Navigating the Politics of the Superintendency

Teri Denlea Melton, EdD
Associate Professor Emerita of Educational Leadership
Georgia Southern University
Statesboro, GA

LaTanya Reeves, EdD
Assistant Principal
Statesboro, GA

Julianne Sergi McBrayer, EdD
Assistant Professor
Leadership, Technology, and Human Development
Georgia Southern University
Statesboro, GA

Alexis Q. Smith, EdD
Affiliate of the Graduate Faculty
Georgia Southern University
Statesboro, GA

Abstract

This study examined how P-12 superintendents understand and respond to political influences on their decision-making regarding matters of student success. Participants included seven recently retired superintendents from two states. Findings revealed that the major influences on superintendent decisions were school boards, parents, community members, and teachers, who attempted to influence superintendents in matters pertaining to accountability and fiduciary responsibilities, as well as with schools and facilities. Strategies most often used to respond to political influences were identifying key stakeholders, deciding the best course of action, networking and forming coalitions, and communication. Results should be beneficial to practicing and aspiring superintendents in helping them to identify, acquire, develop, or refine the skills needed to understand and respond to political influences of the superintendency.

Key Words

superintendency, politics, district/school administration, decision-making

Introduction

School districts are considered to be social

success. Therefore, the purpose of the study was to examine how P-12 school superintendents understand and respond to political influences on their decision-making regarding matters of leading student success.

Research Questions
An overarching research question guided the study: How do P-12 school superintendents understand and respond to political influences, particularly as they relate to decision-making regarding matters of leading student success?

the political waters. These findings were addressed according to the research questions.

Demographic profile of respondents

Participants consisted of seven retired (12) superintendents from two southeastern states; five were female and two were male. Four of the superintendents were Caucasian and three were African-American. Participants' years in the superintendency ranged from 3 to 17 years; all had been appointed by an elected school board. As stated previously, participants were retired for a maximum of three years.

Understanding and responding to political influences

The seven superintendents who participated in the study acknowledged that the position of superintendent was, in and of itself, political. Thus, they were making all of the decisions regarding matters of leading student success within a political context. They indicated that it was important for them to know who would support and who would come out against their decisions. As such, they utilized a repertoire of strategies to respond to political influences on their decision-making.

The superintendents interviewed viewed politics as an ever-present and necessary challenge of the job. Their remarks indicated that they were aware that politics, both positive and negative, came with the position.

According to Participant S3: "Political influences keep us grounded in kind of a check and balance process for what we do every day with students. They keep us transparent in what and how we go about the business of improving student success." Some viewed it as a positive, almost like a system of checks and balances where they might capitalize on the politics of certain groups in order to acquire necessary resources.

Understandably, others saw political influences as a challenge, particularly when the political influences had conflicting motives and goals that deterred their work. This conflicting motive often is seen happening when there might be a single-agenda board member or parent group. Participant S4 spoke to this issue: "The ability of the superintendent and School Board is greatly hampered when you have naysayers who have individual agendas that have nothing to do with student success." Although it was clear that each superintendent had his or her own style of responding to these political influences, the most frequently identified strategies fell into three categories: identifying key stakeholders; deciding the best course of action; and, networking and forming coalitions.

Political influences on the superintendents

Superintendents' responses about the individuals and groups that seek to influence them confirmed that they constantly found themselves in the position of having to contend with internal and external political influences on them. The study acknowledged that the position of

on thee study acknowle 4(posi)2ti)36nti)3those e4ng4eW*nBTanETOec

therefore, were subject to influences from the board. Most participants attributed the root causes of these political issues to conflict, power struggles, and/or ethics.

After the board, the superintendents deemed the community to be a significant political influence on their decisions regarding matters of leading student success. Each superintendent stressed the importance of getting to know the school community, especially the key political players. As participant S remarked, "somebody that's very well connected in the community who stands out and they just want their way." They spoke of the need to communicate with the community regarding new initiatives in order to mitigate opposition, citing the benefits of communication and collaboration with the community. Participant S1 stated: "My number one concern is not allowing fallout from decisions that I made to affect the politics of the community."

In addition to the board and the community, superintendents commented on the political pressure from parents, which was especially prevalent during times of change. This was especially noted when children would be affected by the proposed changes or initiatives. As participant S1 stated, "When you're doing something new and it affects the way things are and students are reacting, parents don't want that." In addition to change, other initiatives that led to conflict with parents were school closings or consolidations, curriculum and program offerings, student placement, and provision of resources. Participants expressed mixed beliefs regarding parent influence being positive or negative, indicating that it was situational.

Teachers also exerted influence on superintendent decision-making regarding matters of leading student success. While the four of the seven (57%) superintendents reported that they valued teacher influence and tried to use teachers to help propel their agenda, the primary challenges presented by teachers pertained to changes involving curriculum and instruction, program offering, evaluations, staff handbooks, and policies and procedures. Participants indicated that teachers and/or teacher representatives were slow to embrace change. Other sources that influenced superintendents' decisions regarding leading student success included government officials, the state department of education, other superintendents, and other school districts; the first two were found to challenge their decisions, while the second two served to provide support for their decisions.

