

Full Length Research Paper

Comparing Two Female Superintendents' First Years: Challenges and Successes

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This article investigates the journeys of two first-year female superintendents. A qualitative descriptive analysis of the superintendents' journals reveals not only how their experiences differed, but what factors contributed to a more positive or negative first year as a superintendent: (a) the superintendents' relationship with their school board; (b) their ability to network within the school community; and (c) the school district's willingness to change. This article provides insights into how different professional environments can help or challenge a new superintendent, as well as recommendations for maneuvering through these environments.

Keywords: female superintendent, new superintendent, rural schools, school board, community, leadership, change

Introduction

No matter how much aspiring superintendents enrich their knowledge, abilities, and leadership skills, a school district's social environment may still pose a challenge that they have not prepared for. This article investigates the journeys of two first-year female superintendents. A chronicle of events written by each superintendent reveals not only how their experiences differed, but what factors contributed to a more positive or negative first year as a superintendent. The sample used is limited. This may be partially contributed to the geographic Midwestern area where the sample was taken, which is considerably below the national average of female superintendents. This article is offered to new superintendents and higher education institutions that prepare them in the interest of enlightening their perceptions of how different professional environments can help or challenge a new superintendent.

Purpose and Methods

The purpose of this qualitative study was to compare and contrast the experiences of two first-time female superintendents. They are referred to as Superintendent A and Superintendent B. The article examined skills of superintendents and how these skills interact with the daily

challenges within different school environments and geographic settings. Researchers asked both superintendents to keep a journal of their daily experiences. Superintendent A submitted data in one document; Superintendent B submitted data in two documents, one for each semester of the school year. Researchers color-coded both journals as they were submitted.

Qualitative descriptive analysis was selected as the method for this research. The study used intense prolonged contact with individuals whose experience was reflective of the everyday life of a group. This method provides a "holistic" overview of the context and captures data on insider perceptions with relatively little or no standardized instrumentation (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Using the descriptive analysis method, three main themes were yielded which affected the superintendents throughout their first year: relationship with the school board, networking within the school community, and the school district's ability to change. This data is further supported by connections to academic research. The superintendents validated the narrative data and final document, which will remain confidential to protect both participants. Lastly, researchers explored additional insights to produce possible

implications for higher education institutions as they prepare future educational leaders.

Sample Population

This qualitative study compared and contrasted the experiences of two first-time female superintendents, located in two mid-western states, referred to as Superintendent A and Superintendent B.

Superintendent A came to her first superintendent position with previous experience as a teacher and principal, including more years of administrative experience than Superintendent B. Superintendent A repeatedly indicated that her prior administrative experience was helpful for managing situations. She wrote, "If I was a new supt. [sic] who had to do the budget, I would have been really confused and probably more scared. I am really glad for my central office experience." Superintendent A's district is identified by the National Center for Educational Statistics' *Common Core of Data* (2010) as "32-Town, Distant: Territory inside an urban cluster that is more than 10 miles and less than or equal to 35 miles from an urbanized area" (New Urban-Centric Locale Codes Section). Superintendent A had more resources readily available, students routinely performed above the state average and the free and reduced rate was considerably below the state average (Institute of Education Sciences, 2011).

Superintendent B also entered her first superintendent position with previous experience as a teacher and principal, but without the administrative experience reported by Superintendent A. Superintendent B described herself as "much like a new teacher . . . I am finding things out by accident." Superintendent B's district is different from that of Superintendent A; identified by the National Center for Educational Statistics' *Common Core of Data* (2010) as "42-Rural, Distant" Census-defined rural territory that is more than 5 miles but less than or equal to 25 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is more than 2.5 miles but less than or equal to 10 miles from an urban cluster (New Urban-Centric Locale Codes Section). One-third of the students were eligible for free or reduced lunch, slightly above the state average (Institute of Education Sciences, 2011). Academically, Superintendent B reported that the scores in her district "were not good and academic changes were needed." She also identified disadvantages to working in a rural school district such as: the school board restricting funds for the school in efforts to do "whatever they can to not raise taxes," and finding new teachers to bring to the district. Superintendent B reported, following a job fair for teachers, "Not very many participants would even stop at my table. They are all looking for big cities." Additionally, both school districts report over 90% of the student population being "White alone" (NCES.ed.gov).

