

Teachers College Superintendents Leadership Institute



An Online Tool for Mentoring New Superintendents

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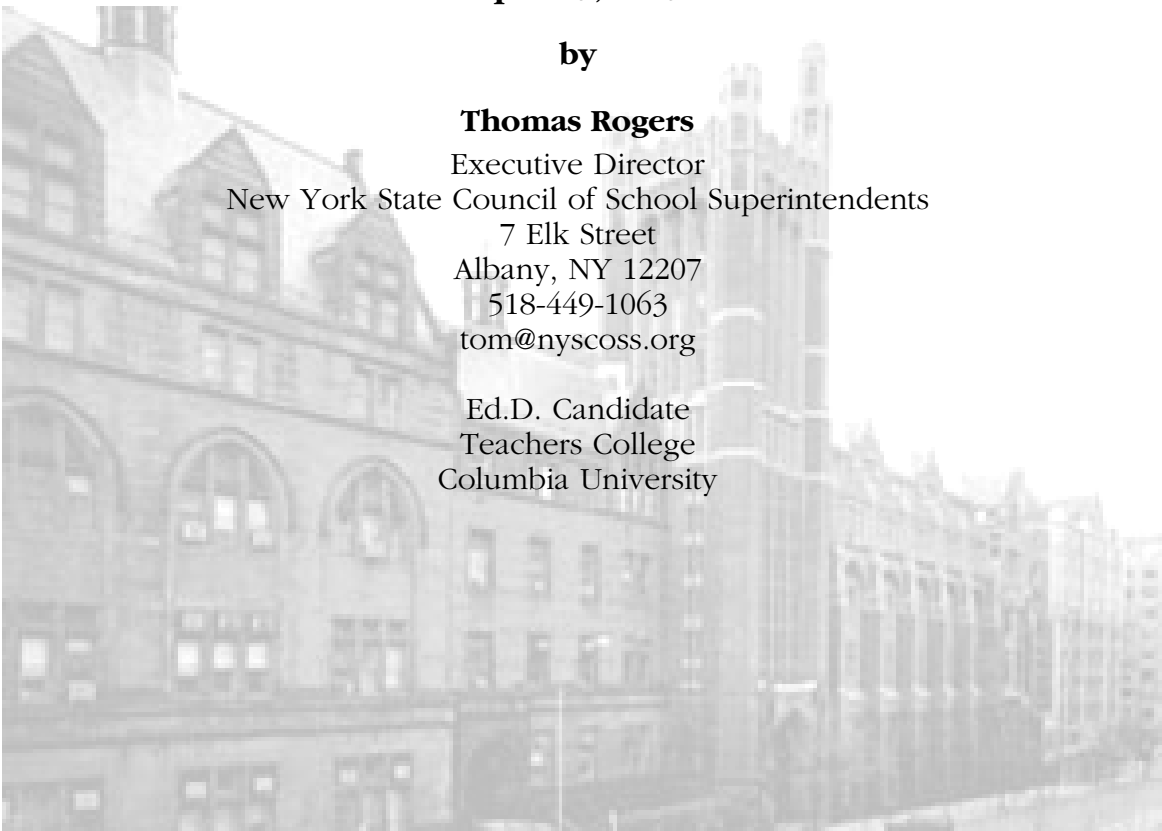
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Problem/Theoretical Perspectives

The national school leadership shortage is beginning to be felt acutely in the school superintendency in New York State (Cooper, Fusarelli, & Carella, 2000; NYSCOSS, 2000). New York State's superintendents association estimates that 57% of the state's superintendents will retire in the next 5 years (NYSCOSS, 2000). At least one clear consequence of this trend will be the loss of a considerable amount of experience, expertise and institutional memory among the superintendent corps, which heretofore has served as socializing and support system for new superintendents.

This trend is juxtaposed against a recruitment phenomena characterized by a difficulty in attracting experienced candidates to the superintendency in historical numbers. Data from other studies indicated that the candidate pool for the superintendencies has diminished significantly from 1996 to 1999 (from 43 applications per vacancy to 26) and is comprised of fewer qualified applicants (Brockett, 1996; O'Connell, 2000). Not only do fewer people seem to be pursuing the superintendency, those who do are doing so later in their careers, and thus will serve fewer years and accumulate less experience before retiring (Glass, Bjork & Brunner, 2000; NYSCOSS, 2000).

