

A Study of the Michigan Superintendency: Insiders v. Outsiders

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During the Winter of 2002 a study was conducted of the Michigan superintendency with particular attention given to the issue of successor origin. The purpose of the study was to learn more about the current makeup of Michigan superintendents as well as to compare the similarities and differences of those who were hired from within their current district versus those who were hired from outside their current district. Of the 524 superintendents anonymously surveyed on-line, 363 responded for a total response rate of 69%. Below is a summary of selected findings.

Gender, Age, and Demographics

Seventeen percent of those responding to the survey were females, which is comparable, albeit slightly higher, to the national average. In *The 2000 Study of the American School Superintendency*, 14% of all superintendents were female (Glass, p. 16). Interestingly, the study of the Michigan superintendency revealed no difference between the number of female insiders and outsiders. Exactly 20 of the 40 female respondents indicated that they were insiders and 20 indicated that they were outsiders.

The vast majority of superintendents are in their fifties (64%) and are male (83%). Fifty-six percent

represent rural districts while only 5% represent urban districts. Most others identify their district as suburban or rural/suburban. Seventy-three percent of the superintendents responded that they were content with the size of their district, while most of the others indicated that they would like to be in a larger district.

Successor Origin

One-third of the superintendents surveyed were insiders at the time they were hired for their present superintendency and two-thirds were outsiders. Less than 10% of all superintendents have spent their entire career in just one district, indicating that even the majority of insiders have also worked in other districts throughout their career. Interestingly, 16% of outsiders were once insider superintendents before leaving their district for another superintendency.

Turnover

Another observation drawn from the data is that approximately one-third (32%) of all superintendents surveyed are in their first three years of being a superintendent, which indicates a fairly significant amount of superintendencies were turned over in the last three years. This is a trend that leaders in the state expect to continue due to a growing number of superintendents who are eligible to retire.

Superintendent/Board Relations

The vast majority of Michigan superintendents reported

that they have a positive relationship with their board of education. Surprisingly, only 3% indicated a negative relationship with their board. Of those reporting a negative relationship, all were outsiders. The vast majority of Michigan superintendents also characterized favorably the quality and frequency of communication with their board of education. Again, only 3% reported negatively regarding communication with their board. Generally, the superintendents view their own performance as either successful or very successful. Less than 4% were concerned about their success as a superintendent.

The majority of current superintendents (66%) have only held one superintendency. Of those who have held more than one superintendency during their career, 25% reported either conflict with the board of education or changes on the board of education as reasons for leaving their previous superintendency. Regardless of successor origin or other factors, most superintendents intend to remain in the profession as a superintendent until retirement.

Advantages and Disadvantages of One's Origin

Finally, perhaps the most enlightening feedback from the superintendents was their collective response to the last item on the questionnaire, which asked them to indicate the advantages and disadvantages of being an insider or outsider superintendent. While the answers varied, it was interesting to see the common threads that emerged from the 225 superintendents who responded to the question. Table 1

demonstrates the general themes that were repeatedly referred to as either advantages or disadvantages of being an *outsider*.

Table 1

Advantages and Disadvantages of Being an Outsider

Outsider Advantages:

- (a) No personal baggage
- (b) New ideas for the district
- (c) No alliances/Can be objective
- (d) Fresh start/Renewed motivation
- (e) Ability to bring about change

Outsider Disadvantages:

- (a) It takes a while to get to know staff and community
 - (b) Do not know past history and culture of district
 - (c) Takes time to develop relationships and trust
 - (d) The Board has high expectations of change
 - (e) Unions do not like outsiders
 - (f) Moving/Relocating family
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Many of the outsider superintendents responded that they felt that the opportunity for a fresh start with no baggage was a distinct advantage of being an outsider. For example, one superintendent stated that as an outsider, "history does not get in the way of problem solving."

Another indicated that "as an outsider I can focus on the present instead of the past." The two most common responses regarding outsider advantage were with regard to bringing new ideas to the district and being able to operate with objectivity because no favors were owed to others in the district. For example, one superintendent stated that there were "no 'good old boy' issues to overcome." Another indicated that not having ties to friends made it easier to make the tough decisions.