Results

This study yielded three common themes that factored into the experiences of both superintendents during their first year in

the position: (a) the superintendents' relationship with their school board; (b) their ability to network within the school community; and (c) the school district's willingness to change. These themes are expanded upon to complement each superintendent's skills, circumstances, and challenges.

Relationship with the School Board

A superintendent's relationship with the school board substantially influences the chances of their success. Blumberg and Blumberg (1985) reported that the most significant element in running a school district is the relationship between the superintendent and board of education.

For Superintendent A, this relationship was positive from her first impressions – "After visiting the board meeting, I feel confident making the move. I feel at home with those people" – and continuing as the school year went on: "Board meeting went off without a hitch. Everything went smoothly." She helped the board transition to a paperless agenda, and felt able to "tak[e] the board-identified goals and blend them into something coherent for my tasks for the year," prioritizing as needed. She wrote, "I've met all of the board members and can honestly say I really like all of them," and received "glowing reports from the board" for her evaluation. Even though Superintendent A had interpersonal conflicts with other stakeholders, she could count on the school board's support.

Superintendent B had a negative relationship with her school board. When she failed to participate in traditions she was unaware of, such as sending out a weekly update and attending a volleyball game against a rival school, she received "stinging email[s]" from board members. She felt that the school board rejected her ideas simply because they were hers. She explained, "They did pass the landscaping project the kids presented and the building upgrades the architect suggested. Maybe I should have someone else present any idea I have." Superintendent B also felt that the school board had too much control over school decisions. She wrote, "I feel concerned about my relationship with the board. I have to do something because if I don't, [the] board is completely in charge and making all the decisions – even curriculum and development decisions. I am a puppet." After one board meeting, she shared, "I have not felt this discouraged all year. I guess the honeymoon is over. . . . One person questioned everything. He emailed me questions, I answered all of them, and he came up with more. One person is running the show."

Superintendent B realized that the school board could be a helpful force when it worked well, since "they ask me questions and provide perspective that I could otherwise not have," and she was aware of the problem in the relationship, writing, "I have to build a relationship of trust with the board. I don't think they trust me yet – and I know I don't trust them. I wonder if I tried too hard or did too much too soon." But although she stated repeatedly that she needed to discuss these problems with the board president, she wrote, "I just don't want

to go there yet.” At the end of the year, the feedback she received from the board was not positive, as it set the raises of “everyone except mine and the principal’s.” This led her to self-doubt: “Maybe I did a bad job of communicating with my board and it is my fault if they give me a bad evaluation.”

A positive working relationship that results in collaborative goal-setting between the school board and the superintendent is linked to higher levels of student achievement (Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2006). Each has a significant role to play in guiding the district to success. Clear and defined roles for the superintendent and board of education are essential to the development of a strong working relationship. When these are ambiguous, strain can increase (Carr, 2003). Carr (2003) noted, “Privately and in surveys, superintendents often express dismay at some school boards’ tendencies to micromanage, while board members voice concerns regarding the lack of communication and conflict over roles and responsibilities” (p. 17). Petersen and Fusarelli (2002) summarized the need for a strong working relationship between a board and superintendent as, “A superintendent and a board can’t sing two different tunes and then expect the public to hum along” (p. 3).

A study by Mountford (2004) suggests that half of the people who serve on school boards are motivated to serve for personal reasons while the others are motivated for altruistic reasons. Mountford’s (2004) findings suggest there is a direct relationship between superintendent-school board relationships, motivations for school board membership, and the different perceptions of power held by school board members. Role confusion is cited by multiple researchers as the most commonly cited reason for difficult school board–superintendent relationships (Danzberger, Kirst & Usdan, 1992; Education Commission of the United States, 1999; National School Boards Association, 1996; Petersen & Fusarelli, 2002). Possibly, role confusion and power struggles accounted for some of the school board issues that Superintendent B encountered.