Given the difficulty of the initial transition to the superintendency (Chapman, 1997), the foregoing trends suggest that the need for the professional development of new superintendents will be greater than ever. Yet new superintendents have difficulty taking advantage of existing professional development opportunities because of job demands, particularly in small districts, isolation and perception problems with travel out of district. In addition, few such professional development opportunities are focused exclusively on the population of novice superintendents (Glass, Bjork & Brunner, 2000).

This study was predicated on the suspicion that an electronic medium could overcome some of the geographic and practical barriers to professional development that exist for novice superintendents. Websites outside the field of education were already serving as means of connecting users' questions with expert answers (www.webmd.com), and within education, experimentation with a "virtual mentor" program was done through the National Association of Secondary School Principals' website (www.nassp.org). We found more support for this idea in the literature bridging adult learning and the Internet (Cahoon, 1998). It became clear that asynchronous means of communication would lend themselves to broader participation, more thoughtful dialogue and a sense of on-line community (Holt, 1998).

Brookfield (1989) reported from his long term studies that adult learners found educational activities most meaningful when the learners could make a direct connection between past experience and current concern. Further, adult learners declared the learning of greatest personal significance to be that in which they had to confront and work through a realistic challenge. This is consistent with other research (Eastman, 1998) which would indicate that permitting superintendents to use direct personal experiences

as a learning tool in an interactive setting would enhance the learning experience and aid in knowledge retention.

Guided by these trends in educational leader preparation programs and adult learning theory, we sought the feedback from superintendents, both new and veteran, about the potential relevance and use of such a system. The result of our efforts was a website designed to use innovative technology to overcome difficulties that have minimized the effectiveness of more traditional professional development efforts for novice superintendents.

Methods and Data

The sparse nature of the literature on the intersection of adult learning theory and technology suggested the need for a great deal of preliminary investigation prior to the creation of any on-line tool. It became clear that it would be necessary to elucidate not only the types of on-line experiences new superintendents would find useful and appealing, but the specific needs encountered by new superintendents specifically.

Background data was thus drawn from a series of two sets of focus group interviews with superintendents from across the nation over the course of two academic years. The first group of focus groups was with over 200 superintendents, who were asked about their graduate preparation, their on-going professional development, and their actual experiences as chief school officers with particular emphasis on surprising or counterintuitive findings.

Specific attention was paid to the needs that arose in the first few years. Consistent with Fullan (1991) and others, it became clear that the first 3 years were as much about learning the unique nature of the position as they were about actually performing its functions. Several immediate needs were identified, centering less around questions of leadership and more around the practical/functional questions. Budget preparation, board relations, facilities management, and personnel were prominent themes.

Given the promise that the Internet appeared to hold for addressing many of these types of issues, we followed this initial research with two series of focus group interviews. The research had twin goals: fine-tune remaining design issues, and develop “market research” on potential new superintendent clients. While it had become clear from the lengthy series of initial focus groups interviews that the need was present and pressing, an assessment of new superintendents’ likelihood of turning to the internet for solutions needed to be explored as did the attitudes of any veteran superintendents who might be asked to staff the website as experts.

The background focus group interviews revealed that many veteran superintendents spent considerable time mentoring new superintendents. This is consistent with findings that at least 31% of superintendents actively mentored superintendent candidates (Volp, 2000). Through two state superintendent associations, meetings were conducted with superintendents who chaired association professional development committees (New York) and with the Executive Director (Tennessee). These meetings identified a pool of potential veterans to “staff” the website and highlighted remaining considerations.

The preliminary findings from the focus groups and these meetings were contrasted with a second set of phone-based focus group interviews conducted with new superintendents (defined as those with fewer than 3 years experience) in New York and Tennessee over the same time period. Questions were designed to prompt discussion of several key issues: perceptions of their first 3 years, self-evaluations of their learning needs, perceived barriers to professional development, and comfort with technology. New superintendents' perceptions and evaluations of preparation programs were also discussed in order to advance the design of such programs for future superintendent candidates.

The phone-based focus groups were conducted in conjunction with the two state associations which identified superintendents with fewer than 3 years experience on conference calls scheduled at times of mutual convenience. Each focus group consisted of 5-6 participants including the researcher/moderator. Once collected, the focus group data was analyzed for common themes relating to the practice of the superintendency, the professional development habits and needs of new superintendents and then some basic marketing analysis for the website proposal – the outline was described and the superintendents' reactions were recorded.

