

Illinois Public School Superintendents: Influencing State-Level Education Legislation and Policy-Making In Illinois

Dr. Daniel L. Oakley, EdD
Superintendent
Fieldcrest Community Unit School District 6
Minonk, IL

Dr. Sandra G. Watkins, PhD
Professor
Educational Leadership
College of Education and Human Services
Western Illinois University
Macomb, IL

Dr. Bridget Z. Sheng, PhD
Associate Professor
Educational Leadership
College of Education and Human Services
Western Illinois University
Macomb, IL

Abstract

Standards for superintendents of schools are clearly spelled out by The Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) and the Educational Leadership Constituent Council (ELCC) standards. ISLLC and the ELCC standards both address the political actions expected of today's district superintendents. Little scientific research has been conducted that demonstrates how superintendents have embraced this requirement. The purpose of this mixed methods study utilizing sequential explanatory design sought to determine the level of political involvement of superintendents in the state of Illinois. Our results identified key findings that have significant implications for Illinois superintendents of schools, which includes superintendents with more prior administrative experiences and those who work in high school districts who have more influence on political involvement and decision making, and superintendents who are actively involved in professional education organizations exert more influence on state-level education legislation and policy-making.

Key Words

superintendent, evaluation standards, policy, advocacy

Introduction

The job of a school district superintendent is naturally a political one. The superintendent must work both directly and indirectly with a number of constituencies in daily work, including administrative staff, parents, the teacher's union, the media, the community, along with local and state governments. It has been a common expectation of the superintendent to demonstrate the ability to work effectively with all of these groups to enhance student learning and student achievement and adhere to state and federal laws and mandates.

Standard 6 of the 2008 ISLCC Standards clearly states that the expectation of administrators is to lead by “understanding, responding to, and influencing the larger political, social, economic, legal, and cultural context” (The Council of Chief State School Officers, 2008, p. 18). The ELCC Standard 6 expounded even further that the superintendent does this by “acting to influence local, district, state, and national decisions affecting student learning” (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2011, p. 23).

The collusive nature of these two standards serve as a clear statement that today's CEO of schools, the superintendent, must be involved in impacting educational policy making and in the future, federal level policies. While policy issues at all levels (local, district, state, and national) are important, the study focuses on state-level education legislation and policy-making.

The voices of the superintendents must be heard by legislators to ensure decisions are made that will be in the best interest of students in school districts across the United States of America. According to Standard 6, superintendents should be expected to play a

role in the development of policies, with the ultimate hope of garnering a result that will have a positive impact for all students in the school district. The superintendent of our time, as described, was expected to ride the waves of politics both inside and outside the district, but the time has come when superintendents need to adhere to Standard 6 and become politically involved at both the state and federal levels.

Conceptual Framework

The role of the superintendent of schools in most states had been formally defined and informed by the six Interstate School Leaders License Consortium (ISLLC) Standards for School Leaders. The ISLLC standards were first developed in 1996 by the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) and were updated in 2008 (The Council of Chief State School Officers, 2008). The Educational Leadership Constituent Council (ELCC) District-Level Standards were approved by the National Policy Board for Educational Administration in 2010. The ELCC standards were developed on the heels of the ISLLC standards and serve to define the role of an educational leader at the district level. The ELCC standards have been the framework upon which educational leadership programs were built.

Superintendents wishing to be effective in their jobs must identify with the roles expected in the ISLLC and ELCC standards, and as related to this paper, ISLLC and ELCC standards 6, related to the superintendent and politics. The superintendency has largely been defined by “emerging social, economic and political conditions” (Bjork, Kowalski, & Browne-Ferrigno, 2014). The politics of the superintendent's office were those of leveraging to provide for students' needs, in myriad modalities (Edwards, 2007). The reality was that policy-making had been moving inexorably

from the local board of education to the state and even the federal government, and influencing policy-making therefore implied as action at those levels, as stated in the ELCC standards (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2011).

It is important to note the new Professional Educational Leadership Standards, in Standard 8, back away from the specificity of ELCC Standard 6 of working to influence state and federal policies, but still presents the need for the superintendent to be politically active in such activities as “Advocate publicly for the needs and priorities of students ...” (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015).

