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Without the support of AASA and Seton Hall University, the AASA Journal of Scholarship and Practice would not be possible.
Research Article

Principal Dispositions Regarding the Ohio Teacher Evaluation System

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Abstract

The Ohio Teacher Evaluation System (OTES) was first implemented during the 2013-14 school term. This study examined principals’ dispositions at the end of this school term. Findings revealed several major concerns. The most prominent were (a) not having sufficient time to implement the program properly, (b) basing a teacher’s performance heavily on student value-added data, and (c) being required to assist teachers in developing their annual improvement plans. Three independent variables, teaching experience, administrative experience, and level of school assignment, were found to have only a low level of association with principal dispositions. With respect to teacher evaluation generally, findings here were consistent with earlier studies reporting mixed principal dispositions; with respect to OTES specifically, findings here were consistent with studies in other states reporting that principal dispositions were more negative than positive.

Key Words

superintendent, leadership, school administration
**Principal Dispositions Regarding the Ohio Teacher Evaluation System**

Recent federal programs, such as the *No Child Left Behind Act* and the *Race to the Top Initiative*, reflect a commonly held belief: improving the accuracy and effectiveness of teacher evaluation and making school officials more accountable for the process are essential reforms (Strong, Gargani, & Hacifazlioglu, 2011). In 2009, the Ohio legislature responded to federal incentives by directing the state’s Educators Standards Board to recommend a rigorous statewide approach for assessing teacher performance.

Subsequently, the Ohio State Board of Education approved a new model, naming it the Ohio Teacher Evaluation System (OTES). Initially implemented in the 2013-14 school term, the system included two requirements previously uncommon in Ohio; 50% of a teacher’s annual performance had to be determined by student value-added scores and teachers, assisted by principals, had to develop annual individual growth plans.

The overall purpose of this study was to determine principal dispositions toward performance evaluation generally and toward OTES specifically. According to the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (2009), educator dispositions are relevant to reforms because they represent values and commitments that define the performance of those who implement change. In the case of employee performance evaluation, principal opinions are especially germane because they affect both personal behavior and teachers’ attitudes and beliefs (Youngs, 2007).

Data were collected after the principals had implemented OTES for the first time. Findings indicate that the respondents’ general views about performance evaluation were rather typical when compared to previous studies. Their temperament toward OTES, however, was primarily negative. Three variables often linked to principal dispositions, *teaching experience, administrative experience, and level of school assignment* (elementary or secondary) were examined. All three were found to have a low level association with the dispositions.

**Prior Literature**

Historically, teacher performance evaluation has evolved from end of the year checklists to far more sophisticated models that emphasized both summative and formative judgments (Danielson, 2002).

Recognizing the growing complexity of the process, Medley and Coker (1987) examined its effectiveness nearly 3 decades ago. They found the validity of teacher evaluations conducted by administrators to be unacceptably low. Since then, countless other studies have been conducted in an effort to better understand and improve the procedure. Two aspects of previous research are especially relevant here: educator dispositions toward teacher performance evaluation and research on state-mandated performance evaluation systems.

**Performance Evaluation Dispositions**

Dispositions are relevant because they have a behavioral component. That is, attitudes and feelings toward a responsibility influence behavior, particularly in relation to pursuing that duty. Thus, if administrators believe differentiating between good and bad instruction is impossible or if they believe that candid discussions with teachers do more harm than good, they act accordingly. Equally important, their personal behavior then
influences what teachers believe about the
efficacy of performance evaluation and how
they feel about being subjected to the process
(Tuytens & Devos, 2010).

Most studies examining teacher and
principal dispositions have yielded rather
consistent findings. With regard to the former,
teacher temperaments have been mixed but
skewed toward being more negative than
positive. For instance, in a national study,
Duffett, Farkas, Rotherham, and Silva (2008)
reported that only 26% of the teachers thought
their evaluations were effective and useful.

Another study (Louis et al., 2010)
reported that only 38% of teachers considered
classroom observations helpful in relation to
improving instruction. With respect to the
latter, principal dispositions also have been
mixed but skewed slightly toward being more
positive than negative. For instance, studying
Iowa principals, Armendt, (2004) found that
68% said the process had improved and 52%
said they did not require additional training to
conduct the process effectively.

Comparing the two groups, Armstrong
(1988) found a statistically significant
difference between them with principals
expressing the more positive opinions;
however, in-group variance among principals
was considerably higher than it was among
teachers.

Much of the literature on educator
opinions has centered on problems and
constraints. The following are notable
examples of these findings:

- School culture has been
  identified as a primary barrier.
  Donaldson (2013), for instance,
  reported that the effectiveness of
teacher evaluation in many schools has
been diminished by shared negative
values, beliefs and norms. Likewise,
Louis and associates (2010) found that
educator dispositions on performance
evaluation often contravened
professional norms and public policy.

- Dandoy (2012) and Kersten and
  Israel (2005) found that collective
  bargaining agreements unduly restricted
  what could be assessed, how
  assessments occurred, and when and
  where they occurred.

- Marshall (2005) and Youngs
  (2013) concluded that classroom
  observations often were conducted
  using invalid or unreliable instruments.
  In addition, Marzano (2012) found that
  the effectiveness of classroom
  observations often has been diminished
  because the evaluator did not
  understand the process; specifically,
  sampling errors resulted in principal
  ratings not being based on actual
  behavior.

- The presence of evaluator bias
  and subjectivity in areas such as age,
  experience, gender, and race has been
  reported in multiple studies such as
  those conducted by Donaldson (2013)
  and Tucker and Stronge (2005).

- Another pervasive problem
  identified in previous research is
  inadequate human and material
  resources (e.g., Coulter, 2013).

- The most pervasive problem in
  the eyes of principals has been time
  restrictions (e.g., Donaldson, 2013; Hill,
  2013; Kersten & Israel, 2005).
• Painter (2001) reported that principals believe that defining and measuring effective teaching is inherently difficult.

Opinions about principal self-efficacy also are relevant. In both an Ohio study (Himmeneil, 2009) and Massachusetts study (Ford, 2014), the researchers found that a majority of respondents believed they had the requisite knowledge and skills to evaluate teacher performance. In a study of nearly 300 Arizona principals, however, Painter (2001) found that a majority were dissatisfied with the level of training they had received in this area.

Although findings regarding principal self-efficacy have been mixed, teachers’ opinions about principal expertise have been largely negative and consistent. Specifically, teachers have expressed doubt about principals being able to assess teachers across multiple subject areas or grade levels (e.g., Duffet et al., 2008; Oppenhien, 1994), to conduct assessments relevant to instructional improvement (e.g., Louis et al., 2010; Peterson, 2000), and to apply assessment procedures correctly and consistently (e.g., Zimmerman & Deckert-Pelton, 2003).

Research examining evaluation outcomes also has revealed problems. For example, in a study spanning 12 districts in four states, the vast majority of teachers received the highest rating possible but conversely, dismissals in this defined population were extremely rare (Weisberg, Sexton, Mulhern, & Keeling, 2009). After analyzing numerous studies, Menuey (2005) noted that various researchers have estimated the level of incompetent teachers to be between 2% and 20%, with 5% being the modal approximation. Yet, research reveals that less than 1% of teachers have been dismissed annually. Menuey described the discrepancy between the level of incompetent teachers and teacher dismissals as “gross” and “staggering” (p. 310).

Studies also have revealed the presence of subjectivity and bias. Typically, these conditions have resulted in discrimination, especially in the areas of gender and race (e.g., Rinehart & Young, 1996). In addition to subjectivity, leniency in performance evaluations has been found to exist across all types of organizations, especially when performance ratings determined or influenced high-stake decisions, such as job retention, promotion, or tenure (Jacob & Lefgren, 2007).