To supplement these interviews, two state superintendent associations were enlisted to provide feedback on the design phase to ensure the relevance of the tool and later in the implementation phase to market the tool to their membership.

With few successful implementation models to rely on, it seemed prudent to have at least two different strategies, one for each two states which would have the collateral benefit of providing some useful comparative data. The only similar model, the National Association of Secondary School Principals' Virtual Mentor had very little traffic overall and none in the 3 months prior to our exploration of the site.

In Tennessee, with only 138 superintendents, an invitation to the site was extended to the entire membership of the state association by its Executive Director. Teachers College would provide logistical and technical support as well as maintain the website. All Tennessee superintendents would be granted access and the ability to engage in the dialogue.

In New York, a more progressive approach was taken through several stages. To ascertain superintendents' comfort with the "threaded discussion group" model on which the website was based, the site was initially opened to the state association's Executive Committee, a group of highly motivated senior superintendents, to conduct the business of the association in a virtual space. The second stage of the implementation was adjusted based on initial findings from this group.

The second stage consisted of an invitation to emeritus faculty of the state associations' Superintendent's Academy professional development program to staff the website as "mentors". New superintendents, defined as those with fewer than 3 years, were also invited to participate as "mentees". The emeritus faculty members were already

vettted through the state association as being both highly knowledgeable and highly motivated to offer their colleagues professional development.

Ultimately, it is hoped that what is learned by following these participants' use of the website will form the basis for recursive improvement of the tool through subsequent generations.

Results

What became evident from our conversations with both new and experienced superintendents is how different the actual practice of the superintendency was from their perceptions prior to entering the position and from the kinds of preparation that were received in graduate training programs. Because of these differences, all agreed that a great deal of on-the-job-learning needed to take place. How that learning was taking place became an interesting line of inquiry as several counterintuitive and non-traditional approaches were noted in addition to more familiar workshop-type experiences. While we used the term professional development to encompass such learning broadly, it was clear that the superintendents viewed many of their informal contacts as equally valuable as the traditional didactic program format.

Current Professional Development

When asked what comprised current professional development activities, new superintendents in every group immediately identified the obvious – workshops run by state and national professional associations and education agencies – but also identified neighboring superintendents and local colleges and universities as resources. When the conversation turned away from workshops toward mentoring, little enthusiasm was noted for formal mentoring programs. A typical comment was:

“Formal mentoring is not as helpful, informal mentoring works better because personality is so critical.”

Many new superintendents indicated that they kept in contact with cohort members from graduate and professional training programs, and considered this relevant professional development.

“I was part of the Oswego new superintendents program where I did a lot of networking, I maintain my membership on their listserv which has given me contacts with the legislature and the State Education Department.”

“The Capital District superintendents have an annual retreat. The networking that takes place there is the best benefit. I’ve also attended the NYSCOSS Superintendents’ Academy three times. That’s been very helpful.”

Instead of seeking mentors, superintendents seemed to gravitate toward “go to” persons for different topics. (“It’d help if we could identify for each an area of expertise, finance, personnel, special education, etc. We do that locally, I know who to call.”) One surprising finding was how often the “go to” person was a lawyer. This quote echoed a sentiment from each of the focus groups:

“I tend to run a lot past the lawyers. We live in such a litigious society, I have to make sure every little bit of communication coming from the district will pass legal muster.”

In short, new superintendents seemed to be greedily pursuing the knowledge they needed to do their jobs well, but more often than not through non-traditional avenues. Reliance on interpersonal relationships, and thus very individualized learning, seemed typical and might have been displacing workshop-type experiences. Although they were taking advantage of the apparent opportunities presented, there was a definite need for additional assistance. Superintendents were unsure of how much support could be rendered by the state association, they were also anxious to find veteran superintendents who could be identified as “expert” in one or more areas.

Barriers to Professional Development

Despite the professional development taking place both formally and informally, new superintendents readily identified barriers to professional development ranging from the obvious:

“I suppose that if I had to identify another issue, it’d be money or travel. There’s often a public relations problem with conference spending locally.”

to the not-so-obvious:

“It seems that opportunities always come at inconvenient times, because of board meetings, or the football game. Our free time is very, very limited.”