The draft National Educational Leadership Preparation (NELP) Standards for District Level Leaders, Standard Seven, also maintains a distance from conceptualizing district leaders as influential in the educational legislation and policy-making process in statehouses and the nation’s capital, referring only to “... the capability to appropriately respond to local, state and national decisions” (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2016).

Edwards (2007) stated the politics of the superintendent’s office were those of leveraging to provide for student needs. A consortium of Illinois educational leadership organizations, including the Illinois Association of School Administrators (IASA) and the Illinois Association of School Boards (IASB), echoed ELCC standard 6 in the landmark Vision 20/20 agenda: “As a school official, your voice is needed in Springfield ...” (Illinois Vision 20/20, n.d.a, para. 1). “It is our responsibility as educators to reflect upon the current state of education in Illinois and take action to create an education system that meets the needs of all students. (Illinois Vision 20/20, n.d.b, para. 1).

Yet a 2009 study found novice superintendents recommended, among other items, improvement of preparation programs at the university level relating to the politics of education due to perceived lack of preparation (Kowalski, Petersen, & Fusarelli, 2009).

Within this framework, the state of Illinois had its own peculiarities related to the ability to influence state-level education legislation and policy-making. On the surface, Illinois politics seemed simple enough, with a constitutional framework of the legislative, executive and judicial branches laid out in the state Constitution of 1970 (Ill. Const).

On a functional level, however, the state was essentially run by the “big three” – the governor, the Speaker of the House, and the President of the Senate – as the House has ceded almost all power to the Speaker and the Senate has ceded almost all power to the President, including naming legislators to committees.

The Speaker and President also controlled all party funds, as did the minority leaders for their own parties, and could use those funds as they saw fit (Nowlan, Gove, & Winkel, 2010). As if the functional framework needed more complication, the state of Illinois also ranked high in political corruption, with the state ranking third in the nation in federal public corruption convictions in the time span 1976-2013 (Wilson, 2015).

This functional framework presented additional challenges to Illinois public school superintendents’ efforts to influence state-level education legislation and policy-making.

Purpose of the Study

Superintendents carried an ever-increasing load of responsibilities (Carter & Cunningham, 1997), of which the role of being influential in

state-level educational legislation and policy-making were a part (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2011). It is important for superintendents to become politically involved in educational policy making, but how can superintendents increase their political influence?

Few empirical studies have investigated the possible pathways superintendents could utilize to influence state-policy making. This study attempts to address superintendents' leverage of state politics by way of involvement in educational organizations. Specifically, the purpose of this study was to determine educational organizations superintendents utilized in order to be influential in the Illinois educational political process, as well as how successful Illinois superintendents believed they were in achieving this goal. Demographic data were also collected to determine if demographics played a role in superintendents' perceptions of being influential.

Methods

The study utilized a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design. Both quantitative and qualitative strategies were utilized, with an online survey followed by interviews of selected superintendents.

Instruments

The survey was developed by the researcher following a review of the conceptual framework presented in the ISLLC and ELCC standards 6. The survey questions were first reviewed by a panel of three experts in the field. The survey questions were then pilot tested by asking five experienced superintendents to review for clarity and content. Feedback from the expert panel and superintendents was utilized to refine the survey. In addition to demographic information, the survey used Likert-type scales for responses and has the following components:

1. Superintendents' Educational Organization Affiliations – one survey item with twelve sub-responses that measure to what extent superintendents utilized specific educational organizations to influence the state-level educational political process. The Likert-type scale included responses of Always, Often, Occasionally, Sometimes, and Never.
2. Perceived Success of Superintendents' Educational Organizational Affiliations in Influencing State-Level Education Legislation/Policy-Making, which was measured by one survey item with twelve sub-responses. The Likert-type scale included responses of Highly Effective, Mostly Effective, Somewhat Effective, Neutral, Somewhat Ineffective, Mostly Ineffective, Highly Ineffective, and N/A.
3. Overall Perceived Success in Influencing State-Level Education Legislation/Policy-Making, measured by one survey item. The Likert-type scale included responses of Highly Effective, Mostly Effective, Somewhat Effective, Neutral, Somewhat Ineffective, Mostly Ineffective, Highly Ineffective, and N/A.

