Why Not Allow School Boards to Choose Alternatives to Traditionally Trained Superintendents?

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Abstract

This paper was prepared as a response to:

  1. A national trend towards lessening the requirements to become a public school superintendent and hiring non-traditional superintendents. State and national approaches to alternative licensure for public school superintendents are reviewed, including the lessening or abolition of standards. This is of concern to those aware of the need for highly qualified school leaders.

  2. A national trend linking effective practices of school district leaders to improvements in student achievement. Well-prepared superintendents have been tied to high student achievement. A key part of this response involved pairing Educational Leadership Constituent Council's (ELCC) "District Level Standards," with five key responsibilities Tim Waters and Robert Marzano (2006) fulfilled by superintendents who positively impacted student test scores (p. 11-13). Profiles from the Wallace Foundation, national groups, and district level studies are cited to establish a foundation regarding the impact of highly trained on student success.

Key Words

school superintendent training, student achievement, impacting student achievement

When a superintendent with a strong reputation as an educational leader was dismissed by his school board and replaced by a principal who had no certification as a superintendent, it attracted the attention of the chairman of one of the largest manufacturing companies in the United States, which was located near the district. The chairman asked some area superintendents and educators an understandable question: How can a board hire someone to serve as a superintendent without the proper certification?

The group he questioned—two superintendents, including the one impacted by this action; two university representatives who work with superintendent preparation programs, including this author; the state association director who represents superintendents and central office administrators; and a company attorney—pointed out that the trend in hiring unlicensed superintendents is by no means unique to our state.

About 40 states have provided for the hiring of superintendents from outside of education (Thompson, Thompson, & Knight, 2013, p. 61). Florida, Indiana, Michigan, North Carolina, Delaware, South Dakota, Utah, Washington, and Wyoming were among the early states to eliminate certification for superintendents.

Michigan's elimination of superintendent certification since 1993 has been a subject of study to identify whether a more diverse applicant pool has been attracted to the role (Smith, 2008). The study noted "Perceived and projected gaps between supply, demand, and effectiveness have driven the matter on to political and professional agendas (p. 31)."

The 2013 Thompson, Thompson, & Knight study surveyed experienced educators and found, "participants did not trust, respect, support, or accept nontraditional superintendents" as compared to traditionally trained and licensed superintendents (p. 60). Smith (2008) summarized the quest of the above study succinctly: "Michigan threw an educational leadership party … did anyone come" (p. 36)?

Out of over 600 school districts, the study found only four "out-of-field" superintendents hired as of 2008 (p. 41). Dr. William Mays, the Michigan Association of School Administrator's Executive Director, stated in my conversation with him in early 2012 that of the "four originally hired, only one remained."

In 2013, the Indiana General Assembly joined the bandwagon, passing Public Law 167, which states that a superintendent hired by a school district "is not required to hold a teacher's license" but "is required to have obtained at least a master's degree from an accredited postsecondary educational institution" (p. 1706). This master's degree is not limited to education, but may be earned in any area.

As the executive who had called our meeting began to grasp the possible consequences of this licensing trend, he voiced concern that this lack of required licensing may lead some school boards to employ less than the best of candidates. The group also discussed the concern that in some areas this could lead to cronyism in hiring. Brian, one of the educators, posed the question "What happens to 'highly qualified' as a standard if there are no standards?"

The chairman left the group with a challenge and a promise. First, he challenged us to "build support around what it takes to be a successful superintendent." Second, he cautioned us to be able to respond to the question: Why not allow boards to make a choice between alternative or traditionally trained candidates? Finally, if there is a need for highly trained superintendents, "get the right people to push that point as a perceived need."

The chairman made a commitment to the group: Get good information to me, and I'll get it out there. Two members of the majority party of the state's General Assembly had agreed to author and carry a bill to again require certification above a master's degree for a superintendent's licensure and eligibility for appointment. Now came the challenge to get good information.

I chose to develop my response to the chairman in terms of how a highly qualified and professionally trained superintendent, according to a preponderance of research, is the point person in improving student learning and performance. As I continually stress to my graduate students working toward administrative licensure, "If what you are doing does not add to the improvement of student learning, why are you doing it?"

Literature Review

The following review of literature surrounding this topic suggests that the need for highly trained educators, successful in completing advanced licensure programs, may never have been greater than it is today. At the same time, national trends show licensing requirements for superintendents are actually declining. By 2011, nine states had no licensure requirement for superintendents, while 22 states had developed waivers for licensure and 18 states had developed alternative routes to licensure (Kowalski, 2013).

