1 was positive; data were able to define a more complex picture of Strength of Relationship and evaluation than the primary hypothesis had posited. The researcher began this study with the assumption that method of superintendent evaluation would be a powerful indicator of the nature of the relationship

between the board and the superintendent. Although evaluation method correlated with Strength of Relationship and its six subgroups, the power of that correlation was not as robust as expected. Data-driven evaluation had consistently higher means compared to other evaluation types, yet it was not the factor that compelled Strength of Relationship. It appeared that other factors were at work.

These data revealed that when evaluation method was paired with political climate, the power to predict Strength of Relationship became dynamic. When boards worked together in a pluralistic way, pluralism became the decisive indicator of positive Strength of Relationship. When pluralistic interaction was paired with data-driven superintendent evaluation type, Strength of Relationship was increased approximately two-fold in most cases.

The general influence of the superintendent on the district had independently strong results. The stronger the superintendent's influence on the district was, the higher the student achievement was. The operating budget and the size of the district had little impact on Strength of Relationship.

The data surrounding socioeconomic status (SES) reiterated the Malone (2002) findings that SES was highly correlated with student achievement (MEAP). The data went on to reveal that SES negatively predicts conflict levels, disagreement, and Strength of Relationship between board members and the superintendent; the lower the SES was, the higher were the levels of Conflict and Disagreement, and the lower was the Strength of Relationship.

A hierarchy of evaluation types and political types emerged from these data, as depicted in Table 17, with Pluralistic political type and Data-driven evaluation type yielding the highest Strength of Relationship scores. The issue becomes *Can a school board be capable of intentional change toward pluralism and data-driven evaluation when the board is functionally Inert or Factional?* The researcher addresses this issue later in this chapter.

Table 17

Data-driven Hierarchy of Evaluation Types and Political Types

Strength of relationship	Evaluation type	Political type
Strongest	Data-driven	Pluralistic
Least strong	Judgment	Inert
Weak	Global	Factional

Hypothesis 2: Conflict Levels. Low levels of Conflict between the board and the superintendent correlate with Data-driven evaluation type and Pluralistic political climate type.

Hypothesis 2 was shown to be positive. Once again, political climate type emerged as a strong predictor of conflict level. Boards that work in a pluralistic manner are 87–93% percent less likely to report conflict.

The nature of conflict was clarified by these data. When conflict was reported, it centered first on role definition and fulfillment and second on financial issues. The most frequently reported conflict focused on staff negotiations, an issue that spans both role definition and financial considerations, as well as external (local, state, federal) and internal forces. The least reported conflicts were student achievement and technology.

Hypothesis 3: Agreement, Overall Strength of Relationship (OSOR), and MEAP. High levels of agreement and higher Overall Strength of Relationship between the board and the superintendent correlate with higher district Michigan Education Assessment program (MEAP) scores.

Hypothesis 3 was shown to be positive. The lower the level of Disagreement between the board and the superintendent was, the higher the MEAP passing rate rose. The higher the Overall Strength of Relationship between the board and superintendent was, the higher the MEAP passing rate rose. This remained true regardless of district size, per-pupil expenditure, or socioeconomic status. The data were clear.

A school board that works pluralistically and evaluates the superintendent on the basis of a data-driven method that sets goals for the district and assesses the district's achievement on the basis of the goals contributes to higher student achievement. Student achievement is shown to be as much as 3-4 times higher in the districts where Pluralistic political type and Data-driven evaluation method combine.

The data surrounding socioeconomic status (SES) reiterated the Malone (2002) findings in that SES correlated with student achievement (MEAP) and went on to reveal that SES negatively predicted Conflict levels, Disagreement, and Strength of Relationship between the board members and the superintendent;

the lower the SES was, the higher the levels of Conflict and Disagreement were, and the lower the Strength of Relationship was.