Furthermore, Superintendent B understood that she was walking into a role traditionally dominated by males. However, she did not begin to reflect upon this fact until her mentor suggested that some of the difficulty she faced with the school board might have been due to her gender, rather than the transition to new leadership:

When he asked, “Do you think some of the problems you encounter are sexist? I think some of it may be,” caught me by surprise. He said as a principal, he watched boards question the female superintendent when they didn’t question the males—they got their ideas blessed far more easily than she did and, in his opinion, her ideas were just as good. He said he thinks women really do have to cover more bases than men. I guess I had thought about it. I knew I had to be far more careful with my tone and demeanor than a man and, as my mentor said, I have to do my homework even more carefully.

According to 2007 data, even though 75% of the educational work force in the U.S. is female, only 21.7% of school superintendents are female (Polka, Litchka, & Davis, 2008, p. 294). The U.S. Census Bureau described the superintendency as “the most male dominated executive position of any profession in the United States” (as cited in Garn and Brown, 2008, p. 51). Implications from this data are supported by academic research which details additional challenges for these women. Garn and Brown (2008), who found that female superintendents perceived a gender bias from the district and community, also described “dispelling gender stereotypes” by being “tough or compassionate, collaborative or dictatorial, depending on the situation” as a “fact of life” for female superintendents (pp. 65-67). Female superintendents also perceive pressure to “conform to male expectations regarding the superintendency” as a barrier (Polka et al., 2008, p. 302).

There is much debate whether specific leadership styles are associated with a particular gender or whether genders behave differently in the same role (Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001). Nonetheless, Eagly and Johannesen-Schmidt (2001) suggest that there is an underlying process of bias encountered by women especially if the roles they occupy are male-dominated:

One manifestation of this prejudice is the operation of a double standard by which women have to meet a higher standard to attain leadership roles and to retain them over time. . . . A reluctance to allow women to ascend to organizational hierarchies may reflect resistance to change managerial styles. (p. 795)

By contrast, Superintendent A never commented on sexism in her workplace. She wrote, “Had a great day yesterday with a metro superintendents’ meeting. They were very accepting, and one man even made the nice comment that they needed more women in that group! Funny.” That she did not feel pressure due to sexism may have led to her upbeat demeanor.

Rural superintendents, particularly those located in more extreme rural and isolated areas, encounter specific difficulties. Among rural-specific challenges, Lamkin (2006) lists bearing sole responsibility for the school district’s success or failure when the school district is a large employer in the community, an understaffed central office that makes delegation difficult, and being “often the only target of public criticism” (p. 17). Superintendent B was located in a more rural school district; it is possible a combination of factors, including rural specific challenges associated with limited resources, gender, as well as tradition may have contributed to her difficulties with the school board compared with Superintendent A.

Networking within the School Community

Superintendent A placed a great emphasis on building relationships within the school. She described the people she worked with as “the inner gears that keep everything running.

Take care of them!” Therefore, she had an empathetic approach to her new support staff: “I’ve been reassuring my new secretary that I will try to make the transition smooth for her. We have found some things we have in common and she seems eager to work together.” She took her staff on retreats, reporting, “Great day of retreat getting some things hammered out for next year, then golf in the afternoon. Makes me remember how important it is to play together during the year.” She also took the office staff to motivational seminars. She noted,

They really seemed to enjoy it. We often leave support people out of the loop for development and it’s crucial to move them along as well. We also had our luncheon to celebrate one year of being together. It’s good to celebrate the small things, although I think this is a big thing!

Superintendent B also tried to build positive relationships in her school district, but met with less success. One of her successful endeavors was involving teachers in administrative decisions, such as hiring a new P.E. teacher, and shared that “They seemed genuinely honored to be included.” However, she felt that her office staff was less willing to cooperate or “buy in” to her new leadership, which was less top-down than they were accustomed to. She described the situation with the office staff as an “us and them” thing,” and explained, “The office staff runs things to make it easier for them[selves].” This antagonistic relationship with her staff continued throughout the school year:

When I ask [the high school secretary] to make calls or fill out a form she [says] she is not going to do my job. She told 2 people that “[the superintendent] thinks she is in charge but I am” . . . I tried to be very diplomatic b/c she is quite opinionated. My hope was that if she did get mad she would be mad enough to quit.