What does it take to be a successful superintendent, and why is advanced, specialized degree work a necessary part of preparing our superintendents and central office leaders? As noted by Allan Odden and Lawrence Picus (2014), "The goal is to have teachers use data to inform their instructional practice, identify students who need interventions, and improve student performance" (p.115).

In order to assist teachers in becoming proficient, the leader of a school district must be well trained in instructional practices, interventions, tracking student learning, establishing procedures to deal with problems when noted, and providing enriched learning opportunities for students identified as proficient.

Research connecting the superintendent to improving student achievement has been strong, thanks to studies commissioned by the Wallace Foundation (Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom & Anderson, 2010), and a definitive study in 2006 by Robert Marzano and Tim Waters. The book *Leaders of Learning: How District, School, and Classroom Leaders Improve Student Achievement* states it this way, "Leadership from the central office matters—both in terms of raising student achievement and in terms of creating the conditions for adult learning that lead to higher levels of achievement" (DuFour & Marzano, 2011, p. 46).

The challenge remains how to best make sure those filling positions as superintendents are prepared to maximize such potential impact once in the position.

Research from diverse organizations emphasizes the need for preparing superintendents to impact student improvement by focusing on performance standards. The Southern Regional Education Board, in its 2007 *Illinois Benchmarking Report: Executive Summary* noted, "the capacity of states to improve the quality of schools is greatly diminished when the whole leadership system is neither in place nor effective to meet the leadership challenges in its schools" (p. 5).

The summary suggested superintendents insist that the basis for standards and student performance should be the underpinning for how instruction is delivered, assessed, and used to determine the success of candidates in preparation programs. Such criteria are also noted to be integral to employment decisions, future professional development, and expectations for performance during employment.

The need for highly trained educators certified in school leadership is summarized within the opening comments from the Executive Summary of a 2010 study commissioned by the Wallace Foundation entitled *Central Office Transformation for District-wide Teaching and Learning Improvement*:

> Our findings reveal that leaders in these systems, first and foremost, understood what decades of experience and research have shown [and that is] that districts generally do not see district-wide improvements in teaching and learning without substantial engagement by their central offices in helping all schools build their capacity for improvement. Central offices and the people who work in them are not simply part of the background noise in school improvement. Rather, school district

central office administrators exercise essential leadership, in partnership with school leaders, to build capacity throughout public educational systems for teaching and learning improvements. (Honig, Copland, Rainey, Lorton, & Newton, p. iii)

Another research report to the Wallace Foundation (Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson, 2010) noted that effective superintendents understand the "critical importance of patience and sustained, continual efforts aimed at improvement" (p. 212), emphasizing that district "leaders need to take steps to monitor and sustain high-level student performance wherever it is found and to set ambitious goals for student learning that go beyond proficiency levels on standardized tests.

Focusing improvement efforts solely on low-performing schools and students is not a productive strategy for continual improvement in a district" (p. 214).

The Council of Chief School State Officers' State Consortium on Education Leadership noted in Standard 2 of its 2010 *SCEL Toolkit for SEAS to Increase District Leadership Capacity* the need for educational leadership to advocate, nurture, and maintain a culture encouraging a culture of student and staff growth and improvement. Indicators suggested included "a comprehensive, rigorous, and coherent curricular program" (p. 11).

Nationwide there is ground-roots recognition of the need for school administrators who are educational leaders. Stephen Fink and Max Silverman, of the University of Washington's Center for Educational Leadership, reported that school districts in Seattle, Washington; Pittsburg, Pennsylvania; Denver, Colorado; Albany, New York; Tulsa, Oklahoma; and Hillsborough

County, Florida, are all endeavoring to utilize the central office as a support system for developing instructional leadership in their building level administrative staff (2014). A study of 12 high achieving school districts in California (Murphy and Hallinger, 1988) paired district effectiveness with a superintendent's ability to actively provide leadership in curriculum and instruction.

Working to improve its educational delivery system, the school corporation of Highline, Washington, focused on how superintendents and their leadership teams transformed "the central office into a support system to help all schools improve the quality of teaching and learning" (Enfield & Spicciati, 2014, p. 28). The district developed two primary beliefs:

1. They agreed that the central office adds value not merely through efficiency "but also through a more active role in strengthening school leadership. … The central office now must play a pivotal role in ensuring a strong system of schools … for the strategic work of transformation."

2. There must be an emphasis to "develop a clearer organizational focus on how everything we do is in service of supporting student achievement" (p 28).