Studies examining possible associations between principal attitudes and personal characteristics have been limited and their findings mixed. Studying dispositions toward Iowa’s mandated evaluation program, Amendt (2004) found a significant difference between relatively inexperienced principals (less than 4 years) and their peers regarding program effectiveness with the former group having more positive beliefs. Conversely, Fiscaro (2010), studying New Jersey principals, found highly experienced principals (over 15 years) to have more positive views about teacher evaluation than their peers.

Several other studies have looked at possible associations between leadership style, a factor arguably relevant to conducting evaluations, and levels of professional experience. Results of these inquiries also have been mixed with most having found no statistically significant association between the two variables (e.g., Bentley, 2011; Cooper, 2011).

A few studies have examined a possible association between principal opinions and the
level of school assignment (elementary or secondary). Often, educators assume performance evaluation is more difficult for secondary principals, primarily because the quantity is greater and the nature (across multiple subject areas) is more complex. Nevertheless, most studies examining level of school assignment as an independent variable and principal opinions as a dependent variable (e.g., Cardine, 1998) have found no statistically significant association.

State-Mandated Evaluation Systems

The number of state-mandated paradigms proliferated over the past 2 decades, largely because of fiscal incentives embedded in the federal program, A Race to the Top. Commonly, state systems include two mandates: student performance, assessed by value-added achievement scores, must be a component of a teacher’s evaluation and each teacher must develop an annual professional growth plan. Both obligations have been and remain controversial.

With respect to the former requirement, many teachers and principals believe that placing considerable weight on value-added learning data, a condition that currently exists in 40 states (Collins & Amrein-Beardsley, 2014), is unfair. Although some researchers (e.g., Kimball & Milanowski, 2009; Taylor & Tyler, 2012) have urged state policymakers to rely on these metrics, others either have challenged the validity of these measures (e.g., Kerstling, Mei-kuang, & Stigler, 2013) or have concluded that they are invalid (e.g., Berliner, 2013; Darling-Hammond, Amrein-Beardsley, Haertel, & Rothstein, 2012; Konstantopoulous, 2014). Expectedly, teacher opinions about using value-added data to determine their performance have been predominantly negative. In a California study, for instance, Lee (2012) found that most teachers believed that the mandate was not only unfair, it likely would force them to change curriculum and instructional methods.

To a lesser extent, concerns also have been expressed about requiring teachers to develop individual growth plans under the guidance of a principal. Teacher opposition to this mandate appears to be nested in skepticism; that is, many teachers have been unconvinced that principals can provide them with meaningful guidance (Stark & Lowther, 1984; Zimmerman & Deckart-Pelton, 2003). Although principals’ opinions about assisting teachers to develop growth plans are largely unknown, persistent concerns about the amount of time spent evaluating teachers (e.g., Hill, 2013; Maharaj, 2014) suggest that their attitudes are likely to be negative.

Recently, researchers have examined opinions of specific state-mandated programs. This body of research has disclosed myriad concerns. Educator apprehensions were not unexpected given the fact that state programs often contained as many or more constraints than the models they replaced (Hinchey, 2010). In a Colorado study, for example, Ramirez, Clouse, and Davies (2014) described that state’s policy as over-reaching, unduly time consuming, and poorly designed.

Other state studies reveal the depth of educator concerns. As examples, in Georgia (Eady & Zepeda, 2007), Washington (Coulter, 2013), and Missouri (Killian, 2010), researchers reported mostly negative dispositions. Equally notable, disapproval of using value-added data was pervasive and concerns about specific state programs were nearly identical to those recorded in studies addressing performance evaluation in general.
(e.g., lack of resources, excessive time requirements, inclusion of value-added metrics, and unrealistic expectations).

A notable exception among the state studies is research conducted by Lasswell, Pace, and Reed (2008) in Iowa. They found that principal opinions toward that state’s system were primarily positive; however, their study population included only principals from small rural districts. Limited research (e.g., Ferguson, 1981) suggests that principals in small-enrollment districts have received substantially less performance evaluation training than have principals from large-enrollment districts. Thus, the nature of the Iowa study population may largely explain the atypical finding.

Ohio Study of Principals’ Dispositions Description
This study of Ohio principals was conducted immediately after teachers were evaluated under OTES for the first time. The research was guided by three questions:

1. What are the principals’ opinions regarding teacher performance evaluation?
2. What are the principals’ opinions regarding OTES?
3. What level of association exists between the dependent variable (opinions of OTES) and each of three independent variables (respondent teaching experience, administrative experience, and level of school assignment)?

The first question focused on opinions regarding educator dispositions toward performance evaluation generally; the second question focused on opinions regarding OTES. Both questions were answered using descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, and rank order). The rank order of the responses was determined by calculating the percentage of respondent agreement for each statement.

Because opinion data were continuous and demographic data were dichotomous, the third research question was answered by calculating point biserial correlation coefficients. The coefficients were then applied as descriptive statistics using a typology recommended by Cohen and Cohen (1983):

- Small association: (+ or -) correlations from .01 to .29
- Moderate association: (+ or -) correlations from .30 to .49
- Large association: (+ or -) correlations of .50 and higher

The defined study population consisted of 89 principals employed in public elementary and secondary schools located in three Southwestern Ohio counties. Data were collected in May and June of 2014 using a paper survey developed by the researchers. Content validity was established by a panel of experts, all of whom were former principals and current professors.

Limitations
The study had three notable limitations. First, the defined population only included public elementary or secondary school principals in three Ohio counties. Second, findings relied on the accuracy of self-reported beliefs. As such, validity depends on principals having sufficient self-awareness and responding honestly. Third, no inferences could be made about the study population’s non-responders.
Findings
Completed surveys that could be analyzed were returned by 50 principals, a return rate of 56%. The respondents were almost equally divided in terms of the level of assigned schools, with 54% being secondary school principals and the remainder being elementary school principals.

Response percentages for nine statements about teacher performance evaluation in general are in Table 1. The statements appear in rank order based on the percentage of respondent agreement (highest to lowest). A majority of respondents disagreed that they and teachers had a positive disposition toward the evaluation process in general.

Table 1
Opinions about Teacher Performance Evaluation in General

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank*</th>
<th>Statements</th>
<th>Percentages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Principals have the skills necessary to complete teacher evaluations effectively.</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Evaluation data are used by principals to improve the quality of instruction.</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Principals consider teacher evaluation to be one of their most important duties.</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Principals have the knowledge necessary to complete teacher evaluations effectively.</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Evaluation data are used by principals to determine if a teacher is competent.</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Teachers have confidence in the evaluation data generated by principals.</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Evaluation data are used by principals to determine if a teacher should be reemployed.</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Principal dispositions regarding performance evaluation are positive.</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Teacher dispositions (attitudes/beliefs) regarding performance evaluation are positive.</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Statements are ranked from highest to lowest respondent agreement

Legend: SA = Strongly Agree; A = Agree; D = Disagree; SD = Strongly Disagree
Response percentages for the 16 OTES-related statements are in Table 2. Again, the statements appear in rank order based on the percentage of respondent agreement. Overall, the principals’ responses reveal that opinions regarding OTES were substantially more negative than opinions about performance evaluation generally.
Table 2

Opinions about Ohio Teacher Evaluation System

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Run</th>
<th>Statements</th>
<th>Percentages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>The amount of time I spend on the OTES is excessive.</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>The pre-conference requirement is an effective OTES element</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>The amount of time teachers I supervise spend on the OTES is excessive.</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>I know how to apply the OTES correctly.</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>The OTES is increasing the quantity of time I spend with supervising teachers.</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>The scope of the OTES is understood by the teachers I supervise.</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Instructions for applying the OTES are clear to me.</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>The professional growth plan requirement is an effective OTES element.</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>The teachers I supervise know how to apply the OTES correctly.</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Instructions for applying the OTES are clear to the teachers I supervise.</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>The OTES is increasing the accuracy of teacher evaluations.</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>I have a positive disposition regarding the OTES.</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>The OTES is having a positive effect on teaching and learning.</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>The OTES has improved my relationships with the teachers I supervise.</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>The weight placed on student growth measures (50%) in the OTES is fair.</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>The teachers I supervise have a positive disposition regarding the OTES.</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Statements are ranked from highest to lowest respondent agreement

Legend: SA = Strongly Agree; A = Agree; D = Disagree; SD = Strongly Disagree
Responses to three demographic questions were dichotomous and the percentages are shown in Table 3. Associations between respondent beliefs about OTES and each of the demographic variables were determined by calculating point bi-serial correlations. The coefficients were then categorized as being large, medium, or small as described earlier. The coefficients and categorization outcomes are in Table 4. As these data reveal, all three association were small, with the highest level of association being negative.