The questions for the follow-up qualitative interviews were developed from responses to the survey instrument, and were designed to further the information garnered from the survey. Three interview questions were asked of participating superintendents, one for each of the survey components to examine

how superintendents utilize educational organizations and their perceived success.

Participants

The survey population consisted of 834 Illinois public school superintendents. The sample size for the survey was 201 unique superintendents. The sample was generally reflective of the study population. The sample was comprised of 24.9% female and 75.1% male superintendents; 44.3% were in the 40-49 age group, 37.8% were in the 50-59 age group, with less than 10% each in other age groups; 72.7% of the sample had been in the field of education for 21 or more years; 52.7% of them had been superintendents for at least 6 years and 47.3% for five years or less; and 77% of the study participants were from districts of 2,000 or less students.

Respondents indicated that 25 superintendents had only one prior administrative experience, 99 had two prior administrative experiences, and 50 had three or more prior experiences. Responding superintendents also reported 94 who were in unit districts, 81 in elementary district, and 23 in high school districts.

Six superintendents were selected by random draw from the self-selected list of those willing to be interviewed, which included 45 superintendents. The 45 superintendents' responses to the survey question, overall perceived success in influencing state-level education legislation/policy-making, were analyzed.

Due to a low number of superintendents endorsing some of the choices, response choices were combined into three broad categories: Effective, which included the original choices of Highly Effective, Mostly Effective, and Somewhat Effective; Neutral; and Ineffective, which included the original

choices of Somewhat Ineffective, Mostly Ineffective, and Highly Effective. Two superintendents were randomly selected from each of the broad categories.

All selected in the random draw were male, which was not unexpected, considering the fact that only five female superintendents indicated interest in being interviewed. The six superintendents selected came from different age groups. They differed also in the number of years in the superintendency, and in the size of school districts in which they were employed.

Analysis

Survey responses were analyzed. First, descriptive statistics were computed to describe superintendents' modes of access to legislators and perceived effectiveness as a member of various educational organizations. Then, confidence intervals were used to compare the extent of utilization of the educational organizations and perceived effectiveness.

Finally, the overall perception of success influencing state-level education legislation and policy making was examined. Chi square tests were used to identify key demographic variables which were related to the overall perceived level of success.

Interviews were analyzed utilizing the coding process for qualitative data as described by Creswell (2009). The data was transcribed and organized for analysis.

Then transcripts were read to derive a general sense of meaning. Following that, the interview data were coded by breaking the information into segments by topic. After the coded information was described to develop themes useful as major findings, a determination of how to present the description themes was made; and the data were interpreted for meaning.

Results

Superintendents' organizational affiliations

The survey results, as well as the follow-up interviews, indicated Illinois' public school superintendents use professional organizations as the primary method in their efforts to access state legislators and influence state-level education legislation and policy-making. The extent of superintendents utilizing specific educational organizations was rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale: never = 1; sometimes = 2; occasionally = 3; often = 4; and always = 5. Superintendent responses were then weighted