Ways in which individuals and groups seek to influence superintendents

Data revealed that the identified ways in which individuals and groups were most likely to exert influence were in terms of accountability. When the superintendents spoke of accountability, the specific types of political influences and the sources of influences were varied. Most often, the superintendents cited local, state, and federal school effectiveness measures, charter legislation, evaluation and grading of schools, federal legislation, state and federal testing requirements, and funding compliance. The sources of these political influences were board members, parents, community, the state department of education, and government officials. The superintendents viewed such influences as having an adverse impact on their decision-making in matters regarding student success. For example, participant S3 stated, "There are all kinds of federal political influences, such as legislation and policies that tend to focus more on compliance than a true comprehension of the systems and processes that influence continuous

versus coming from outside the district. For example, according to the superintendents, this factored into how they responded to political influences. Specifically, participants contended that if the superintendent came from within the district, he or she might have more support; however, if the superintendent came from outside the district, he or she had to work harder to identify key players, network, form coalitions, and get consensus.

As participant S commented, "You always need to know who is connected to whom."

The next political skill described by the superintendents as essential to responding to political influences was networking and forming coalitions. Participants indicated that building alliances and forging relationships involves a combination of identifying key stakeholders and deciding the best course of action. They were specific as to with whom they needed to network, and this included board members, teachers, parents, or the community.

While they all described networking and forming coalitions as essential to understanding the political landscape, they also

communication. Other interpersonal skills interspesed throughout interviews where the following: accessibility, visibility, transparency, building trust, teambuilding, honesty, and integrity

Discussion

School superintendents do not make decisions in a vacuum (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011). Rather, their decisions are made within social systems that are made up of various stakeholders. Thus, it is not uncommon for superintendents to encounter political manipulations as they make

of a check and balance process for what we do every day with students. They keep us transparent in what and how we go about the business of improving student success. The superintendents referenced operating in what they called "the political frame" whenever they faced issues. However, the superintendents stressed the importance of understanding how to navigate the politics of the job to avoid conflict.

Superintendent concerns about appropriate board member role understanding and the challenging nature of boards are found throughout the literature (Gil, 2013; Kowalski, 2006; Nope et al., 2013; Polka et al., 2011). Kowalski (2006) specifically cited three historical tensions existent in the superintendent-school board relationship: blurred lines regarding roles and responsibilities, power struggles, and questionable motives for serving on the board. In a manner similar to Kowalski (2006), all of the superintendents referenced these tensions as barriers to productive relationships with their boards.

The superintendents in this study also spoke of other political influences, some from within the school district and others outside of the school district. Specifically, the superintendents spoke of problems with parents, teachers, or community groups over competing agendas, interests, curriculum,

school superintendent to understand, practice, and become adept at political leadership (Gil, 2013; Quinn, 2010; Noppe et al., 2013). As the superintendency continues to become more complex, superintendents must make innumerable judgments that have no established criteria or protocol. Superintendents are engaged with conflict, problems, and issues that require political acumen.

Superintendents are practitioners who need to be able to recognize the significance and implications of a political situation. Thus, how superintendents learn political leadership skills should be included in leadership training. To note, traditional preparation programs and professional development available through professional organizations may be inadequate in preparing superintendents for the myriad of leadership demands that characterize their roles. Undoubtedly, superintendents must have unique skill sets to respond to the demands and influences from a multitude of stakeholders. Beyond traditional leadership skills, they must know how to navigate the political waters of the superintendency.

This study addressed a gap in the educational literature regarding how superintendents understand and respond to

Author Biographies

Teri Denlea Melton is associate professor emerita of educational leadership. She has held leadership positions in NY, VA, FL, GA, and the Dominican Republic. Her current scholarship focuses on educational leadership and successful strategies in chairing doctoral dissertations. E-mail: tamelton@georgiasouthern.edu

LaTanya Reeves has served in PK-12 public education for twenty-three years. She is currently an elementary school assistant principal in Los Angeles, but has also held leadership positions in public elementary, middle, and high schools across metro Georgia. E-mail: lr01979@georgiasouthern.edu

Juliann Sergi McBrayer is an assistant professor and M.Ed program coordinator in educational leadership at Georgia Southern University, Statesboro, GA. Her research agenda includes educational leadership and teacher preparation programs with a focus on professional learning to ensure program effectiveness and accountability. E-mail: jmcbrayer@georgiasouthern.edu

Alexis Smith is an affiliate of the graduate faculty of Georgia Southern University, Statesboro, GA and an educational consultant. She has served as a teacher and educational leader at the school and district levels in the PK-12 public school districts in metro Atlanta, Georgia. E-mail: smithlexieq@aol.com

References

Blase, J & Bjork, L. (2010). The micropolitics of educational change and reform: Cracking open the black box. In A. Hargreaves (Ed.), *Second international handbook of educational change* (pp. 237-258). New York, NY: Springer.

Bolman, L. & Deal, T. (2013).

National Policy Board for Educational Administration (2015). Professional standards for educational leaders. Reston, VA: Author.

Noppe, R., Yager, S., Webb, C., & Sheng, B. (2013). Decision