Table 3

Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teaching experience</th>
<th>Administrative experience</th>
<th>Level of assignment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&lt; 11 years</td>
<td>11 &gt; years</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38%</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt; 11 years</td>
<td>11 &gt; years</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>62%</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Elementary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Secondary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>54%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4

Levels of Association between Opinions about Ohio Teacher Evaluation System and Demographic Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Correlation coefficient</th>
<th>Level of association</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teaching experience</td>
<td>+.19</td>
<td>Small positive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrative experience</td>
<td>+.03</td>
<td>Small positive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assignment level</td>
<td>-.27</td>
<td>Small negative</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Discussion

The main purpose of this study was to determine dispositions of a defined population of Ohio principals toward performance evaluation generally and OTES specifically. At the time the study was conducted, the following three pieces of evidence suggested that their temperaments would be more negative than positive.

1. Relatively recent studies (e.g., Duffett et al., 2008; Louis et al., 2010) have revealed that educator skepticism regarding the validity and usefulness of teacher evaluations remains considerable.

2. Using value-added student data to determine teacher performance has been criticized not only by education associations but also by several prominent scholars, such as Berliner (2013) and Darling-Hammond and associates (2012). Expectedly, studies examining reactions to this mandate (e.g., Lee, 2012) have reported substantial teacher opposition to it.

3. Mandating educators to implement changes (i.e., using a power-coercive strategy), especially those they do not support, almost always have failed to be institutionalized (Kowalski, 2011; St. John, Griffith, & Allen-Haynes, 1997).

Nevertheless, in light of the fact that OTES constituted a radical change in teacher evaluations, there was a need to determine if this assumption was accurate.

With respect to opining about performance evaluation nationally, outcomes reported in this study are congruent with previous research findings. As examples, most respondents in the Ohio study thought that principals understood the importance of performance evaluation and possessed the requisite knowledge and skills to apply it properly. These findings reinforce evidence reported earlier by Armstrong (1988), Himmelein (2009) and Kersten and Israel (2005). Nevertheless, principal self-perceptions should be weighed in relation to teachers’ perceptions of principal efficacy.

Teachers have tended to rate principals’ expertise much lower as demonstrated in investigations conducted by Armstrong (1988), Duffett et al. (2008), and Oppenhiem (1994); unfortunately, explanations for the disparate views remain imprecise. Equally notable, the Ohio study found that most principals believed that educator dispositions toward performance evaluation were more negative than positive. This outcome reinforces data reported in a recent national study conducted by Louis and associates (2010).

With respect to OTES specifically, several findings are noteworthy. First, 96% of the principals agreed that the time they had devoted to implementing the new system was excessive. This finding is congruent with numerous studies reporting that principals consider insufficient time to be their most serious constraint (e.g., Hill, 2013; Kersten & Israel, 2005; Killian, 2010). Instead of attempting to mitigate this problem, OTES, especially the mandate for principal involvement in teacher professional growth plans, exacerbates time requirements.

Second, the level of opposition to using student value-added measures reported here was considerable. A similar finding was reported in a recent California study conducted by Lee (2012). As previously noted, resistance to judging teacher performance on the basis of value-added scores appears to be pervasive in
the education profession. From a political perspective, widespread opposition to basing 50% of a teacher’s evaluation on this metric already has resulted in legislation that lowers the percentage in OTES for the next school year.

Third, the level of skepticism expressed about individual teacher growth plans merits attention; 52% of the principals did not believe this provision is effective. This finding is relevant in light of studies revealing that many teachers are skeptical about the ability of principals to conduct formative evaluations (e.g., Stark & Lowther, 1984; Zimmerman & Deckart-Pelton, 2003).

Many questions about the principal’s responsibility to assist individual teacher growth remain unanswered. As examples what will occur if a teacher refuses to apply the advice provided by his or her principal? What will occur if a principal fails to meet his or her responsibility to provide advice?

Fourth, a majority of respondents did not believe that OTES would produce positive outcomes in several critical areas including (a) overall school-improvement, (b) principal-teacher relationships, and (c) the validity and reliability of performance evaluations. Similar levels of pessimism about state-mandated systems have been reported in studies in Georgia (Eady & Zepeda, 2007), Missouri (Killian, 2010), and Washington (Coulter, 2013). This growing body of evidence suggests that widespread cynicism will fuel resistance to state mandates.

Last, this study examined the extent to which principal dispositions about OTES were associated with three independent variables: teaching experience, administrative experience, and level of school assignment (elementary or secondary).

Both experience variables were found to have a low level of association with the dependent variable (dispositions). Likewise, level of school assignment had a small-negative association with the dependent variable, indicating that being an elementary or secondary school principal did not heavily influence dispositions toward OTES.

Recognizing structural and application deficiencies in teacher evaluation, state policymakers have been applauded by many stakeholders for taking actions intended to improve the situation. Unfortunately, many state systems appear to include more problems than the systems they have replaced (Hinchey, 2010).

As such, the growing body of research on mandated teacher evaluation programs indicates two primary concerns. One is that the requirements may exacerbate rather than resolve persistent reliability and validity problems. The other is that political resistance will incrementally result in reversion; that is, considerable human and material resources will be expended on state programs that will have a short lifespan.

Although limited in scope, this study provides additional insights regarding three highly relevant issues: (a) educator skepticism about the validity and reliability of teacher evaluation; (b) judging teacher performance on the basis student value-added metrics; (c) the possible effects of educator disposition on the institutionalization of state-mandated evaluation systems.
Given the proliferation of state systems, the need for additional investigations is axiomatic. Specifically, future research is encouraged in the following areas: studies of mandated systems in other states, examining variables underlying the disparity between principal and teacher views of principal efficacy, examining variables associated with educator dispositions toward teacher evaluation, and the development of alternative models that include reliable and valid components aligned with the existing knowledge base on performance evaluation.

Author Biographies

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Superintendent Retirement in a Reform State: Rhetoric and Reality

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Abstract

Indiana recently gained status as a national leader in educational reform. At the same time, a record number of superintendents retired, with 62 retirements in 2012 and 2013, representing 21% of superintendents in the state. The purpose of this study was to explore factors influencing superintendents’ decisions to retire during this time. Quantitative survey methodology was used to gather data directly from retiring superintendents over two years with 28 participants. Analysis of responses revealed that school funding issues, including Indiana’s new voucher program and its impacts on education funding, were the highest-rated issues influencing participants’ retirement decisions. This research advances our understanding of the superintendency in today’s school reform climate and identifies factors potentially affecting longevity in the position.

