Superintendents' Perceptions of the Assistance Provided by Their Predecessors During A Change in Leadership

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The need for individuals to fill superintendent positions in the coming years is substantial. A 2003 survey of nearly 2,000 superintendents found that most respondents agreed that the nation was facing a shortage of applicants for the superintendency (L. D. Fusarelli et al., 2003). In a 2015 study, almost one-third of superintendents stated that they planned to retire within five years (Finnan et al., 2015). With well over 13,000 school districts in the U.S. (*NCES Digest of Education Statistics*, 2012), this represents well in excess of 4,000 superintendent vacancies in this period. The shortage of school leaders has been identified as a problem that is global in nature (Ryan & Gallo, 2011).

A great deal of trust is placed in school district superintendents to provide overall leadership for the organization. The effects of the position are not always readily measurable, and many scholars have brought attention to the complexities and stresses of the position (Bird & Wang, 2013; Bjork & Keedy, 2002; Brunner, 2002; Cuban, 2001; L. D. Fusarelli et al., 2002; Glasman & Fuller, 2002; Grissom & Andersen, 2012; Grissom & Mitani, 2016; Hart et al., 2019; Kowalski & Glass, 2002; Leithwood et al., 1999; Petersen & Fusarelli, 2008; Petersen & Short, 2001; Riley et al., 2002; Thompson & Holt, 2016; Webner et al., 2017). Observers generally agree that the position is a critical one in influencing the culture, policy agenda, strategic decision-making, and overall leadership of school districts.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to obtain information about the nature and extent of assistance provided by superintendents to their successors, and to better understand differences in the helpfulness of that support depending on whether the superintendent moved to a new superintendency, retired from the position, or was nonrenewed or terminated.

The study also sought to identify potential differences in transition experiences related to gender and the size and location of the district. Lastly, the study sought to gain insight into the perceived value of other sources of assistance during the transition to a new superintendency.

Significance of the Study

Given the importance and influence of the position, it stands to reason that the transition from one superintendent to the next merits

can be expected to contribute to our understanding of the perceived effectiveness of s to effect a favorable transition.

It is not unusual for a change in leadership at the top to result in a loss of support for previous programs and initiatives to create organizational space for the initiatives promoted by a new leader (Alsbury, 2008a, 2008b; Lechasseur, 2017).

A lack of continuity in leadership can result in a high organizational cost, as districts experience both the abandonment of initiatives associated with a predecessor and the whipsawing effect produced through a (Schwanenberger et al., 2020). Hart and colleagues (Hart et al., 2019)

viewed as a temporary position, with boards of education and superintendents expecting a lack (Hart et al., 2019, p. 4) corporate leadership are also applicable to

result of poor succession planning is often poor performance, which translates into higher

white. School boards, which in some cases may be more representative of the community than the superintendent, may be in a better position to alter the superintendency as a   (Maranto et al., 2018, p. 12).

Often, notes Dan Domenech, executive director of the American Association of School Administrators, when a superintendent vacancy occurs, even when an internal candidate is seen

boards feel obliged to undertake a formal search to assure the community it has considered other candidates and has concluded no one out there is better than the homegrown product (2016, p. 40).

Communicating with and assisting one's successor

There appears to have been little research rel
the transition of their successor. Although Kasper (1997) proposed varied approaches to transition planning based on the specific circumstances in a district, there is no model in widespread use to guide superintendents in

superintendent; in fact, such a model may be impractical because of the diverse circumstances that influence the succession process in districts that are in highly varied settings.

The authors of this manuscript recall mentoring a number of new superintendents and advising them to spend much more time listening and learning in the first year, as opposed to speaking and explaining. As a staff and community get to know a new superintendent, their initial observations and

character will greatly influence a c receptiveness toward the new leader. What staff and community members invariably want

to see is a leader who listens, who is intent on understanding the full breadth and depth of challenges and concerns from varying perspectives, and who is deliberate in making judgments about the nature of the

district need to have the opportunity to understand the history of the district, and, often, the best person to provide that history   r in the role (Dedrick et al., 2016)

(2009, p. 9). Keeping a focus on district goals that preceded the transition process may provide a way to reduce fear and anxiety (Finger, 2016).