The Education Direction firm consults with school corporations to prepare mentors with positive educational experiences to coach building principals, especially in the area of effectively using a data-driven inquiry cycle to improve teaching and learning. One of their clients, the Chandler Unified School District in the suburbs of Phoenix, AZ, has invested a great deal in professional development to ensure each of its schools implements the critical elements of the inquiry cycle including:

- developing a focus on the instructional core [which is] "the intersection of content, the teacher and the student" (Kaufman, Grimm & Doty, 2014, p. 21),
- expanding the definition of data to include student work and instructional practices, and
- continuously monitor progress.

Regular, meaningful coaching of teachers and principals is a major component of central office/superintendent leadership that the Education Direction firm finds leads to systemic school improvement.

The need for highly trained district leaders who understand the relationship between effective teaching and learning has become even more evident as educational standards have evolved throughout the last few decades. Odden and Picus (2004) note that "For most of the 20th century, school finance policy focused on equity. … In the 1990s, new attention began to focus on education adequacy and productivity—the linkages among level and use of funds, and linkages to student achievement" (p. 1).

With the transition from equity to adequacy in school systems, the 2001 federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) mandate created a performance demand unprecedented in education. Now, instead of measuring student performance in terms of means or medians, success for each public school and school district in the United States began to be measured by how each of the federally designated 37 sub-groups identified by No Child Left Behind met predefined targets, with the goal of all students testing within the "proficient" level by 2014.

Waters and Marzano's 2006 working paper for McREL, *School District Leadership*

that Works: The Effect of Superintendent Leadership on Student Achievement, is quoted frequently by researchers exploring superintendents' impact on student achievement.

Their research found that the computed correlation between district leadership and student achievement was .24. Based upon this figure, consider the case of a superintendent at the 50th percentile in terms of leadership abilities who leads a district where average student achievement is also at the 50th percentile. "Now, assume that the superintendent improves his or her leadership abilities by one standard deviation … we would predict that average student achievement in the district would rise to the 59.5th percentile" (p. 10).

The authors found district-level leadership that statistically provided a significant impact on student test scores required competency in five key responsibilities:

- Collaborative goal setting,
- Establishing non-negotiable goals for achievement and instruction,
- (School) Board alignment with support of district goals,
- Monitoring achievement and instructional goals (interpreting any differences noted between stated goals and current practice), and
- Using resources to support the goals for instruction and achievement.

The preceding research supports the premise that effective district leadership positively influences student achievement. Subsequent research demonstrates that Educational Leadership Constituent Council (ELCC) standards are addressing the needs to develop such leadership.

The National Policy Board documents the research support for the ELCC District Level Standards for Educational Administration (NPBEA). In the organization's 2011 examination of the ELCC "District Level Standards," each standard discussed is followed by a review of relevant literature under the section Research Support for ELCC Standard. Throughout the document, ELCC standards are supported by the research of many experts, the 2006 research on school district leadership done by Waters, Marzano, and McNulty.

The Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) also noted the relationship between the ELCC/ISLLC Standards and the 2006 Waters and Marzano research concerning the link between specific school district leadership practices and student performance.

This analysis of the leadership standards includes a call for district administrators to "align and focus their work in all these areas" identified within the standards (Canole & Young, 2013, p. 27), the key rationale being that, "when district leaders align and focus their work in all these areas, they have a strongly positive effect on student learning." The same study developed charts comparing "Model Teacher Leader Standards" with the 2008 ISLLC/ELCC district leadership standards (pp. 117-118).

Building Support Around What It Takes to Be A Successful Superintendent

Universities provide programs leading to superintendent licensure, primarily by becoming accredited as part of the Educational Leadership Constituent Council (ELCC). In order to become accredited, universities must demonstrate their course work incorporates an awareness, understanding, and application of seven program standards that are broken down into many more detailed sub-skills. The first

assumption embedded within the 2011 ELCC leadership standards is that "improving student achievement is the central responsibility of district leadership" (p. 5).

The ELCC 2011 standards for leaders of school districts are research based and were updated from the earlier Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) standards using current research and documentation from scholarly resources regarding district leadership preparation for those training to lead school districts through transitional times (Young and Mawhinney, p. 1).

According to the research driving the ELCC Standards, "district-level standards are meant to be used for advanced programs at the master, specialist, or doctoral level that prepare assistant superintendents, superintendents, curriculum directors, and supervisors and/or other programs that prepare educational leaders for a school
district environment" (Young and Mawhinney, 2012, p.42).