This theme of time pressures was repeated again and again. Whether it was concerns about how much time they are putting into their jobs (“Are 16 hour days normal?”) to the time pressures of having to make board meetings, sports events, community meetings, committee meetings and the time taken in travel to a professional development venue, the issue of time kept coming up in group after group, context after context.

The themes of tight district budgets, a reluctance to leave the district because of perception issues, and the cost of travel to a distant state capitol or university appeared frequently. Some new superintendents learned to overcome this:

“I was given some good advice - schedule it in advance. I make all of the monthly meetings in the county, I haven’t missed one yet. I find they save time because help me make better use of my time. Going to those opportunities is a great use of my time.”

“It took me a while to realize this, but it’s refreshing to realize that you have the power to control your own time, despite the pressures.”

“Yeah, in this role, doing the job means gathering information which often means leaving the building. It was a complete change in mindframe for me coming from

a principalship where the culture was of being visible in the building all the time.”

And while some reluctance on the part of school boards to see superintendents leave the district for professional development was the norm (“boards always say ‘we pay you to stay here and run the district.’”), there were exceptions:

“No actually with my board, it’s quite the opposite. They tell me that I need to have the training in order to be up to date and on top of what is going on. There’s no conflict there at all.”

“Me either, in fact, I have it written into my contract. It’s not an issue as long as I keep it around 2-3 days a month. If it got to be more than that, it’d be a concern.”

In every focus group, the superintendents readily suggested similar solutions – some internet or web-supported solution – to this problem:

“Perhaps one way to get around this would be to do more electronic professional development. I live 332 miles from Nashville. I’d like to see some real-time electronic opportunities. I know some things will lose their effectiveness, but the time I save in travel would be immeasurable.”

“You know, with technology I think we can overcome the limitations of travel time.”

Each group seemed to express a distinct impression that new superintendents felt caught between the pressures of the position and the time demands it immediately placed on them and the need to develop the skills that would enable them to be more effective with the time they had. For some, that tension was slowly overcome by insisting on professional development, while others waited for sufficient experience – through trial and error learning – to accumulate so they didn’t feel the time and other job pressures as acutely.

New Superintendent Skill Needs

The interviewed superintendents also had several distinct skill needs or gaps in knowledge that they wanted to address. Superintendents generally felt unprepared for the day-to-day activities of running a district, typically having focused on curriculum and learning issues in their preparation, they found the superintendency to be not only a more managerial, but also involved a great deal of political interaction and communication with the board and the community.

New superintendents in particular mentioned surprise at how little time was spent on educational issues and how much of their day was consumed with the management of the district and of the board. The greatest areas of need included specific information on the implementation of state regulations, compliance with laws on personnel, and the preparation of budgets. The following illustrate the laundry list of needs new

superintendents identified. Of the list, the most common deficiencies cited were lack of budget preparation skills, lack of board relations skills, and lack of media skills.

“My opinion, having lived through the first year, is that I didn’t even know what to ask. “

“I was an assistant superintendent for instruction, some superintendents come from a business background, the skill sets we bring to the job are different, so the problems will be different for every superintendent (though) there may be common gaps... ”

“I think 2 common problems are budget development and the change process... Do you move slowly or do you attack and make change? Boards and the communities expect academic results, but the change period is slow and outcomes come even slower. Despite all the literature on how slow the change process is, we’re expected to be instant change agents.”

“There’s all the aspects of the job that have nothing to do with education. Buildings and Grounds, personnel are very expensive so you have to understand that whole end of the school system. The awful civil service rules!”

“I wish I had a better handle on the technical aspects of say building trades because when I work with my contractor, I want to be able to understand what they’re saying... I’d like to know more about grantsmanship, just a quick and dirty guide to where to find money...”

“Dealing with the media is a biggie! How do you manage a crisis before the media turn it into a feeding frenzy? If there were a website with a crib sheet, a synopsis of what to do and some links to other resources, that’d be fabulous.”

“(I need help with) practical legal matters. I’m in a small central office with a business official. I’d love a legal handbook and some templates of letters for personnel appointments, or the denial of tenure, I want to make sure my letters are constructed correctly, some kind of outline would be great.”

I wasn’t ready to do so much working directly with boards. How do you handle tough situations with tough board members?