Networking

Superintendent A successfully tapped into the tremendous advantage of networking. She defined networking as “talking with the right people who set you up with more people,” and explained, “You have to take advantage of the resources available and use them to your advantage. The old adage of ‘it’s not what you know but who you know’ becomes even more important in a high profile position.” Superintendent A contacted and met with superintendents in the region and other states, former superintendents of the district, the ministerial association, the district’s bus drivers, community members recommended by the school board, as well as students and parents. It was the first time a superintendent had accepted the invitation to meet with the bus drivers, and she wrote, “They seemed very appreciative and it’s nice to know them better when I see the buses out on the road.” She explained, “I have done everything I can in terms of doing my homework, following good advice, and following through with contacts. It really pays off.” Superintendent A also seemed happy to partake in community and school events. She wrote, “Big season for plays and readers’ theater. Was out in buildings a

lot, but that’s a great opportunity to see parents and grandparents. Pays big dividends with students, too. I love that preschoolers and kindergartners know my name.”

Networking was more of a challenge for Superintendent B. She was not able to attend a community meeting until March, and did not attend regional superintendent association meetings until much later in the year, because she had felt too overwhelmed by her own school: “I know I should be a part of other things but the first year is not the time to jump into all those organizations.” She also did not try to contact all the retired superintendents in her town because “[the superintendent who just retired] told me he didn’t get much help when he took over so I probably wouldn’t either.” Of the retired superintendents she did contact, one became a trusted mentor who was like “a big brother who had ‘been there done that’ and genuinely wanted to see me succeed,” while the other “can help sometimes but at other times not” because “once you are gone, you are gone.”

While Superintendent B attended extracurricular school events, she resented the time commitment they required. She explained, “I am so tired of all the extra stuff that has very little to do with the ‘job.’ There are games every night and I just want to be at home. I could handle late nights and long hours, but being expected to be at everything that happens at school is too much.” While she did not want others to think she didn’t want to be involved, she added, “This place is taking advantage of me and I don’t know how much of it is my fault.” Superintendent B understood the importance of positive relationships, but also seemed to feel burdened by the pressure of this realization: “If you offend someone, you must go in person, apologize, and talk it out. In a town this size, it is life and death.”

Being a superintendent requires balanced leadership and the ability to network with various stakeholders. Among the various responsibilities of a balanced leader are: fostering mutual beliefs, building a sense of community, providing teachers with professional development and resources, being an advocate and spokesperson for the school district, being willing to challenge the status quo, and adapting one’s leadership as needed (Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2003). According to Fullan, (2001) relationships and organizational success along with moral purpose are interconnected, “If you asked someone in a successful enterprise what caused the success, the answer was ‘It’s the people.’ But that’s only partially true: it is actually the relationships that make the difference” (p. 51). Superintendents must develop these skills for their leadership to have an impact, since they face a range of external challenges in their line of work.

The School District’s Willingness to Change

One clear situational advantage that Superintendent A had over Superintendent B was her placement in a school district that wanted to change and was relatively functional. She explained

that change “can be made easier or more difficult depending on a lot of factors. For me, they have been easier because of how things are going where I am going to.” Despite the perception that her district was “very successful and cutting edge,” she still felt that “things behind the scenes are very behind and need to be brought up to speed.” When Superintendent A proposed improvements, they were received warmly. She shared, “I had my secretary read [the new newsletter], and she characterized it as very good and ‘refreshing.’” She added, “After many of my meetings, people tell me how glad they are I’m here and how they detect a new freshness. I think a layer of fear has been removed and people are beginning to hope they don’t have to deal with the same dynamics.”

The district where Superintendent B worked was much less eager to change, even though she felt desperate to make changes because of the school’s poor performance. Teachers were willing to adopt new ideas, such as professional learning communities, action research, and a new assessment data program. Unfortunately, Superintendent B felt completely stymied by the school board, which did not see the incentive to change: “[The school board president] actually said current teacher development is working. Well, their scores are stagnant or dropping, so it isn’t working.” She felt that the school board “use[s] the ‘We’ve never done it that way’ card all the time,” whether the issue was driver’s education or parent-teacher conferences. She was especially disappointed because she considered herself a change agent in the area of curriculum/teacher development. She wrote, “I left the board meeting wondering why they hired a change agent who talked about Professional Learning Communities at her interview and then not let any changes happen,” and “They hired a curriculum/teacher development specialist and don’t want to change anything in those areas.” She concluded, “If you do what you have always done, you get what you’ve always gotten.”