The earlier *2008 Educational Leadership Policy Standards: ISLLC 2008,* had already asserted that, due to a wealth of information about school and school district leaders available at that time, national discourse had advanced from whether leadership makes a difference for students to how to prepare "high-quality leaders" to assume roles that can, indeed, contribute to raising student achievement. To get there, the report states that:

One of the clearest lessons from this research is that the states that are using leadership standards are on the right track. According to an extensive review of the research literature, funded by the Wallace Foundation, goal-and vision-setting articulated in the standards are areas in which education leaders have the most impact. (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2008, p. 3)

How clearly are the ELCC standards based upon research? One way to test this is to compare them to the highly acclaimed research of Waters and Marzano. To demonstrate which of Waters' and Marzano's key responsibilities are explored in each of the ELCC program standards, I created Table 1.

Table 1

Alignment Between ELLC and Five Key Responsibilities for Superintendents Noted by Waters and Marzano (2006)

	Key Responsibilities Proven Statistically Significant in Impact on Student Test Scores				
Numbered and underlined portions of ELCC Standards are aligned with Five Key Responsibilities for Superintendents at right	Responsibility 1: The goal-setting process	Responsibility 2: Non-negotiable goals for achievement and instruction	Responsibility 3: Board alignment with and support of district goals	Responsibility 4: Monitoring the goals for achievement and instruction	Responsibility 5: Use of resources to support the goals for achievement and instruction
ELCC Standard 1.0: 1. facilitating the development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship of a shared district vision of learning through the collection and use of data to identify district goals, 2. assess organizational effectiveness, and implement district plans to achieve district goals; promotion of continual and sustainable district improvement; and 3. evaluation of district progress and revision of district plans supported by district stakeholders	Standard 1 – Category 1	Standard 1 – Category 2	Standard 1 – Category 3		
ELCC Standard 2.0: 2. promotes the success of every student by sustaining a district culture conducive to collaboration, trust, and a personalized learning environment with high expectations for students; creating and evaluating a comprehensive, rigorous, and coherent curricular and		Standard 2 – Category 2		Standard 2 – Category 4	Standard 2 – Category 5

instructional district program; 4. developing and supervising the instructional and leadership capacity across the district; and 5. promoting the most effective and appropriate technologies to support teaching and learning within the district.					
Standard 3.0: 5. promotes the success of every student by ensuring the management of the district's organization, operation, and resources through 1. monitoring and evaluating district management and operational systems; efficiently using human, fiscal, and technological resources within the district; promoting district-level policies and procedures that protect the welfare and safety of students and staff across the district; developing district capacity for distributed leadership; and 2. ensuring that district time focuses on high-quality instruction and student learning	Standard 3 - Category1	Standard 3 – Category 2			Standard 3 – Category 5
ELCC Standard 4.0: A district-level education leader 4. applies knowledge that promotes the success of every student by collaborating with faculty and community members, responding to diverse community interests and needs, and 5. mobilizing community resources for the district by collecting and analyzing information pertinent to improvement of the district's educational environment; promoting an				Standard 4 – Category 4	Standard 4 – Category 5

understanding, appreciation, and use of the community's diverse cultural, social, and intellectual resources throughout the district; building and sustaining positive district relationships with families and caregivers; and cultivating productive district relationships with community partners.				
ELCC Standard 5.0: promotes the success of every student <u>by 2. acting with integrity, fairness, and in an ethical manner to ensure a district system of accountability for every student's academic and social success</u> by modeling district principles of self-awareness, reflective practice, transparency, and ethical behavior as related to their roles within the district; safeguarding the values of democracy, equity, and diversity within the district; evaluating the potential moral and legal consequences of decision making in the district; and promoting social justice within the district to ensure individual student needs inform all aspects of schooling.		Standard 5 – Category 2		
ELCC Standard 6.0: promotes the success of every student by <u>5. understanding, responding to, and influencing the larger political, social, economic, legal, and cultural context within the</u>		Standard 6 – Category 2		Standard 6 – Category 5

district through advocating for district students, families, and caregivers; 2. acting to influence local, district, state, and national decisions affecting student learning; and anticipating and assessing emerging trends and initiatives in order to adapt district-level leadership strategies.					
ELCC Standard 7.0: A district-level education leader applies knowledge that promotes the success of every student in a substantial and sustained educational leadership internship experience that has district-based field experiences and clinical practice within a district setting and is monitored by a qualified, on-site mentor. (See first paragraph, page 14.)	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA

Across the top of the table to the right are listed the five responsibilities described on page 11 of *School District Leadership that Works*. Down the left side of the page are listed the seven *ELCC Educational Leadership Program Recognition Standards* for the district level.