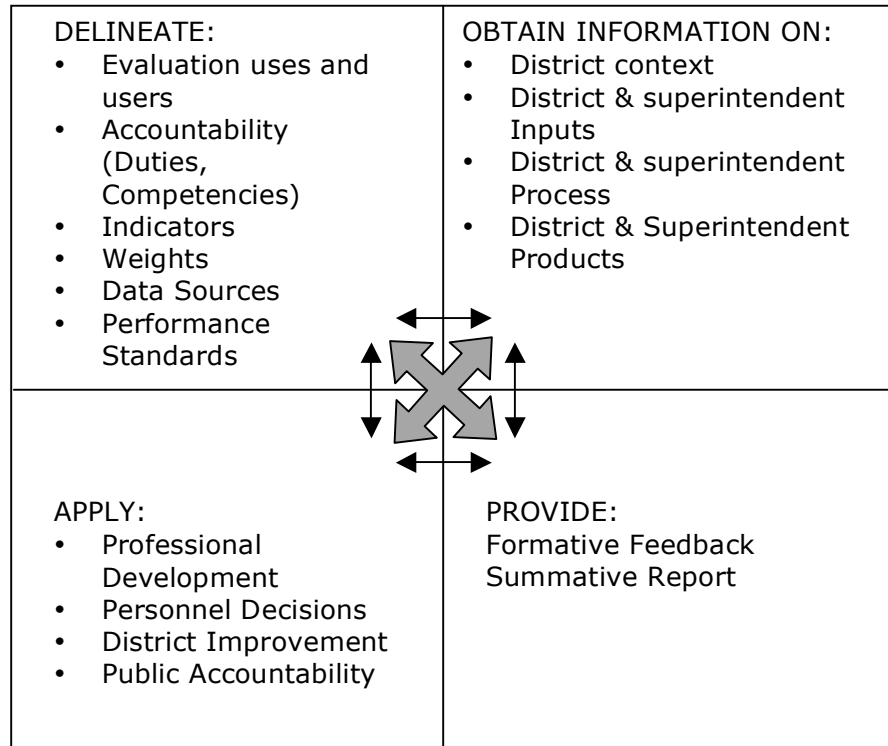
Findings and Existing Research

Candoli, Cullen, and Stufflebeam

Candoli, Cullen, and Stufflebeam's (1997) book, *Superintendent Performance Evaluation: Current Practice and Direction for Improvement*, reviewed research and literature in the area of superintendent evaluation. Their concise categorization of four evaluation methods was used throughout this research. The authors described an emerging model of superintendent evaluation that was comprehensive of the literature if somewhat complex and daunting for practice. It seems likely that the amount of historical and current data-gathering, interviews, and research necessary to actualize the Candoli et al. model is beyond the energy of most lay school board members. Figure 6 depicts the Candoli et al. model.