Accordingly, Superintendent A had an easier time updating and modernizing old systems. Rather than writing about difficulties she encountered, Superintendent A simply recorded her progress: “Working on getting our forms online. Would be much simpler and would help us get updated. Those things need to be tightened up, but this way it could happen at once.” Her experience also gave her insight on how to update these systems:

I’ve learned enough to know about some things, [but] little twists need to be dealt with, so no two days are ever alike. I’ve also learned that some changes should take place at a logical break. Leave forms need to be updated and combined for efficiency and accuracy, [but] can wait to be rolled out next fall. That will give the appearance of [being] just a modification. It also won’t scare teachers.

Superintendent B expressed greater frustration in updating systems in her school district: “I printed off the calendar. There are significant things missing – AYP, APR??? I looked on the

website where we complete forms – nothing?” There was noticeable dysfunction present in the way her school district followed guidelines: “A lady from the state said they were not doing summer school according to the way the grant app says. [The ladies teaching summer school] knew nothing about the grant app. Why didn’t the teachers know what was in the app?” Her district lacked enthusiasm for technology as well, as the business manager “has been very stubborn” about not updating to an online payment program: “I found out recently she is writing every transition by hand. What a waste of time.” Superintendent B began to feel that not only change but her own leadership in guiding change was impossible. She shared, “I went to the technology conference and had to fight back tears. I want this for my school so badly but I am not sure the board sees it. I wonder if the problem is really me. What made me think I could lead[?] I keep thinking of that saying, ‘You aren’t a leader unless someone is following.’ Now that I have been shot down on everything I am too afraid to ask.”

As new leadership emerges, changes will occur. Change is an unavoidable process which takes time and must be allowed to happen. According to Fullan (2004), the change process will emerge due “to pressure to change or a compelling reason to change” (p. 39). Although some leaders believe change should be defined or managed, Fullan (2004) emphasizes that “Change cannot be managed. It can be understood, and perhaps led, but it cannot be fully controlled” (p. 42); “Change is rapid and nonlinear, which creates messiness” (p. 39).

The journal of Superintendent B included multiple entries detailing times when staff, especially office personnel, reverted back to how things were done in the past, even manipulating the situation to move back to what had been done before the new superintendent arrived. The resistance to change, to new leadership, and to a new gender in the leadership role may have combined to contribute to the complexity of change. The superintendent even commented that her “frustration was the messiness of seeming to move forward and then falling back.”

Fullan (2004) explains that as leaders make worthy changes, everyone involved experiences anxiety throughout the change process. Effective leaders must have sensitivity to these emotions but cannot cave in to the resistance for change. Furthermore, Fullan (2004) emphasized that during the change process building relationships can alter these emotions and help to develop a school climate that results in confidence in new leadership. Eventually, the building of relationships can lead to support for the systemic change that is occurring.

As all effective leaders come to realize, not everyone is willing or able to make the entire journey through this change process (Collins, 2001). Collins challenges new leaders to seek out and determine who is willing to take the journey— *determine who is on the bus!* Superintendent B reflected:

I think XXX (name omitted for confidentiality) would like to have controlled the situation. I had thought all along that I needed the business manager on my side since she seemed to be really respected by the board, but recently a few board members have asked if I am sure the real problem is gone (secretary) and indicated that (the issue was) the business manager. I told them at this point I think she does want control but is manageable. She is smart enough to back down and the biggest problem is she thinks the money is hers—probably not an unusual problem.

Part of the journey is deciding what to do about those who are resistant to change and must be let go. This may include the least apparent staff members who might impede the change process, simply by siphoning time and energy on meaningless complaints. Superintendent B made some staff changes, but also indicated her “weariness” from “the daily battle to keep things on an even keel and not from the actual dismissal of the secretary and the resignation of the head cook.” A school district’s willingness to change impacted the successful transformation for these two superintendents. Letting the change process occur is the journey that all new leaders must take (Fullan, 2004).