Key Words

public school superintendency, superintendent retirement, superintendent preparation and training
Superintendent Retirement in a Reform State: Rhetoric and Reality

Public school superintendents are paramount in promoting school and student success (Björk & Kowalski, 2005; Wahlstrom, Louis, Leithwood, & Anderson, 2010). Studies have documented the value of effective, goal-oriented, and stable leadership at the superintendent level (Cooper, Fusarelli, & Carella, 2000; Trevino, Braley, Brown, & Slate, 2008).

Statistically significant positive relationships have been found between superintendent tenure and student achievement, highlighting the importance of retaining veteran superintendents (Waters & Marzano, 2006). A recent study revealed that superintendents with more experience in their respective states had a larger influence on student achievement than those with less experience (Plotts & Guttmore, 2014). Logically, it follows that the widespread retirement of veteran superintendents in a state immersed in educational reform is concerning and should be studied.

In Indiana, an unusually high number of superintendents retired in 2012 and 2013, leading to speculation that the role was becoming less desirable.

However, no state-specific research could be drawn upon to determine if the issues being discussed as “reasons for leaving” were rhetoric or reality. This led to the development of this study, with the purpose of ascertaining issues that retiring superintendents recognized as having influenced their decisions to leave the position.

Changes in the Public School Superintendency

Although the superintendency has long been considered a challenging position, national research reveals that the job is evolving with notable increases in the demands, complexities, and scope of the role (Björk & Keedy, 2003; Glass & Franceschini, 2007; Litchka, Fenzel, & Polka, 2009).

Practitioners and researchers report that today’s superintendents face intensified pressures like more on-the-job conflict, expectations to meet the needs of different special interest groups, higher accountability standards, persistent media exposure, funding difficulties, increased state and federal mandates, and negative public perceptions about schools (Cordeiro & Cunningham, 2013; Hall & Brown, 2013; Litchka et al., 2009; Trevino et al., 2008).

There are added pressures when schools are highly engaged in educational reform because these efforts typically involve the concurrent implementation of multiple large-scale changes, all of which can leave educators feeling “initiative fatigue” (Reeves, 2010).

Clearly, today’s public school superintendents face a plethora of complex issues. Yet, it is not clear if any of these issues contribute to retirement decisions, especially because despite the ever-increasing challenges, superintendents still report relatively high job satisfaction (Kowalski, McCord, Petersen, Young, & Ellerson, 2011). However, superintendents have indicated higher levels of
job stress. In 2007, Glass and Franceschini found that nearly 60% of superintendents reported either “considerable” or “very great” stress levels, which represented an increase of 16% from twenty-five years earlier. The heightened stress and demands of the position have resulted in speculation that some superintendents have left the position due to the increased stress and pressures of the job (Björk & Keedy, 2003; Hall & Brown, 2013).

At the same time that superintendents’ jobs are becoming more complex and demanding, demographic studies indicate that the typical American superintendent is older than in past years (Fale, Ike, & Terranova, 2012; Kowalski et al., 2011; Sharp, 2011). The 2000 national decennial study conducted by the American Association of School Administrators (AASA), found that eight percent of superintendents reported being older than 60 (Glass, Björk, & Brunner, 2000). However, in the 2010 AASA decennial study, that number rose to 18% being over 60, with 72% of superintendents reporting being age 50 or above (Kowalski et al., 2011).

This prompts the question: Is the upswing in retirements in Indiana simply age-related with superintendents feeling “it is time to retire?” Or are other factors pushing superintendents towards this important decision?

Through this study, we investigate this question by asking superintendents who have recently chosen to retire why they made that decision. This research is valuable because it broadens our understanding of the superintendency in today’s climate by potentially isolating job issues superintendents felt were important enough to influence their decisions to retire, shedding light on current factors that may hinder the appeal of the role.

**Background on Retirement from the Indiana Superintendency**

A record number of superintendents retired in Indiana in 2012 and 2013, according to data maintained by the Indiana Association of Public School Superintendents (IAPSS, 2013). For the ten years prior (from 2001-2011), the average rate of superintendent retirement per year in Indiana was 6.8%, or about 20 per year.

However, at the end of the 2011-2012 school year, 33 superintendents retired (11.3%). At the end of the 2012-2013 school year, 29 retired (9.9%). Therefore, for the two-year period of this study, 62 of the 293 public school superintendents in Indiana retired; a total of 21.2% of the state’s superintendents.

During this same period the statewide superintendent search team began reporting a shrinking pool of qualified applicants (D. Jarman, member of statewide superintendent search team, personal communication, May 19, 2012; April 11, 2013). This combination of increased retirements with a smaller applicant pool generated concerns in the education community and heightened awareness about recruitment and future staffing. In addition, these factors led to speculation regarding increased hesitancy about serving as a superintendent in Indiana. In recent years, Indiana has been extensively involved in multiple educational reform efforts and there has been conjecture that one or more of these initiatives might be dissuading superintendents.

However, increased attrition of superintendents is not unique to Indiana. A
Substantially increased superintendent retirement rates have been recorded in New Jersey (Cooper, 2013) and Kentucky (Coldiron, 2013). The Illinois Association of School Boards noted that the supply of experienced school administrators was soon to be at an all-time low after a survey indicated that approximately 40% of Illinois superintendents intended to retire by 2015 (Hall & Pierson, 2010).

Educational Context in Indiana
In the last few years, Indiana has embarked on a fast-track educational reform journey with state initiatives involving increased accountability and standardized assessments, an innovative educator evaluation model with performance-based pay components, grading of schools and districts, revisions to the school funding process and formula, new academic standards (not Common Core), full-day kindergarten, increased charter schools, and the implementation of a generous and quickly growing voucher program (Center for Evaluation and Education Policy [CEEP], 2011; CEEP, 2012; Hirth & Eiler, 2014).

Several prominent reviewers have ranked Indiana as a leading model for educational reform. For example, the State Policy Report Card 2014, released from StudentsFirst, founded by Michelle Rhee, placed Indiana third in the nation in “forward-thinking, student-centered education policy ideas” (StudentsFirst, 2014, p. 9). A policy brief by the think tank, the Sagamore Institute, summarized Indiana’s efforts by saying, “Not long ago, no one thought of Indiana as a national leader in education reform. Now, the state is heralded by many as the best example in America of expansive, full-spectrum education reform (Streeter, 2011, p. 2).

Purpose
As we look to the future of public school leadership in Indiana and across the nation, it is important that we fully understand the superintendent’s role and issues that may or may not be influencing superintendents' decisions to remain in the position.

Accordingly, the purpose of this research was to identify specific factors that superintendents recognized as having impacted their decisions to retire at this time. This information can be used to assist with curricular planning and professional development to better prepare candidates for the challenges they will face in the superintendency, as well as providing a deeper understanding of the support and assistance needed by those currently serving. Two research questions guided this study:

1. What factors did outgoing superintendents agree influenced their decisions to retire in 2012 and in 2013?  
2. Did the factors influencing retirement decisions remain the same—or change—after removing from the analysis superintendents who agreed that, “… it was time to retire?”

Methodology
Based on the study’s purpose and exploratory nature, a survey approach was deemed most appropriate. After completing a
comprehensive literature review, the researchers developed the survey instrument employing a quantitative design. We used the "Tailored Design Method" (TDM), which outlines a specific set of procedures for question development and survey implementation designed to yield high quality results (Dillman, 2000).

**Survey instrument**
The survey first gathered basic demographic information, such as participants’ years of experience, age, gender, ethnicity, and degree(s) earned. General information about the superintendent’s school district was also obtained, including the student enrollment and type of community (rural, suburban, or urban).