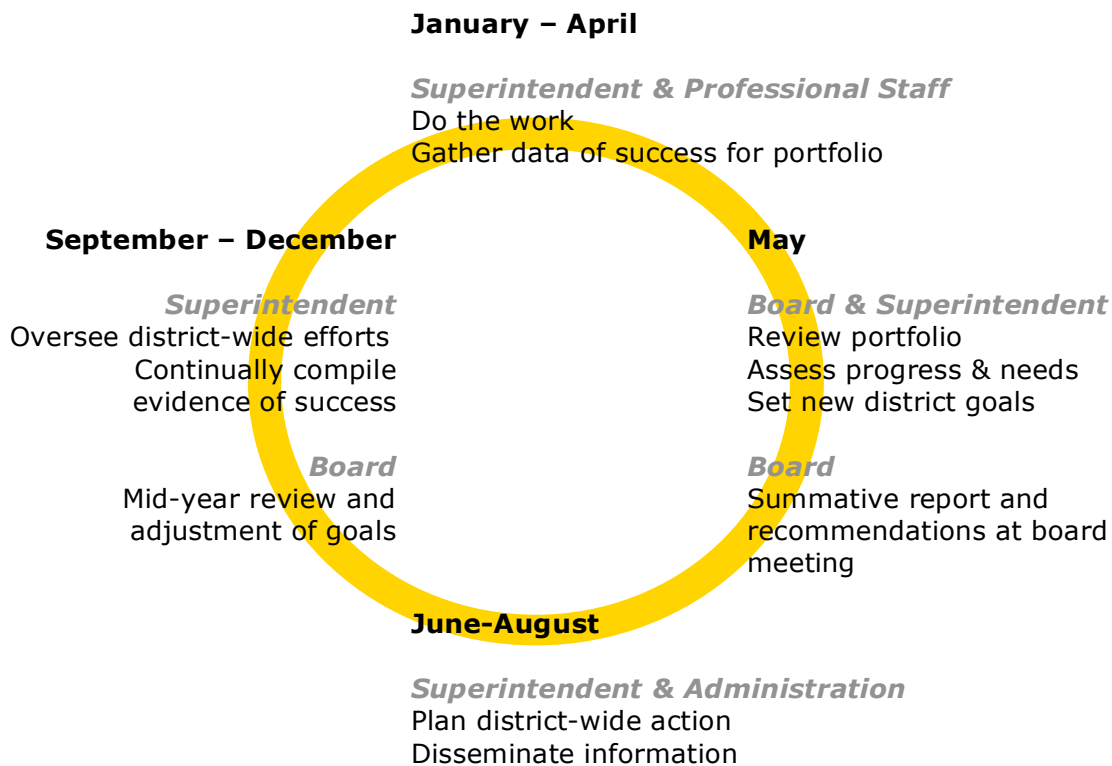
The data from this study suggested that districts use a more practical model that focuses on a continuous and collaborative process between the board and the superintendent. Figure 7 depicts the new model suggested by this study. There is little theoretical

difference between the two models, yet the emphasis on collaboration and team effort characterizes the new model.



* Candoli, Cullen, and Stufflebeam, 1997, p. 121

Figure 6. General and specific tasks in evaluating superintendent performance.*



* Timing is based on researcher observation in a "G – C" paired Michigan school district.

Figure 7. Model of a continuing cycle of goal setting, communication, data gathering, and assessment: Data-driven superintendent evaluation combined with pluralistic board interaction.*

Goodman and Zimmerman

Goodman and Zimmerman's (2000) report for the New England School Development Council (NESDC), *Thinking Differently: Recommendations for 21st Century School Board/Superintendent Leadership, Governance, and Teamwork for High Student Achievement*, was grounded in the theoretical concept that school districts cannot effectively raise student achievement without strong leadership and teamwork from the school board and superintendent. The National Advisory Committee for the report included 36 nationally recognized educational leaders whose theories were supported by the findings of this research. This study found that Strength of Relationship predicts student achievement (MEAP).

Iowa Lighthouse Study

The data from this study supported the findings of the Iowa Association of School Boards' (IASB, 2000) *Lighthouse Study*, which based its findings on interviews of administrators, teachers, students, and parents at six demographically similar schools with differing achievement levels. The Lighthouse Study found that the

difference between high student achievement and low student achievement was based on the following factors:

1. The attitude and beliefs of the school board and superintendent team
2. Communication between the central office team and the staff
3. Action taken on a consistent basis

This study suggested that board and superintendent actions play a leading role in creating the *culture of improvement* necessary to overcome the barriers to student success.

McCarty and Ramsey

McCarty and Ramsey (1971) conducted the defining research on how school board members relate to each other, to their superintendent, and to their community. Their study also discussed the effect that those interactions had on roles and relationships. The study undertaken here extended the McCarty and Ramsey findings with evidence that political climate is the strongest factor influencing the Strength of Relationship between a board and the superintendent. The section entitled *Implications for Further Study* will discuss specific implications of this evidence.