Conclusion

In summary, Superintendent A and Superintendent B had different experiences within three main areas: (a) the superintendents’ relationship with their school board; (b) their ability to network within the school community; and (c) the school district’s willingness to change. Superintendent A had a supportive relationship with her district’s school board, whereas Superintendent B felt that her school board did not trust in her abilities or support her. Superintendent A successfully built networks within the school community, while Superintendent B had difficulty negotiating these networks. Superintendent A also felt that her school district exhibited enthusiasm toward change, while Superintendent B felt that her school district did not want to change the way they operated. While no one factor determined how the subjects fared in their first superintendency, a combination of these three factors did contribute to the superintendents’ overall experience.

At semester break, Superintendent A felt positive and confident about her school district and her progress: “It’s nice to feel confidence, like you know more than you did six months ago. It’s also nice to know names and faces as you visit with people or discuss situations in the district. I don’t have much to complain about!” At the end of the year she was able to “sit with people and come full circle” during administrative evaluations, enabling her to feel not only like she had made progress, but had consolidated that progress. She wrote, “I’ve adjusted to my team and really like them. I didn’t want to be the one who came and destroyed a great team. The opposite has happened, and they have reaffirmed that to me.” Superintendent A finished her school year on a high note: “I need to see things through until my leadership has done what it

was supposed to do. It doesn’t get any better than this gig!” Having a supportive network of colleagues within the school system helped Superintendent A enact necessary changes.

For Superintendent B, the pressure to fix a struggling school district that didn’t want to embrace the changes she suggested weighed on her. She shared, “The greatest needs of the district are in curriculum, technology, and teacher development, but if we don’t do something about the social climate, we will sink. I don’t think the community or board understands how serious things are.” By the end of the year, Superintendent B had gained enough experience to understand how she might enact change, but did not feel confident that the board would support her: “I have begun to think of myself as a change agent. Things will get worse before they get better. My heart breaks to see how students act, how they treat each other, and how they treat teachers . . . I am willing to take this on, but only if the board is with me 100%.” This perceived lack of support from the school community caused Superintendent B to doubt herself and her abilities, and also caused her to doubt whether change would be possible in her school district.

Polka et al. (2008) describe “professional victim syndrome” as a condition faced by superintendents whose “professional and personal reputation was being tarnished,” and had to “navigat[e] the political waves in order to survive” (p. 296). The authors caution that female superintendents may be more likely to experience “professional victim syndrome” (pp. 302, 305) and suggest that personal and professional preparation is the best guarantee that a superintendent will weather the crisis (see also Byrd, Drews, & Johnson, 2006). Self-confidence, acting as if one is in control of the situation “no matter how disastrous,” learning from criticism, emotional management, and self-awareness were other keys to resilience (Byrd et al., 2006, p. 306; Kopelowitz, 2009; Summers & Wells, 2000).

School boards are often cited as a decisive factor influencing how long a superintendent stays in the job, as superintendents often feel micromanaged by the school board (Byrd et al., 2006). Some rural superintendents noted that school boards have changed to expect “increased shared decision-making” and “continuous communication” (Lamkin, 2006, p. 21). Kopelowitz (2009) recommends that to develop a mutually respectful relationship, superintendents spend time with school board presidents, acknowledge the school board’s importance, keep members regularly updated, and must “be willing to learn” (p. 30). Summers and Wells (2000) suggest that superintendents and board members hold a joint training on developing an effective relationship.

Building interpersonal relationships with stakeholders was considered a key to success for superintendents in general (Kopelowitz, 2009), and female superintendents in particular (Gilmour & Kinsella, 2010). Summers and Wells (2000) advise superintendents to get involved in the community, volunteer at school functions, and use local news to disseminate

information, because good community relationships are critical to a superintendent's success. However, in some more rural districts, a lack of privacy and confidentiality lead superintendents to feel "too visible" (Lamkin, 2006, p. 22), and when faced with this challenge, rural superintendents often retreat from the high exposure instead of embracing their visibility. This can ultimately impact networking and the building of relationships.

It is clear that these three factors, (a) the superintendents' relationship with their school boards; (b) their ability to network within the school community; and (c) the school district's willingness to change, all impacted the superintendent's success in their first assignment. Aspiring superintendents should learn to anticipate these potential challenges and institutions preparing them for a career in educational administration should assist these aspiring superintendents to brainstorm ways to mitigate these challenges, should they occur.

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