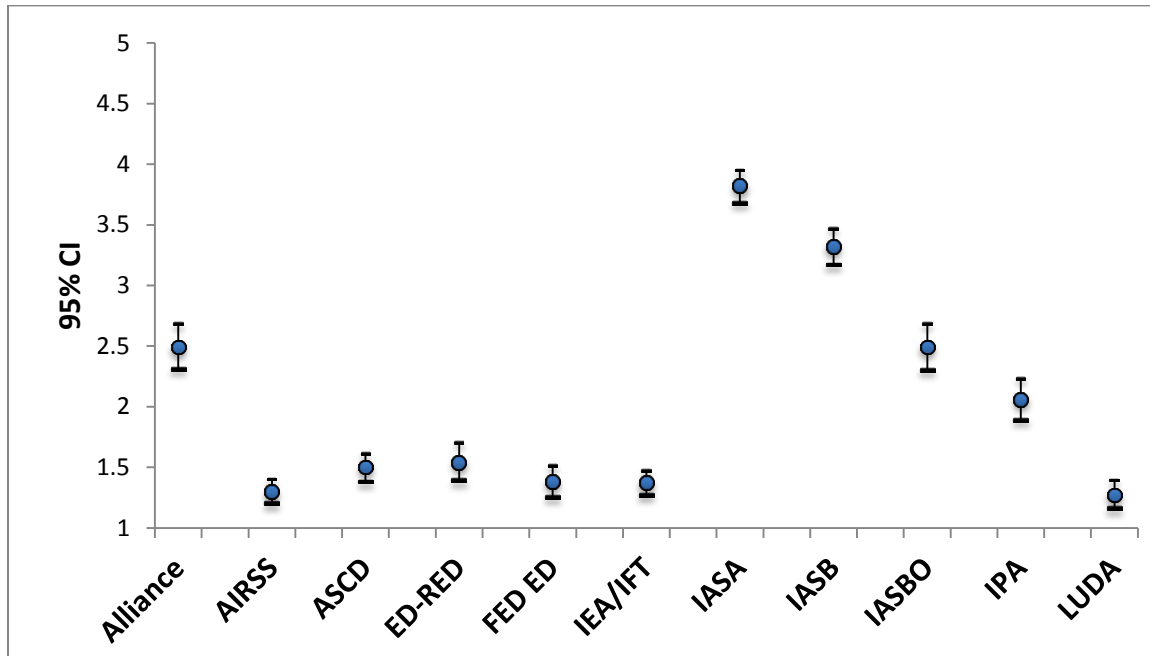
based on the scale score and the number of responses in the response category. The top two educational organizations that superintendents relied on to influence state-level educational political process were the IASA with a mean score of 3.82, followed by the IASB at a mean score of 3.32. Means, standard deviations, and 95% confidence intervals of superintendents' ratings of other educational organizations are listed in Table 1. Ninety five percent confidence intervals of superintendents' ratings of educational organizations were further illustrated in Figure 1 for comparison.

Table 1

Weighted Average Table of Educational Organizations

Educational Organization	M	SD	95% CI
Illinois Association of School Administrators	3.82	1.00	3.68-3.95
Illinois Association of School Boards	3.32	1.08	3.17-3.47
Illinois Association of School Business Officials	2.49	1.38	2.30-2.68
Alliance (Illinois Statewide School Management Alliance)	2.49	1.33	2.31-2.68
Illinois Principals' Association	2.06	1.21	1.89-2.23
Education Research Develop (ED-RED)	1.54	1.11	1.39-1.70
Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development	1.50	0.84	1.38-1.61
Federal Representation, Education and Communication	1.38	0.93	1.25-1.51
Illinois Education Association/Illinois Federal of Teachers	1.37	0.72	1.27-1.47
Association of Illinois Rural and Small Schools	1.30	0.71	1.20-1.40
Large Urban District Association	1.27	0.81	1.16-1.39

Figure 1. 95% confidence intervals for educational organizations.



A review of Figure 1 showed a clear separation of educational organizations utilized in efforts to influence state-level educational legislation and policy-making at the 95% confidence level. Two organizations, IASA and IASB were utilized by Illinois superintendents more frequently than other organizations.

Superintendent's interview responses related to organizational affiliations

Superintendents who were interviewed echoed the data regarding their professional organizational affiliations. The interviews showed that superintendents found the IASA in particular to be the most valuable organization with which to be affiliated.

Superintendent C noted that IASA's value goes beyond just access to legislators:

"I think it's important to be as proactive

as possible in the IASA and some of those other groups that I've belonged to ... have allowed me to be a bit more proactive because you get an idea what other schools are doing and what might be coming down the road."

Superintendent E also found the IASA to have value beyond access and relationships:

"Being involved in IASA ... I think they do a really good job of encouraging superintendents to reach out to their legislators."