In order to identify commonalities between the ELCC Standards and Waters and Marzano's five responsibilities for superintendents, I isolated key words and concepts from each and aligned those that intersected. Key words and phrases within each of the ELCC standards listed on the left of the table are underlined and numbered to identify and isolate which part of the standard was connected to which of the five "Key Responsibilities," as most standards linked to more than one of the responsibilities.

As can be seen, the 2011 ELCC district level standards incorporate the five key responsibilities noted by Waters and Marzano as well as the needs discussed in the reports commissioned by the Wallace Foundation noted in this paper. Conversely, support for Waters and Marzano's five key responsibilities for district-level leaders is found in each of the ELCC program standards.

The alignments noted in Table 1 create the foundation for the program protocols for university training programs in district leadership. It should be noted that of the ELCC standards that address preparation for addressing district leadership experiences, there are 14 references to district or individual student performance standards that fall under those five key responsibilities referenced

above. Standard 7 relates only to district level internships for students of educational leadership and is not directly applicable to Waters and Marzano's responsibilities, although internship experiences I have mentored as both a superintendent and a university mentorship supervisor have required interaction with all five responsibilities.

The linkage noted in Table 1 identify key responsibilities supported by the ELCC Standards. Those sections within the first six ELCC Standards that can be linked to the corresponding "Responsibilities" noted above have been underlined on Table 1 for ease of identification. Notice the intersect between these two powerful national impacts on superintendent preparation. Crucial responsibilities identified by Waters and Marzano in 2006 can be supported by the ELCC Standards, as presented in Table 1 noted by Waters and Marzano (2006). The numbered sections within the ELCC Standards correspond with the number associated with the key responsibilities across the top of the page.

Table 1 examines the overlap of ELCC Standards 1-6 with the 2006 Waters and Marzano research linking specific school district leadership practices and student performance. For example, Responsibility 1 identified by Waters and Marzano (p. 7) include "The goal-setting process," which aligns on the chart with the underlined ELCC Standard 1 comments: "facilitating the development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship of a shared district vision of learning through the collection and use of data to identify district goals, assess organizational effectiveness, and implement district plans to achieve district goals; evaluation of district progress and revision of district plans supported by district stakeholders." It was interesting to note that ELCC Standard 2 (p. 10) requires skills noted under Waters and

Marzano Responsibilities 2, 4, and 5. Standard 3 incorporates three of these key responsibilities.

Conclusions

A businessperson with an MBA might be very capable of handling the finances of a school corporation, but he or she may not know how to invest the resources in education to get the highest learning results from his funds. CEO's may have an understanding of high performing organizations, but are they aware of how to link instructional practices to student achievement? A teacher with a master's degree in education might well understand how to enhance education reform but not how to negotiate and maintain a legal teachers' contract. Highly trained, certified superintendents have a well-rounded education that will prepare them for all aspects of leading a school corporation.

Advanced degree programs for superintendents aligned through the ELCC network incorporate priorities that support what noted research has shown to be the five most important characteristics of highly successful superintendents.

Highly successful superintendents not only efficiently manage resources, they must be highly effective in directing resources into such areas as instructional coaching and sharing opportunities to constantly improve the delivery of daily instruction across a wide range of ages and abilities so all students can achieve at higher levels of academic performance.

Patrons, including board members charged with the responsibility of school district governance and policy-making, often have knowledge of and possibly even day-to-day neighborhood visibility of their local school. When in school, many of these patrons only had personal contact with the

superintendent at commencement. This limits their understanding of what the position entails. It is small wonder that they are unaware of the preparation program necessary to become a superintendent and why it is important.

Given the dramatic impact our superintendents are having on student achievement, superintendents should not be allowed to become the best-kept secret in the community.

District leaders need to launch a campaign with their service organizations, clubs, and local Chambers of Commerce to emphasize that, not only can student achievement be improved, but also a strong wealth of research demonstrates that:

1. District leadership not only counts but is at the foundation of student success.

2. A highly qualified and professionally trained superintendent is the point person in improving student learning and performance.

3. We can demonstrate both why and how training of district leaders makes a difference in student learning.

4. Boards should not have the flexibility to ignore the impact that a certificated and highly qualified superintendent has for the betterment of their school district's student achievement when a hiring decision is made.

5. Legislators should be educated as to how advanced course work in educational leadership prepares district leaders through the standards they meet, and how those standards directly impact, as a wealth of research demonstrates, improvements in student performance and achievement.

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