Prior Research

Prior research has shown repeatedly that a weak relationship between the superintendent and board

1. discourages school improvement (Danzberger et al., 1992),
2. affects the quality of the curriculum and programs (Nygren, 1992),
3. weakens the morale and stability of the district (Renchler, 1992),
4. negatively influences the superintendent's credibility with the board members (Petersen & Short, 2001),
5. impedes reform efforts, such as district restructuring (Konnert & Augenstein, 1995), collaborative long-range planning, and visioning (Kowalski, 1999), and
6. results in the shortened tenure of district leaders (Carter & Cunningham, 1992; Petersen & Fusarelli, 2001).

The data from this research suggested strategies for increasing the Strength of Relationship between the board and the superintendent. These align directly with pluralistic, data-driven, collaborative school leadership, and other variables included in this study. It can be inferred that a strong relationship between the

board and the superintendent can promote school improvement, the development of quality curriculum, high morale and stability, credibility of the superintendent with the board, collaborative long-range planning and visioning, and longer tenure for superintendents. The study identified the most effective underpinnings of the climate for improvement: pluralistic, collaborative, and data-driven school leadership. More important, these characteristics are indicative of higher student achievement, suggesting that board members and the superintendent can directly influence student achievement for better or worse.

Implications of the Study for Further Research

Political Context

The defining study of political climate in public school districts was the McCarty and Ramsey (1971) study that identified four categories of political climate: Dominated, Factional, Pluralistic, and Inert. When these categories were applied in this study, the researcher found a more complex and perhaps more dynamic political reality. During the process of constructing the four political type dummy variables from the data, the researcher became aware that many districts were in the process of change

from one political identity to another. The same was true of evaluation type classification. Many districts exhibited characteristics of two categories of political or evaluation type. This indicated that many districts are in transition or are unclear about or disagree on how they work together politically. Given that political climate emerged as the major predictor of Strength of Relationship between the board and superintendent and positively predicted student achievement, a new and comprehensive study of political climate in public school districts would add significantly to the field of knowledge. The data set from this study will be made available for further secondary analyses and reconsideration of political and evaluation type identifications.

Cause and Effect

This research demonstrated a correlational relationship, not a causal relationship, between Strength of Relationship and student achievement. The research method to prove causality in relation to student achievement is difficult to conceptualize. Nonetheless, such research would be useful for educational leaders as they attempt to make data-driven decisions to improve the potential for all students to succeed.

Unique Urban Challenges

This study included only one urban district in its analyses, thus limiting the relevance of these data for the urban setting. One would suspect that the principles of pluralistic collaboration, goal setting, and data-driven evaluation presented here might apply in urban districts, yet on the basis of these data, one cannot confidently generalize to urban settings. Researchers with particular interest in the complex issues of urban public education may wish to include some assessment of political climate in future research.

AASA Longitudinal Study of the Superintendency

Given the importance of political climate, as revealed in this study, the AASA longitudinal study of the superintendency may wish to design specific questions that identify political identity and other influences not currently included in the ongoing study. Data on political climate over a long period of time would contribute to in-depth analyses.

Implications of the Study for Professional Practice

The results of this study can inform the work of school boards and superintendents interested in the goal of higher student achievement.

Hypothesis 1 findings revealed that pluralistic, data-driven board political climates are indicative of higher Strength of Relationship, more superintendent influence, and higher student achievement. Superintendent influence included the elements delineated by Crowson and Morris (1992) in that the superintendent was respected in the community, worked well with board members, was a risk-taker, and supported principals collaboratively. These are characteristics that contribute positively to the board and superintendent Strength of Relationship.

Hypothesis 2 findings suggested the relevance of the development of a clear process for defining board and superintendent roles and district goals. Findings also suggested that the roles-and-goals process be implemented in conjunction with a Data-driven assessment of superintendent performance that is based on the achievement of the district goals.

Hypothesis 3 findings highlighted the need for boards and superintendents to communicate in both directions. They underscored the importance of the goal-setting process and the requirement that district leadership adhere to the goals they create. Also important is the contextualization of personal agendas unrelated to the goals set by the board. The board needs to keep its focus on the good of all children. Simply stated, high levels of agreement indicate high levels of student achievement. Next, the researcher will expand on these concepts.