Superintendent F followed, as related to IASA:

... I feel like there's a lot of effort to get us to write a letter, come to some sort of meeting or some sort of statement being

made or some bill being sponsored or something ... So I would say there's a lot of efforts ...

Superintendent D also found multiple organizations that provided assistance:

“So I look to my own organizations ... IASA, IASB, IPA ... those are the organizations that I look to quite a bit. And I definitely look to them to help guide me through legislative changes.”

Perceived success of superintendents' educational organizational affiliations in influencing state-level education legislation/policy-making

Survey data show that superintendents ranked the IASA and the IASB as more effective than

other educational organizations for wielding superintendents' influence.

Superintendents were asked to rate the effectiveness of various educational organizations in influencing state-level education legislation and policymaking. Responses were rated on a 7-point Likert-type scale: Highly Ineffective = 1; Mostly Ineffective = 2; Somewhat Ineffective = 3; Neutral = 4; Somewhat Effective = 5; Mostly Effective = 6; and Highly Effective = 7. The IASA ($M = 5.31$, $SD = 1.56$) and IASB ($M = 5.06$, $SD = 1.67$) were the only organizations that were rated between Somewhat Effective and Mostly Effective.

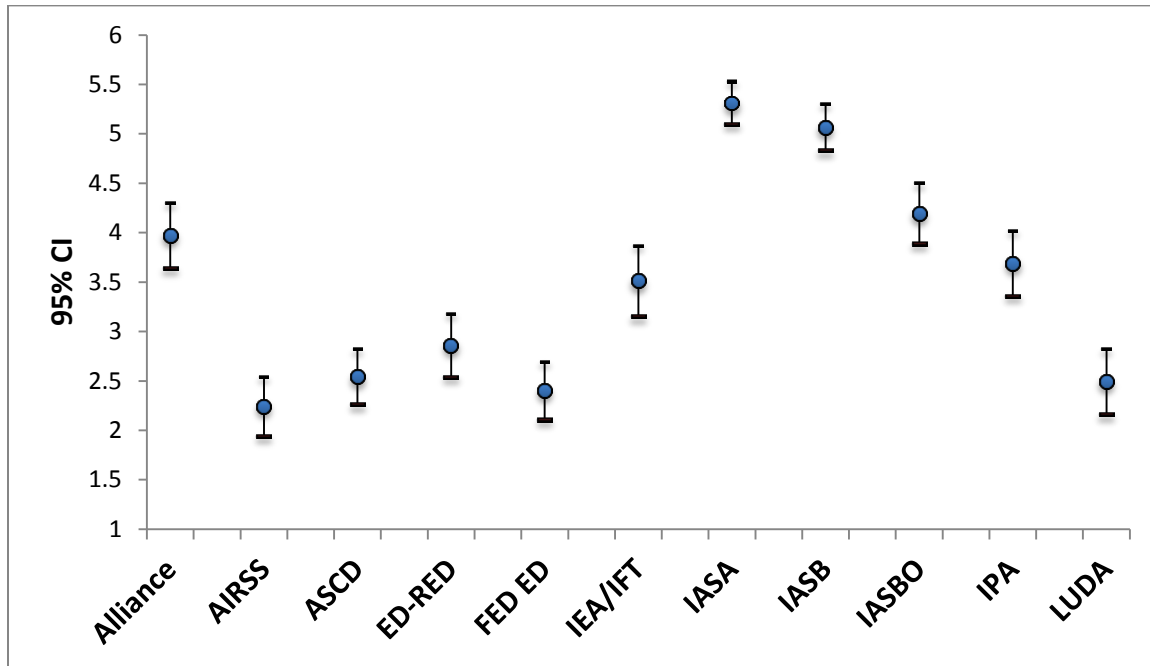
The complete chart of ratings is listed in Table 2, with 95% confidence intervals graphed in Figure 2.