The common thread running through these issues was that they tended to deal with the management of the district rather than the purpose of the district and its schools. New superintendents did raise instructional issues, but these were less often cited as needs either because the new superintendents already had instructional backgrounds (“I’m already comfortable with instruction.”) or because management crowds out time for instruction as the following quotes illustrate:

“Well, I have a curriculum and instruction background and I’m always surprised how little time is spent on C&I which instead should be the heart and soul of what we’re doing.”

“I’m disappointed to find how much time we invest in business matters and how it crowds out instruction. It creates this tremendous reliance on the business official.”

“It’s impossible to find time to step back and view the big picture, you’re always problem solving.”

Despite this complaint about management crowding out educational leadership, some new superintendents were focused enough on educational change to identify learning needs related to curriculum and instruction:

“Tennessee test data can be disaggregated. I’d like to have some way to contact an experienced superintendent to ask them how they’ve found this data to be useful in raising test scores. My principal went to a conference and revealed all of his “secrets”. He subsequently got 25 job offers from people at the conference. Stuff like his information could be on a website.”

“I’d ask my colleagues what programs they found effective. What was their experience with magnet schools for example? How did they go about doing creative scheduling?”

“I could use information on things like alternative calendars and redistricting. If someone else was asking these questions on the website, you could listen and learn from the discussion.”

“In that vein, what would be useful would be a place where schools with innovative programs could post information about their experience... You could do it like how people post reviews of software programs on c|net.”

It was not uncommon, as in this quote, for the vernacular of technology to keep recurring (“I link into a mutual fund discussion group all the time.”).

While quite conscious of the fact that their primary responsibility was to educate children and to find new and more effective ways to do so, it was clear that by and large the needs that the new superintendents felt most acutely centered around the “nuts and bolts” of running a district. In particular, the skills that one doesn’t develop in other school district jobs (i.e. board relations, media relations, budget development, personnel) all seemed recurring needs.

Given that many of the learning needs identified in the lists above are essentially the knowledge and experience of veteran superintendents, it was important to ascertain whether a sufficient comfort level with technology existed among the group to make an on-line mentoring tool appear a promising means of bridging the experience gap.

New Superintendents’ Technology Skills

As promising as such a tool might be, using any on-line medium would require a thorough understanding of new superintendents’ technology skills: New superintendents seemed surprisingly confident with their technology skills. On a scale of 1-10, 10 of the

15 superintendents in our focus groups rated their skills 7 or higher. Keyboarding seemed to be the only major impediment.

“I’d say I’m about a 7. I don’t have my own personal website for example, but I don’t think I fully exploit my capabilities. I’d say I can do anything “outside the box” (as a user) but nothing “inside the box” (as a technician or programmer). I’d like more experience, but that’s down the line for our district. For now, I can get others to do it.”

“One big impediment is if there is a lot of keystroking. A lot of us have poor keyboarding skills.”

“I’d say that across the state about half of the superintendents can do e-mail, the other half write something on paper and have their secretary e-mail it. Some people, not the younger generation.”

Despite this comfort, one admonition from a new superintendent seemed particularly apt: “... simpler is better.” While it was surprising to see how highly two-thirds of the superintendents rated themselves, the remaining 5 superintendents gave themselves very low marks, and not just for keyboarding. While this sample may be too small to draw statistical inferences, it nevertheless suggests a bimodal distribution of technology skills among new superintendents.

On-Line Mentoring Tool Design Notes

In one focus group, the broad strokes for the on-line tool appeared as suggestions from the group during a discussion on other professional development before the topic was introduced by the moderator:

“I like the idea of the specific topics so you can select only those that you need. I’d like to see a smorgasbord from which you can choose to enrich your own personal development... What would be really great is an on-line bulletin board. Not an “open” forum, but if you had 10-15 selected NYSCOSS liaisons where a response could come back electronically.”

“With all the retirements, there must be a cadre of highly effective retired superintendents available for consultation, rather than me just relying on those who are regional.”

“It’d help if we could identify for each an area of expertise, finance, personnel, special education, etc. We do that locally, I know who to call. I’d just like to add that you (NYSCOSS) should keep doing all of the great things you’re doing.”

In another focus group, a similar discussion emerged:

“You could have a lot of old responses catalogued and organized by topic, you could search through these and you might get lucky.”