    Then, to determine the extent to which various topics influenced retirement decisions, participants were asked to rate 26 items on a five point Likert-type scale (5=strongly agree, 4=agree, 3=undecided, 2=disagree, 1=strongly disagree).

    We developed these 26 survey items based on our review of the literature, recommendations from practicing superintendents, and our own knowledge of Indiana topics and reform initiatives.

    There was an additional item, which asked superintendents to rate the statement: “There was no primary issue, I just felt that it was time to retire.” This item was included in order to isolate superintendents who agreed with this statement when analyzing responses.

    In other words, regardless of age, we wanted to be able to take a separate look at the superintendents who might not have felt ready to retire, but moved forward with retirement.

    Before implementation, we asked a panel experienced in survey development to review the survey and submit feedback regarding face and content validity. This seven-member panel consisted of university faculty members, former superintendents, and practicing superintendents in the state. Based on the panel’s feedback, several revisions and sequencing changes were made to the survey, which improved clarity and flow. The survey was then pilot tested with a similar panel with favorable results; therefore, no additional changes were made after the pilot tests.

**Procedure and participants**
We used the IAPSS website in April 2012 and 2013 to gather the names of Indiana superintendents who had announced their intent to retire. We then obtained contact information from the Indiana Department of Education Website (IDOE). At the end of April 2012 and 2013, each retiring superintendent was sent the survey instrument and cover letter. The surveys were anonymous and no identifying information was requested. Superintendents were given 45 days to respond before the survey data was analyzed.

**Results**

**Response rates**
In April 2012, the survey was sent to the 33 superintendents who had indicated their intent to retire. Fifteen superintendents participated, for a response rate of 45.45%. In April 2013, the same survey was sent to the 23 superintendents who had indicated their intent to retire (six superintendents decided to retire after our deadline; so, we were unable to include them). Thirteen superintendents participated in 2013, for a return rate of 56.52%. The response rates for both years were considered satisfactory (Babbie, 1990).
Demographics
Demographic results revealed that the typical superintendent in this study was a white male, with 6-10 years as superintendent in their most recent district, and 11-15 years total experience as superintendent. Doctorate degrees had been earned by 61%, with the remaining 39% holding Education Specialist degrees. In terms of age, 25% were in the 51-60 age group and 75% were in the 61-70 age group. There were no retiring superintendents under age 50 or over 70.

The majority of the participants’ school communities were rural or small town 61%, with suburban 18%, and urban 21%. The demographics of the school communities presented an accurate representation of Indiana in terms of typical population distributions and characteristics (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). The community demographics and the ratio of retirements per area were similar to those reported in previous years; therefore, it did not appear that superintendents in any one type or size of community were retiring at a disproportionate rate.

Results of perception questions
The 26 survey questions, which asked superintendents to rate the influence of specific topics on their decision to retire, were ranked from highest to lowest agreement per the mean responses for each item. Similarities between the two years were striking in terms of the items showing the highest means, suggesting consistency over the two years regarding the topics that participants agreed influenced their retirement decisions. The survey items with the two highest and two lowest means for each year will be discussed next, with particular attention paid to the items of highest agreement in order to provide the reader with necessary background information.

Top areas that superintendents agreed influenced retirement decisions.
For both years of the survey, participants ranked funding issues as top factors influencing their retirement decisions. Two specific topics, vouchers and budget cuts to public schools, were found to have the highest means both years.

Vouchers
Indiana’s school voucher program and its impact on funding of public schools was the survey question with the highest mean response in 2012 ($M = 4.00, SD = 1.31$) and 2013 ($M = 4.46, SD = 0.52$). These means suggested robust agreement that Indiana’s new voucher program had influenced participants’ retirement decisions. The voucher program is perceived as impacting public school funding by reducing the total amount available in the state’s fund for disbursement to public schools and also by drawing students away from public schools.

Indiana’s voucher program is considered the “most open” and “fastest growing” in the nation (Hirth & Eiler, 2014; Simon-Reuters, 2013). In the fall of 2013, Indiana’s voucher program was the second largest in the country with about 20,000 enrollees, next only to Wisconsin’s program, with approximately 24,000 participants (Elliot, 2013). However, in fall 2013, Wisconsin’s voucher system was 20 years old, whereas Indiana’s program was only in its third year.

In terms of background, the Indiana General Assembly passed three voucher programs between 2009 and 2013, which provided tuition tax credits to students who qualified to attend participating private schools (Billick, Hiller, & Spradlin, 2011; Indiana State Government Website [ISGW], 2013). In 2009, the statewide total to be spent on vouchers was
capped at $2.5 million per year, of which $2.2 million went unused (Indiana General Assembly, 2009). However, none of the remaining balance was redirected to public schools (CEEP, 2011).

In 2011, and again in 2013, the Indiana General Assembly broadened eligibility requirements and increased available funding for vouchers, raising the cap to $5 million in 2011, and then completely removing the cap in 2013. In 2011-2012, there were 3,911 vouchers approved, which increased to 9,135 in 2012-2013. For the 2013-2014 school year, approximately 20,040 students utilized vouchers; more than double the enrollment of the previous school year (Elliot, 2013; IDOE, 2013). The combined financial value of vouchers for the 2012 and 2013 fiscal years was tallied at $52 million (Legislative Services Agency, 2013).

Funding cuts
The survey question with the second highest mean response was also related to funding, “Cuts in state funding to public schools,” with 2012 ($M = 3.67, SD = 1.35$) and 2013 ($M = 4.31, SD = 0.63$). These means suggesting agreement both years that public school funding cuts had influenced participants’ retirement decisions.

From 2009 to 2013, the Indiana funding formula afforded three primary methods for shifting individual school funding towards a target amount based on the Complexity Index (calculated from the percentage of economically disadvantaged students), and the Foundation Level (the base amount provided per student). Foundation Level distributions went from $4,825 per student in 2009, to a decrease of $4,280 per student in 2012, before settling at $4,405 per student in 2013 (Spradlin, Robbins, Popely, & Lara, 2011; IDOE, 2013; ISGW, 2013). Since 2009, reductions from the changes in the Foundation Program meant a loss of over one million dollars for the average-size district (1,857 students) in 2012, and a loss of just under $790,000 for the average district in 2013 (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2012; Spradlin et al., 2011; IDOE, 2013).

Also during this time period, several Indiana grants, including the Restoration Grant and the Small Schools Grant, both of which provided additional support for public schools with declining enrollments, were phased out (Spradlin et al., 2011), reducing revenue for many school districts (Adamson, 2013).

Areas that superintendents disagreed influenced retirement decisions.
At the other end of the spectrum, there were several survey questions that superintendents consistently “disagreed” influenced their retirement decisions. One specific question showed the lowest mean both years, “Employee quality in your district,” with 2012 ($M = 1.73, SD = 0.88$) and 2013 ($M = 1.46, SD = 0.52$). These results indicated disagreement both years that employee quality was an area influencing retirement decisions and could be seen as a “vote of confidence” from participants regarding their employees.

The second lowest-rated item in 2012 was “The threat of your school or district being taken over by the state” ($M = 1.87, SD = 1.25$). We included this item on the survey because in 2011, in a highly controversial decision, the IDOE took over five “failing” schools and turned these schools over to private companies (Indiana State Board of Education, 2011). Despite ongoing public debate surrounding this issue, our survey results implied that the threat of school takeover was not an issue influencing participants’ retirement decisions.
The second lowest-rated survey item in 2013 was, “Your relationship with your school board members” \((M = 1.54, SD = 0.88)\). This indicated that respondents did not see their relationships with board members as influencing their retirement decisions, suggesting the possibility of constructive relationships between the superintendents and their boards.