Context

Since *A Nation at Risk* (United States Commission on Excellence in Education, 1985), school reform has jumped and floundered in fits and starts across a spectrum of theories and philosophies. Paul Houston, Executive Director of AASA, has a clear understanding of the implications for today's educational leaders:

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. The new mission is the logical outgrowth of

accomplishing universal access and being off to a good start on equal educational opportunity. Absent universal access and the goal of equal educational opportunity, universal high achievement would be unthinkable. Without equal educational opportunity, universal high achievement is unachievable.

(Houston, 2004a, p. 1)

In America, all children have access to a public school system, but in practice they may not have equal opportunity within each district or each state. Sorting and dividing is still an all-too-common practice, even in schools with the best intentions. This study demonstrated that focused board and superintendent team leadership was one important factor in the achievement of opportunity and proficiency for all students.

Intentional Structural Change

These data give the information needed to begin deep conversations in communities and among educational leaders, faculty, and students about the future of American public education. These data seem to challenge school boards to initiate intentional structural change for the achievement of the goals of access, opportunity, and proficiency for all students. To restructure

schooling (beyond the *Model T* structure) to meet our students' future needs, not our past needs, is a formidable challenge. These data provide the board and the superintendent a place to begin the change process.

Board Self-Evaluation

The results of this study suggest the need for school boards to commit to periodic self-evaluation as one component of the pluralistic process. Earlier, the issue of board self-evaluation was briefly raised as a missing element in the change and reform process. These data suggest that the notion be revived and developed; change without self-reflection has severely marked our recent past history of failed attempts at school reform. The national associations for superintendents and school board members might take on the task of the research and development needed to adopt methods of board self-evaluation.

The concept of board self-evaluation suggests that the researcher might develop the questionnaire and online format for the general use of school boards in the self-evaluation process. It may be helpful for boards to begin the process with a quantifiable

statement of their Strength of Relationship. Further, this toll might identify specific areas for intentional improvement.

Relevancy of Teaching and Learning and Board Training

Board training and district teaching and learning styles were found to form a group of their own as distinct from the variables that formed the Strength of Relationship Scale. The TLSOR (Training, Teaching, and Learning Strength of Relationship) findings revealed that board member training predicted *only* student achievement. In other words, if a board member wishes to personally contribute to student achievement, the board member should participate in board training programs. Working with the other board members, she/he can lead the district toward authentic teaching and learning practices and participate in community-wide conversations about future-thinking education. In large city schools and small, an important factor to recognize is the need for change focused on *relevancy* of teaching and learning for the reality of the student population in largely underfunded public schools.

Conclusion

Alvin Toffler, the author of the 1971 best-selling book *Future Shock*, paraphrased psychologist Herbert Gerjuoy when he said, “The illiterate of the twenty-first century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn” (Toffler, 1971, p. 367). Educational leaders understand this and stand in the midst of a multifaceted challenge to change school culture. They are expected to produce a culture of access, opportunity, and universal proficiency in schools structured for assembly-line convenience. They are called upon to create relevancy with eroding finances, rising costs, class and race barriers, and ambiguous community support. These are indeed difficult and demanding times for public education. The data from this study suggest that educational leadership and governance that are pluralistic and data-driven are more important than ever before. There has never been a time in American history when educators have been asked to do more and to fulfill more roles in society and family life than they are now. In order to achieve these goals in uncertain times, educators must rethink how they organize, how

they lead, how they teach, how they support learning, and how they govern public education. Partial measures will no longer suffice.

This study provides educational leaders with data to support the breadth of necessary change. This dissertation reported data on the strength of the relationships between boards and superintendents and what differences these relationships might make for student success. It identified the pluralistic, data-driven, and collaborative organizational pattern that predicts higher student achievement. There is no time like the present to go forward and further test these findings. School boards and superintendents are challenged to take these findings and implement new school structures to move American public education into the 21st century.