“There’s real value in something with 24-hour electronic turnaround.”

Perhaps you could designate questions with urgency, flag them

“Of course for more complex questions, timeliness may not be as important as accuracy. I think you could build in some kind of urgency meter.”

With respect to the creation of an on-line tool specifically, we were surprised to find that no new superintendents were concerned about anonymity.

“If it’s so private that you want to be anonymous, you probably should be handling that issue with a phone call to someone. Websites tend to be a little more detached. I’d like for it not to be anonymous, because I think it’d be useful to see if there were others from my region that might be experiencing the same problem.”

This generated a lot of agreement along with a similar sentiment (“I’d absolutely share the answers with other superintendents.”).

Rather they were concerned with issues of quality and privacy. It was their sense that as long as the discussion space was limited to superintendents and former superintendents that having the ability to read and respond to others’ questions would permit new superintendents to chime in with different nuances to problems, or to read the answers that were provided to colleagues for common questions. Additionally, they felt that this would create a sense of community.

“It needs to be password-protected to minimize the risk of something getting out.”

“The idea is very valuable, especially if you know who is on the other end. Once you know and trust these people because you know their information is reliable, it’s a known entity, a trusted group.”

“Yeah, it’d be great to get information without having to question its accuracy or wonder if it’s colored by the agenda of the person giving it to you.”

“The toughest thing is that being new, you don’t yet know who you can trust. Who is reliable, who is experienced? Who is the right person to ask which question and how much faith can you put in the answer?”

“I would do that, but I need to know who the “go to” person is in those organizations before I’d call. Who do you call with questions about state aid, or about board relations, etc.?”

“It’s not so much the content, but the quality. After the first 15 minutes of the New Superintendents program I could tell it was just not going to meet my needs. If programs are going to be connected to time, to compete for my time, I have to be convinced that it’s going to be time well spent.”

Both because of keyboarding and the sense of community created in discussion groups, the website tool seemed a better method than a listserv.

“I think few superintendents do (use a listserv in TN). As an innovation, e-mail is reasonably new and it’s not warm and fuzzy. It doesn’t lend itself to interpersonal interaction.”

Veteran superintendents seemed equally enthusiastic about the potential for the site. Retired superintendents in one state had formed a group for the explicit purpose of providing expert assistance to new superintendents, but had recently seen demand for their service drop off, presumably because of geographic and marketing issues. Those in our focus groups volunteered to staff the website with “expert” responses to questions, and the state associations volunteered to identify expert superintendents from within their ranks to review the quality of the responses offered to questions.

It became clear from our results that the state associations and a state-specific identity would be an essential part of the design. Because regulations, assessment programs, acronyms, and laws vary so widely from state to state most questions would likely require an expert response from a colleague in the same state.

“Especially when you’re new to the state, there are new laws, new regulations. I spent a year trying to figure out ways that we could save money within this framework.”

“I would have liked a crash course in the budget process and in education law.”

Based on these conversations regarding the website in the focus groups of new superintendents, it became clear that they envisioned an opportunity to hold an on-line conversation that paralleled an actual conversation as closely as possible given the medium. Like a conversation in a room, there was an expectation of privacy, that the content of the conversation wouldn’t go beyond the participants, but like a conversation, among those participating there was no need for anonymity. It became clear that having someone record the conversation so that others might review the exchange might be useful.

It was also clear that there were a lot of aspects of the conversation, especially where the “nuts and bolts” so prevalent in new superintendents’ needs were concerned, that would be specific to one state or another and that there needed to be some differentiation in the conversation so that new and veteran superintendents from the same state were conversing. Like a conversation, it also became clear that there would be a need to enable some to simply listen in, and allow others to chime in. Finally, the need to “vet the veterans” became clear. Unless the information provided in the conversations was accurate, thoughtful and of high quality, it was clear that the time pressures new superintendents faced would cause them to lose interest in mediocre professional development quickly.

Other Considerations

At least one issue arose which did not appear to be well addressed by the website methodology:

“As a woman, I wish that I had had access to a female mentor, I’ve found all of the males very willing to help out, but that other perspective would be important.”

“You know, I wonder if there is anything that we should be doing to be more conscious of the influx of females into the superintendency. Are there gender-specific issues?”