We included this item due to reports from individual superintendents regarding difficulties in dealing with board members. However, our results supported previous research by Glass and Franceschini (2007), who found that contrary to popular rhetoric, many superintendents have good relationships with their school boards.

In summary, to address our first research question, we investigated superintendents’ perceptions regarding topics that might have influenced their decisions to retire. The survey questions with the highest means, indicating agreement, were the Indiana voucher program (2012 and 2013) and funding cuts (2012 and 2013).

Areas with the lowest means, indicating disagreement, included employee quality (2012 and 2013), threat of school takeover (2012), and superintendent relationship with school board members (2013). A comprehensive listing of the survey items with mean responses can be found as an Appendix.

**Analysis after Removing Superintendents Who Were “Ready to Retire”**

To address our second research question, we removed all survey responses from superintendents who agreed to the item: “There was no primary issue, I just felt that it was time to retire.” We did this because we recognized that if respondents agreed to this item, they were feeling ready to retire irrespective of any school-related issues they might be facing.

By removing all responses from the superintendents who agreed with this question, we eliminated six superintendents’ data from the 2012 results and four from the 2013 results, leaving nine respondents each year, or a combined total of 18 superintendents. This gave us two groups, one group that contained all superintendents \((n = 28)\), and the other group that contained only the superintendents who did not agree that, “… it was time to retire” \((n = 18)\).

We compared these two groups’ responses on each question using t-test analysis, but no statistically significant differences were found at the \(p < .05\) level.

Although no significant differences were revealed, this analysis provided valuable information because it suggested that the two groups held fairly compatible attitudes. In examining these data descriptively, we observed that the same cluster of survey questions consistently rose to the top of the agree-and-disagree ranges with only slight variations in means. These cluster areas included school vouchers and funding issues for the agree range, and employee quality, threat of school takeovers, and relationships with school boards for the disagree range.

We found these data telling because they suggested that even after pulling out the superintendents who felt that it was time to retire, the same topics were indicated as either influencing or not influencing retirement decisions. Table 1 presents the items with the three highest and lowest means for both groups.
Table 1

Survey Items with Highest and Lowest Mean Responses Before and After Removing Superintendents Who Did Not Agree “It Was Time to Retire”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>All superintendents</th>
<th>Superintendents who did not agree “it was time to retire”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highest Mean Response</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indiana voucher program</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>4.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cuts in state funding</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>3.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changes in school funding</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>3.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lowest Mean Response</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship school board</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>1.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Threat of school takeover</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>1.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employee quality</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>1.61</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: Categories: A=Agree, U=Undecided, D=Disagree*

**Discussion**

Paul Houston, the former Executive Director of AASA, talked about the “killer B’s” for school district administrators: boards, buses, and budgets (Education Writers Association, 2003). As we examined responses from Indiana superintendents who decided to retire in 2012 and 2013, we found that for our participants the dominant “killer B” was budgets—or more specifically, vouchers and state cuts in funding. Indiana’s voucher program recorded the highest mean for both years, suggesting concerns from the 28 respondents regarding the influence of the vouchers on public school budgets. Cuts in state funding recorded the second highest mean both years. Even after pulling out superintendents who agreed “it was time to retire” and leaving the 18 superintendents who might not have been ready for retirement, vouchers and public school funding remained the top-rated issues.

These findings suggested that the difficulties superintendents were facing in
funding their school districts were influential in their decision-making about retirement. In addition, these results corresponded with discourse in some other states regarding superintendent retirement. For example, between 2011 and 2013, Kentucky had a turnover of approximately one-third of the state’s superintendents. Fiscal concerns were noted as a potential factor, specifically, difficulties of managing state reform efforts with fewer resources (Coldiron, 2013).

Waters and Marzano (2006) found that one of the specific areas related to superintendent effectiveness was focused on the allocation and use of fiscal resources to support achievement and instructional goals.

Given the decline of state fiscal resources, it is noteworthy that Indiana’s retiring superintendents ranked high the issue of school funding in their reasons to retire, especially considering that these were veteran superintendents with school budgeting experience.

This perspective is problematic when considering the importance of stability and tenure in the superintendent’s position for bringing about district improvement (Cooper et al., 2000; Fullan, 2002) and also in dealing with a district’s economic challenges (Trevino et al., 2008).

On a brighter note, our participants were affirming in several areas, including the quality of their employees and their relationships with their school board members. The superintendents consistently disagreed that their relationships with board members were a reason to retire. Even more strongly, superintendents disagreed both years that employee quality influenced retirement decisions.

From a “people perspective” these results were encouraging as they suggested that the superintendents felt positive about the people they worked with on a daily basis.

**Conclusions and Recommendations**

Indiana is a state highly engaged in educational reform. An unusually high number of Indiana’s school superintendents retired in 2012 and 2013.

Considering the age demographics of the nation’s superintendents, it is easy to dismiss high retirement numbers as simply age-related. However, no recent studies had been conducted to capture superintendents’ voices on this topic. Consequently, this research attempted to identify factors that influenced superintendents’ decisions to retire, thus increasing our understanding of current issues in the superintendency.

Twenty-eight superintendents participated in this study over two years, providing a well-defined snapshot of specific areas of concern and interest. Ten of the 28 participants agreed that “it was time to retire,” while 18 did not. It was revealed that Indiana’s voucher program and its impact on public schools was a reform initiative that participants agreed had an influence on their retirement decisions, followed closely by state cuts and changes in school funding.

In the last several years, Indiana legislators have extensively changed the school funding process (Hiller & Spradlin, 2010). Some changes were intended to reduce property taxes, lessen school funding inequities across the state, and increase parents’ educational choice options. However, the state’s level of funding has fallen consistently below what many school districts received.
prior to the changes (Adamson, 2013). For Indiana’s public school districts, survival now requires that fund-raising efforts are an important focus of the superintendent’s office. This constant and strained effort towards securing adequate funding can divert time and attention away from vital areas like instruction, curriculum, student programs, facility management, and professional development.

Therefore, in terms of recommendations, two themes clearly emerge from this paper. The first finding is that Indiana legislators and state-level government officials need to recognize the importance of adequately funding all public school districts in the state, especially the districts most negatively affected by recent funding changes, those that have lost students through vouchers, and those whose referendums to raise additional funds have been unsuccessful.

Increased performance expectations for public schools are realistic and viable, but only if schools receive adequate funding that allows them to push towards their mission of helping every child succeed. In order to provide the best possible education for Indiana’s public school students, the state cannot continue to expect more for less. Can effective leadership overcome ineffective funding? The relationship between leadership and school effectiveness might also be tied to the effective funding. Legislators need to recognize the importance of and fulfill the need for adequate funding.

The second recommendation generated by the results of this study involves increased training and professional development for current and future superintendents regarding fundraising and budgeting. We recommend that organizations such as local universities, the IDOE, the Indiana Superintendent’s Association, and other professional associations provide opportunities for superintendents to receive ongoing professional development and support designed to address specific funding concerns.

Many of today’s public school superintendents must seek outside funding sources through opportunities such as grants, federal aid, community partnerships, local fund raising efforts, and education foundations, but they need help in making these efforts as time-efficient and successful as possible. However, the issue of finite grant resources and declining external grant awards raise serious issues about the stability of outside funding.

**Limitations and Implications**

This study has several limitations, including being limited to one state, which presents a relatively small sample size. Another limitation is that we cannot assess the degree to which some of the identified factors, such as funding concerns, are unique to 2012 and 2013.

This study also raises questions, for example, what will be the long-term effects of the voucher program on Indiana school funding and will this reform initiative remain a top issue among school superintendents in years to come? Follow-up studies of Indiana’s superintendents are needed. In addition, studies encompassing wider geographic areas and using larger sample sizes of retiring superintendents are necessary in order to better understand motivating factors towards endurance in the role.