Several disadvantages of being an outsider were also listed with the two most common responses being the time it takes to get caught up to speed and the time it takes to build trust. Some spoke about a loss of "institutional history," and others referred to the "inherent distrust of yet another outsider." A few superintendents saw the high expectations of change as a disadvantage. For example, one superintendent stated that Boards call upon outsiders to get "their dirty work done."

Table 2 demonstrates the general themes that were repeatedly referred to as either advantages or disadvantages of being an *insider*.

Table 2

Advantages and Disadvantages of Being an Insider

Insider Advantages:

- (a) Know staff and community (people and values)
- (b) Credibility with staff already established
- (c) Smooth transitions because of prior knowledge
- (d) Trust is already established because the staff and community already know the superintendent
- (e) Already know where the landmines are
- (f) Do not have to move

Insider Disadvantages:

- (a) People already know your soft spots
- (b) Some poor relationships already established
- (c) Baggage comes along
- (d) No honeymoon/Harder to change things
- (e) Lack of new ideas/Too comfortable with status quo

The knowledge of the district and community, as well as the ability to hit the ground running were the most common advantages of being an insider that were listed by the respondents. For example, one superintendent stated, "I knew what areas needed to be addressed." Another indicated that "insiders know the unwritten rules and can navigate the culture with ease." Others referred to a "smooth transition" or an "easy transition." One superintendent commented that being an insider allowed a "consistency toward district goals" and an "ability to relate immediately to staff and the issues." Many saw the prior knowledge of the community as a distinct advantage. For example, one superintendent stated, "You know the people, many parents are former

students."

There were also several disadvantages of being an insider that were listed. Several superintendents referred to the lack of new ideas, the baggage that comes along, and the difficulty of bringing about change. For example, one superintendent referred to the "baggage" he carried from his former position in the district. Another made reference to the fact that there was "no honeymoon," which made it difficult to initiate change. Others discussed the possibility of limited vision because of being in one place so long. Finally, one superintendent stated, "as an insider, you can get too comfortable."

Similarities & Differences

Most superintendents, irrespective of origin, reported similarly on items related to things such as superintendent/school board relations (overwhelmingly positive), communication (positive), job satisfaction (positive), years served (average tenure was 5 ½ years regardless of origin), and board evaluations of their performance. However, this study did reveal that definite differences exist between the insiders and outsiders surveyed. Most notably, those differences include their perceptions of why they were hired to be a superintendent (insiders for stability and outsiders for change), the actual ratio of insiders to outsiders (1/3 insiders and 2/3 outsiders), the frequency and infrequency of various succession patterns (insider-to-insider is the least common

pattern while outsider-to-outsider is the most common), their attitude toward mobility (outsiders being much more willing to think of their present assignment as temporary), and their level of contentment with the size of their district (outsiders demonstrated more dissatisfaction with the size of their current district than did insiders).

Reflections

It could be argued that the demands and political pressures of the superintendency have mitigated many differences that once existed between insiders and outsiders, especially regarding the number of years each serves. It was interesting to note that many of the "insiders" in this study also served in other districts at some point in their career. Less than 10% of the respondents indicated that they had spent their entire educational career in one district. Workers in general do not appear to stay in one organization or one community for their entire career as they once did. Our society has become much more mobile, and the loyalty between employer and employee appears to have eroded from what it once was. This would obviously have implications for what we once characterized as the "placebound" superintendent.

Additionally, public school superintendents are under the microscope of public scrutiny like never before. In the Age of Information where one can watch school board meetings on the local cable station, email the superintendent from home, and visit a school's website to monitor progress,

superintendents are much more accountable and susceptible to criticism than ever before. Couple the increased accountability with the increased responsibility from various state and federal mandates that continue to pile up and it is easy to see what a complex and almost impossible job a public school superintendent now has. Consequently, many superintendents find themselves in the position of needing to move on for a fresh start after several years of fighting various battles within the district and community.

Regardless of the challenges, a relatively healthy picture of the Michigan superintendency emerged. It was obvious from the responses to the survey that this cohort of Michigan superintendents has an admirable dedication to public education. I was also impressed that so many of the superintendents, as busy as they are, took the time to complete this survey, granting me the opportunity to build a profile of the Michigan superintendency. To all those who participated, many thanks! Lead on.