In addition, it became clear that website would have to be state-specific because of the unique nature of the regulations and funding systems employed in every state. For example, education finance is one of the most commonly cited areas of skill deficiency, particularly for superintendents with an instructional backgrounds. Yet the school funding system varies markedly from state to state. It was also clear that a state-specific approach would allow the website to be marketed from within the state superintendent associations. For example, the New York State website sustains roughly 8,000 hits every 6 months from New York’s 800 chief school officers, indicating significant popularity and penetration to this population.

The graduated rollout in New York yielded some interesting data. Veteran superintendents were not nearly as comfortable with using the internet as the new superintendents. This is perhaps not a counterintuitive finding given the average age of superintendents in New York (52.7 years old; Volp, 2000).

It also became clear that if other services were available on the new website, that it would become self-sustaining with respect to traffic. Suggestions included essays and research on current topics in education (charter schools, testing, etc.).

“You could have a lot of old responses catalogued and organized by topic, you could search through these and you might get lucky.”

“In that vein, what would be useful would be a place where schools with innovative programs could post information about their experience... You could do it like how people post reviews of software programs on c|net.”

It is clear that there are additional avenues to pursue which were outside the scope of this initial research design. Clearly the issue of gender (and quite possibly of race) and the new superintendent needs greater exploration. While the needs and interests of new superintendents were explored, little research with veterans took place beyond lining up participants.

Next steps for the research data will be to compare the graduated rollout in New York with the more aggressive rollout in Tennessee.

Conclusions

What became clear from our analysis of the focus group data was how similarly new superintendents perceived their positions and their learning needs whether in New York or in Tennessee. The common thread of uncertainty about the technical aspects of school district leadership consumed the preponderance of their time and attention. As a

result, instructional issues and school reform appeared to compete less favorably for new superintendents' attention.

Our background data, collected over two years from veteran superintendents suggested a much stronger focus on the process of organizational change and leadership. Presumably, having since mastered the technical aspects of a demanding position, these veterans were able to devote much greater attention to the instructional issues at hand.

Given these observations, it appears that on-line community building efforts hold real promise for the next generation of professional development efforts for school superintendents. By overcoming the learning curve technical aspects of the superintendency through interaction with veterans, new superintendents will be able to focus more quickly on instructional issues central to the role of educational leader.

Such efforts comport well with adult learning theory (Cahoon, 1998; Holt, 1998; Brookfield, 1989; Eastman, 1998) by using real life experiences to serve as the basis for discussion, thus permitting experiential learning, and by allowing a free exchange of information and ideas that is unconstrained by the time demands or geographic isolation common to the profession.

What is yet unclear is whether the literature on mentoring or on internet use will appear more relevant. The disinterest shown for traditional, formal mentoring programs suggests that a one-on-one approach may be no more successful in an on-line format than in person. Despite new superintendents' apparent comfort with the use of technology, the time pressures they face will exert some natural selection pressures on their learning opportunities. Any professional development that proves too difficult to use or that doesn't yield useful information quickly will be soon passed over in favor of other opportunities.

We believe that the threaded discussion group format piloted will meet some of these needs. Participants have the ability to access expert advice from experienced practitioners at their mutual convenience without having to be tied to a specific time or chronological construct. As the website is anticipated to continue to grow in popularity as the technology becomes more mature and the community grows.

In the short term, the website can continue to be supported by the two state associations involved. As a future direction, it is hoped that if this model is successful in these two diverse states (one northeastern urban and rural, the other southeastern and mostly rural), that it can be replicated for other states as a model by involving other state associations and replicating the programming engine behind the discussion groups. Future directions might include expanding the site to other states or to the national superintendents association. Other possibilities include creating other communities for other aspects of educational leadership such as the principalship, the business officer, or directors of curriculum and instruction.

In time, these self-directed on-line learning opportunities may become a commonplace companion to more traditional class-based professional development programs.

While this approach does not appear to be in conflict with the literature of adult education and indeed the experiential nature appears to make such an approach an attractive learning opportunity for advanced career adults. However, the literature surrounding electronic discussion groups is just emerging and is much more centered around its use in classrooms and among teachers rather than administrators (Selwyn, 2000). Nevertheless this is an area ripe for further exploration. In addition, a growing body of literature around business' use of the electronic medium for delivering professional development may be another promising area of analogous learners (advanced career managers).



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