In summary, this study contributes to the literature on the superintendency through the identification of mitigating factors that might influence longevity in the position. This research also generates implications regarding potential unintended consequences of certain reform initiatives on funding and leadership of
public schools, as well as professional development, training, support, and resources needed for those serving in the important role of superintendent. We hope these results will increase awareness regarding current issues considered positives and challenges in the position, as well as provide information that can be used to prepare and educate future superintendent candidates.

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References


Appendix
Superintendents’ Mean Responses Regarding Influence on Retirement Decisions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>2012 n</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>2013 n</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Indiana’s voucher program impact on funding</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>1.31</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>4.46</td>
<td>0.52</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cuts in state funding to public schools</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>3.67</td>
<td>1.35</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>4.31</td>
<td>0.63</td>
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<td>Changes in how Indiana schools are funded</td>
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<td>3.67</td>
<td>1.35</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>4.08</td>
<td>1.04</td>
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<td>Charter school movement</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>3.53</td>
<td>1.25</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>3.69</td>
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<td>Rapid changes under heading of educational reform</td>
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<td>3.50</td>
<td>1.74</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>4.15</td>
<td>1.14</td>
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<td>Funding equity in Indiana Schools</td>
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<td>1.25</td>
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<td>0.76</td>
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<td>1.58</td>
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<td>Increased negative press about public schools</td>
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<td>13</td>
<td>3.31</td>
<td>1.11</td>
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Note. n = number of participant responses to survey items with scale of 5 = Strongly Agree, 4 = Agree, 3 = Undecided, 2 = Disagree, 1 = Strongly Disagree. Survey items are shown by 2012 mean order.
A Critique of "The Common Core is a Change for the Better"

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Key Words
Common Core, standardization, high stakes testing

In their article, “The Common Core is a Change for the Better,” Gardner and Powell (2013) make an argument in support of implementing the Common Core to improve teaching and student learning. They opine the Common Core will enable students to become more college and career ready and state the Common Core standards will provide consistency in every child’s educational journey (Gardner & Powell, 2013).

The authors suggest Common Core will enhance critical thinking skills as students take responsibility of their learning (Gardner & Powell, 2013). The authors wrote the Common Core standards provide a road map for what students should be able to do and will increase curricular rigor throughout schools (Gardner & Powell, 2013). The authors’ assertions represent some of the more well-advertised claims made by proponents of the Common Core.

My purpose for this commentary is to critique Gardner and Powell’s article. I use examples from the classical and current literature on the topic of curriculum standards as the basis for my critique. Overall, I argue Gardner and Powell’s (2013) argument contains much rhetoric and both the internal and external aspects of their claims lack sufficient empirical evidence and support.

Internal Aspects of the Authors’ Argument
The authors arrange their argument in support of the Common Core with a focus on various education aspects they state are enhanced with the implementation of the Core. They support their arguments with various claims of the effectiveness of the Core but provide no empirically derived qualitative or quantitative evidence. Throughout the article, the authors suggest the Common Core standards increase rigor of school curricula resulting in higher levels of academic expectations for students (Gardner & Powell, 2013). The focus of the article drifts from claim to claim and the authors frequently support their assertions...
about the efficacy of the Common Core with their opinions, not empirical data.

For example, the authors suggest individuals who oppose the standards have either not read them or do not understand their practical value (Gardner & Powell, 2013). Furthermore the authors clearly state education quality in America has fallen behind foreign counterparts as they contend, “… our work with the Common Core has shown us just how far students have slipped …” (p. 51). It would have been helpful to the reader if the authors provided some research-based evidence from known detractors of standardized curriculum to better support their argument (e.g. Au, 2007; Tanner & Tanner, 2007; Tienken, 2011; Zhao, 2012a; 2012b).

External Aspects of the Authors’ Argument

In addition to some internal aspects, the external aspects do not align to the existing literature and research on the effectiveness of standardized curricula. For example, Tanner and Tanner (2007) point to the work of various researchers such as Dewey (1938), Erikson (1968), Piaget (1967), and Tyler (1949) and their contributions to knowledge about how children develop, how they learn best, and the ways to organize curriculum so more children learn more. Their research and the work of others led to the formation of the Curriculum Paradigm (Tanner & Tanner, 2007).

Education researchers have acknowledged the need to arrange curricula reform efforts and assessments around the Paradigm, which takes into account the nature of the learner, nature of knowledge, human development, and social forces (Tanner & Tanner, 2007).

Gardner and Powell’s assertions do not acknowledge the Curriculum Paradigm or the classical literature on the topic of standardization or curriculum development. Initiatives which seek to standardize student outputs without considering the learner’s prior knowledge and experiences, stages of human development, the way knowledge should be organized, and the various external influences on curriculum and instruction violates the Paradigm and such initiatives are doomed to fail (Tanner & Tanner, 2007).

The authors could have strengthened their argument in favor of the Core by acknowledging the Curriculum Paradigm and explaining how their ideas align with it or the reasons why they choose to ignore it. In essence, the authors argue for an Essentialist philosophy of education. It would have been helpful if they explained the research they had to support such a view of education and who ends up winning and losing when such a view is applied to the almost 50 million public school children who are exposed to the initiative.

The Essentialist viewpoint proposed by Gardner and Powell contradicts fundamental aspects of the Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education (Commission on Reorganization of Secondary Education, 1918) and The Eight-Year Study (Aikin, 1942). The authors of the Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education acknowledged the need to differentiate curricula and programs to meet the needs of the diverse learners in society (Commission on Reorganization of Secondary Education, 1918). Gardner and Powell do not connect their support of the Common Core to this classic study, or any classic empirical literature.
100 Years

Over 100 years of research-results suggest children do not develop at the same paces cognitively, socially, or morally. As a result, curricula and instruction must be differentiated in various ways to meet the needs of students (Tienken & Orlich, 2013). Gardner and Powell could have strengthened their argument by demonstrating how the Common Core accounts for various differences in human development.

Gardner and Powell argue the Core will provide a stable education for mobile students. It would have been helpful to readers if the authors mentioned that, according to the U.S. Census Bureau; about 80,000 of the approximately 50 million public school students migrate out of their respective states (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011).

Gardner and Powell could strengthen their article by acknowledging no single best curricula exists to support all 50 million public school students and therefore, curriculum developments must be locally controlled, evidence-informed, and democratically implemented (Aikin, 1942; Commission on Reorganization of Secondary Education, 1918; Tanner & Tanner, 2007; Tienken & Orlich, 2013; Zhao, 2012a; 2012b). The landmark Eight-Year Study provides a concrete example of why standardization is not necessary to achieve superior academic and socio-civic results (Aikin, 1942).

It would have been helpful if Gardner and Powell told readers the students from schools in the Eight-Year Study, who were able to access multiple, divergent curricula paths through high school, performed better on standardized tests in high school and in their academics and socio-civic measures in college than students who attended schools with standardized programs.

Furthermore, Gardner and Powell make no connection to Thorndike’s (1924) key research finding that no one subject, such as Latin, provides superior mental development over other more authentic subjects like those found in industrial arts or the performing arts (Thorndike, 1924); subjects usually eliminated or greatly reduced in standardized settings.

Gardner and Powell’s argument for standardization of curriculum and outputs is in direct opposition with classical and recent research findings on the topic. Have the authors’ forgotten Dewey’s (1938) proposal that educators must consider a holistic approach to educating children that brings meaning to each learner so they can contribute to society? The authors’ support for Common Core does not take into account Dewey’s theory of experiential learning which is highly contextual and customized at the school or district level.