It is highly unlikely that individuals who are new to a superintendency will show much interest in being instructed by their predecessor in how to be a superintendent, particularly when they already have experience in the role. Hearn (2019) studied superintendent predecessor-to-successor transition practices at Christian schools in the U.S., in part focusing on whether or not predecessors devoted time to training successors. Hearn foundvoted time to training

Table 4 includes information about the the helpfulness of their predecessor. Although

helpfulness slightly higher, a one-way ANOVA established that there was n

Table 6

Ratings of Predecessor Help Based on Successor's Prior Position

Prior position	n	M	SD
as a district administrator in another district	41	4.41	3.605
as a district administrator in my current district	36	6.11	3.616
as a principal in another district	49	4.06	3.738
as a principal in my current district	28	5.71	3.895
as a superintendent in another district	68	4.47	3.605
other position	17	3.71	4.043

However, when responses were grouped as internal or external successors, differences emerge. Table 7 compares the ratings of predecessors based on whether the successor was hired from within the district or outside the district.

Table 7

Ratings of Predecessor Help Based on Whether Successor Was an Internal or External Candidate

Size of district	n	M	SD
Internal	64	5.94	3.716
External	158	4.33	3.628

A one-way ANOVA was conducted to determine if there was a significant difference in a

or outside the district. There was a significant difference in the perceived level of helpfulness from

newcomer. Successors who were promoted internally viewed their predecessor as more helpful than not (M=5.94). Superintendents who were newcomers to the district rated their predecessors as less helpful (M=4.33).

Research Question 3
In what areas do departing superintendents tend to advise and assist their successor?

In what areas did your predecessor provide

Table 8

Areas in Which the Predecessor Provided Insights and/or Advice

Size of district	Percentage	Count
Personnel	54.58%	131
Board relationships	51.67%	124
Potential or ongoing legal action	33.33%	80
District goals and strategic objectives	24.58%	59
Initiatives related to curriculum, instruction, and assessment	23.33%	56
Other	22.92%	55
Upcoming elections	16.67%	40
School improvement plans	12.50%	30

As indicated, over half of the participants responded that the predecessor provided information about issues related to personnel and board relationships. Less than one in four were reported to provide information about matters related to curriculum, instruction, and assessment or school improvement plans.

Research Question 4

How does the support from predecessor superintendents compare with the support of others?

you received from the following positions when you transitioned to your cu
positions were provided, and, for each group, superintendents were asked to indicate whether the
Responses to
this question are summarized in Table 9.

Table 9

Usefulness of the Support Received from Identified

Table 10 summarizes this same information as shown in Table 9 by combining the number of

ith respondents indicating that more useful support was received from fellow superintendents, administrative assistants, district administrators, board members, teachers, and students.

Table 10

Usefulness of the Support Received from Identified Positions, CRPELQLQJ ³([W XVHIXO´ DQG ³0RGHUDWHO\ XVHIXO´

Position	Percent
Fellow Superintendents	94.85%
Administrative Assistant(s)	

Discussion

The data and findings from this study point to the following conclusions regarding superintendent transitions:

1. Overall, superintendents are not viewed by their successors as a significant source of support and assistance. A large majority of successor superintendents have an unfavorable view of the helpfulness of their predecessor. Just 33% of superintendents gave their predecessor a rating of 8, 9, or 10 in assisting them with the transition to their current role. Participants in the study reported that 22.5% of the predecessor superintendents were nonrenewed or terminated, and these superintendents were rated as very unhelpful (M=1.57).

2. It is entirely possible that, having fallen out of favor with the governing board, these superintendents may have been instructed not to communicate with their successor. Predecessors who left the position to move to another superintendency were also not viewed as particularly helpful (M=4.16). The

Second, the establishment of informal mentoring relationships for superintendents new to a district, an area, or a state may help to build on a relationship which is already perceived to be beneficial. In this study, successor superintendents rated the support of their fellow superintendents quite high. Professional associations may be in a position to capitalize on the credibility in these relationships to provide support and mentoring.

Third, even though this study does not offer significant evidence that outgoing superintendents are seen as especially helpful to their successors, they nonetheless do have an important role to play. Rather than attempting to single-handedly assist their successor, outgoing superintendents could endeavor to build a network of support intended to engage a representative group of district administrators, administrative assistants, board members, principals, and teachers in a transition team.

Such a team could develop brief descriptions of schools, departments, and programs throughout the district, create a

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