Standardization Hurts

The use of the Common Core requires the continued administration of high stakes testing to enforce fidelity of implementation. The reliance of a standardized test contradicts Au’s (2007) research and analysis of standardization and high stakes testing. Au (2007) contends high stakes testing enables a small group of elites and bureaucrats to control what happens
in classrooms and actually removes the decision-making power away from local level authorities.

Writer Au also warned a Common Core and high-stakes testing inhibits diversity and discourages the promotion of democracy within schools (Au, 2007). A Common Core significantly contradicts findings and recommendations from the classic and recent literature acknowledging the need to promote diversity of curriculum and assessment and to facilitate democratic principles within schools (Akin, 1942; Baines, 2011; Dewey, 1938; Tienken & Orlich; 2013). Gardner and Powell could enhance their proposed ideas by discussing how the Common Core will actually promote democracy and curricular diversity within schools.

One Side of the Coin
The authors present a somewhat one-sided, advocacy view of the Common Core and associated standardization of testing. The authors failed to acknowledge the pressure that mounts on educators as a result of the Common Core and standardized testing forcing school personnel to essentially teach to the test in order to produce the standardized outputs prized by the centralized system (Freire, 2000). Gardner and Powell argue the rigors of the Common Core will, “… encourage us to engage students in productive struggles rather than focusing on what is on the test …” (pg. 51).

Actually, nothing could be further from the truth. The current Common Core and standardized testing system aligns strongly with Freire’s description of the banking model of education in which information is deposited from those in control to the students. Freire (2000) warned homogenizing education, as in now being seen as result of the Common Core, will create an oppressing system in which the teacher becomes the depositor and constantly makes deposits of information students must receive and regurgitate in the formats instructed on the date and time of the depositor’s choosing. As students are trained to be passive learners and store more and more deposits, critical thinking, application, creativity, innovation, entrepreneurship, passion and the promotion of diversity are minimized (Zhao, 2012b).

Overtime students are mistreated because they receive an inadequate and narrow education (Freire, 2000). The authors could have strengthened their assertions by providing evidence for how the Common Core and standardized testing can be implemented to avoid cementing a banking model of education across the country.

Local Control
Gardner and Powell contend the Common Core does not result in diminished local control as states still have standards students are expected to master. Their assertion is in direct contradiction with scholars on the subject. For example Au (2007), Baines (2011), and Tienken (2013) explained the ways in which local control of curriculum content and testing is diminished in standardized systems of education. No longer can parents who petition their school administrators or boards of education for large-scale revision to mathematics and language arts curricula content expect to see sweeping changes. The Common Core and standardized testing act like cement for the imposed content.

Policy Recommendations

Today’s K—12 education climate is filled with education policymakers and bureaucrats placing a premium on standardized curricula and assessments. Based on the current
school reform landscape, standardizing curricula and assessments is one avenue educational reformers are leveraging in an attempt to improve student learning. However, the time has come for federal, state, and local leaders to make evidence based decisions in education.

Policymakers and education officials at the federal, state, and local level must rely on classical and current peer reviewed, empirically driven research to construct and enact policies, which will ultimately impact millions of educators and students. Considering the landmark and current literature, which demonstrates locally developed curricula and assessments are most effective for improving student learning, district and school leaders must develop and implement policies focused on customizing curricula and assessments around the Common Core that meet the needs of their diverse student populations.

Leaders are federally mandated to implement the Core, but can protect teachers and students by ensuring customized curricula and assessments are developed and implemented enabling each student to reach his/her full potential. District and school officials can enact policies at the local level guaranteeing students are exposed to a diversified education that includes core content as well as elective courses. Principals must make certain student education tracts are not primarily focused on tested subjects but instead, provide a well-balanced holistic tract including various elective courses. Local level leaders can also limit the use of standardized test results to make important decisions in education.

Important, high stakes decisions about students must include multiple measures. The results of high stakes tests are simply one indicator of student progress. Local level leaders must consider the Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing which acknowledges that when making high stakes decisions about students, multiple measures such as student portfolios, teacher recommendations, self/peer evaluations, and the results of locally developed assessments are essential for making critical decisions about students (AERA, APA, NCME, 2014).

Concluding Statements
Based on a critique of internal and external aspects of Gardner and Powell’s (2013) article, readers must approach the arguments and assertions therein with caution. Their arguments do not align with current or classical research/literature on the topic of standardization. The article contains much rhetoric and provides no empirical evidence to support the arguments. Multiple viewpoints are not provided nor are the voices of dissenting experts addressed. The authors could significantly strengthen their argument by connecting it with classical and current research on the topic and addressing the existing counter-claims.

Author Biography

Adam Wolfe is a middle school mathematics teacher. He is pursuing his doctorate in education leadership, management, and policy. E-mail: wolfe07@gmail.com
References


Who’s Afraid of the Big, Bad Dragon

by Yong Zhao

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Dr. Yong Zhao’s book, Who’s Afraid of the Big, Bad Dragon, published by Jossey-Bass, should be required reading for all superintendents, their leadership staff and all professors who prepare education leaders. Like his previous two books, World Class Learners and Catching Up or Leading the Way, Zhao provides cutting insights and expert guidance for those interested in the US education system. In this latest publication, Zhao destroys myths surrounding the supremacy of the Chinese education system with well-researched facts.

Zhao slays the dragon protecting the myth that China is going to out-educate the US. He peels back the veil that covers a Chinese education system steeped in thousands of years of standardization, conformity, and the killing of creativity. Zhao’s message is clear: America should not descend into an authoritarian Chinese system of public education if the goal is to foster the creative talents of its youth.

Professor Zhao does not mince words as he dissects America’s bureaucratic quest to bludgeon the public system using tactics first developed by Chinese emperors thousands of years ago to ensure the population did not rise up or question authority. He writes, “High-stakes testing is America’s Faustian bargain, made with the devil of authoritarianism. Under the rule of authoritarianism, which gave birth to high-stakes testing in the first place, disrespect of teachers as professional colleagues and intrusion into their professional autonomy are praised as characteristics of no nonsense, tough leadership with high expectations” (p. 5). Does the word “rigor” come to mind?

Zhao provides readers with an almost forensic audit trail of thousands of years of Chinese cultural and education history to help readers understand how authoritarian systems are created, but also how hard it is to reverse course once authoritarianism becomes entrenched in policy and practice.

Zhao’s details how a nationally controlled Chinese education bureaucracy sends down edicts for publication of scholarly articles and the development of patents along with a steady stream of carrots and sticks to
create “miracles” of scientific output. But as Zhao shows, this scientific emperor has no clothes. The rampant practice of Chinese scholars purchasing scientific papers and publishing in fake journals in order to satisfy government accountability schemes is an amazing revelation and a prophetic warning by Zhao of how standardizing the means and the ends of professional output can create perverse practices.

Zhao writes, “In short, the quantity of China’s scientific and technological output looks more than impressive, but the quality of its patents and research publications is abysmal” (p. 110). He reminds us that we are already seeing such things occur in the public education system when superintendents engage in test cheating scandals in some of the largest school districts in the US.

The discussion of PISA scores and the dampening effect that chasing them has on creativity should cause those who champion the test as an important indicator of education quality to pause. Zhao calls out those Sinophiles who praise China’s system of education based only on the results from a very small and elite subset of Chinese students: those in top high schools in Shanghai.

He reminds the Sinophiles that China also has one of the worst education systems on the planet because of its lack of ability to develop creative, innovative, and entrepreneurial adults. China lags the US badly on international indices of creativity, innovation, and entrepreneurship.

Zhao’s personal experience with the Chinese public school system and his unparalleled depth of research on the topic makes this an instant classic and an invaluable resource for pushing back on the Chinese system now being imposed on America’s children and professional educators.

**Reviewer Biography**

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