Table 2

Weighted Average Table of Perceived Effectiveness of Education Organizations

Educational Organization	M	SD	95% CI
Illinois Association of School Administrators	5.31	1.56	5.10-5.53
Illinois Association of School Boards	5.06	1.67	4.83-5.30
Illinois Association of School Business Officials	4.19	2.21	3.89-4.50
Alliance (Illinois Statewide School Management Alliance)	3.97	2.37	3.64-4.30
Illinois Principals' Association	3.69	2.38	3.36-4.02
Illinois Education Association/Illinois Federation of Teachers	3.51	2.58	3.15-3.87
Education Research Develop (ED-RED)	2.86	2.30	2.54-3.18
Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development	2.54	2.02	2.26-2.82
Large Urban District Association	2.49	2.36	2.16-2.82
Federal Representation, Education and Communication	2.40	2.08	2.11-2.69
Association of Illinois Rural and Small Schools	2.24	2.15	1.94-2.54

Figure 2. 95% confidence intervals for perceived success through educational organizations.



A review of the 95% confidence intervals in Figure 2 show clearly a separation of educational organizations perceived to be more helpful to superintendents in efforts to influence state-level educational legislation and policy-making.

IASA and IASB were perceived to be more helpful to superintendents in efforts to be influential in the educational political process than other organizations.

Superintendent's interview responses related to organizational affiliations and perceived success in influencing state-level legislation and policy-making

Superintendents who were interviewed noted the value of professional organization affiliations, particularly the IASA, in their efforts to be influential.

Superintendent A found IASA to be of great value in his efforts:

“I believe that particularly our association and the Triple-I does a phenomenal job of communicating those issues that are out there and giving us access to our various legislators.”

Superintendent B echoed the value of IASA for access:

“The IASA in a smaller way gives us a lot of access down in Springfield. The leadership conference coming up is a great opportunity for us to get down there and talk to our legislators.”

Overall perceived success in influencing state-level education legislation/policy-making

Responding superintendents were asked to rate their overall perceptions of their success in being influential in state-level education legislation and policy-making. Responses were rated on a 7-point Likert-type scale: Highly Ineffective = 1; Mostly Ineffective = 2; Somewhat Ineffective = 3; Neutral = 4; Somewhat Effective = 5; Mostly Effective = 6; and Highly Effective = 7.

As mentioned earlier, due to low numbers of responses in some categories, the

categories were combined into three broad categories: Ineffective, Neutral, and Effective.

Superintendents generally rated their effectiveness in influencing state-level education legislation and policy-making as less than effective, with 60.7% of respondents rating their efforts as either ineffective or neutral. Subsequent interviews supported this, indicating that superintendents are uncertain if their efforts are having much, if any effect. Superintendents did report, both in the survey and in subsequent interviews, that they found the IASA and IASB to be more effective organizations through which they work to be influential.

Table 3

Frequency Table of Perceived Success in Influencing State-Level Education Legislation and Policy-Making in Broad Categories

Category	Frequency	Percent
Effective	79	39.3%
Neutral	41	20.4%
Ineffective	81	40.3%

There were two important but unexpected findings regarding superintendent effectiveness from the survey. First, the number of previous administrative roles a superintendent had been employed in was a significant finding, using the chi-square test (X

$= 15.17, p < .05$). Superintendents who had held three or more previous administrative positions were 5.64 times more likely than those who had one previous experience to report perceived effectiveness (see Table 4).

Table 4

Number of Prior Administrative Experiences Versus Perceived Effectiveness

<i>Category</i>	<i>Ineffective</i>	<i>Neutral Effective</i>	<i>Total</i>	
One	20	2	3	25
Two	43	22	34	99
Three or More	17	11	22	50

Second, the configuration of the superintendent's district was found to be a significant factor, using the chi-square test, in perceived influence ($X = 10.64$, $p < .05$). Superintendents in high school districts were

1.83 times more likely to report success than those in unit districts, and 2.89 times more likely than those in elementary districts (see Table 5).

Table 5

School District Configuration Versus Perceived Effectiveness

<i>Category</i>	<i>Ineffective</i>	<i>Neutral Effective</i>	<i>Total</i>	
Unit	40	15	39	94
Elementary	37	19	25	81
High School	3	7	13	23
Total	80	41	77	198

Discussion

Illinois' public school superintendents were charged with a duty to influence state-level education legislation and policy-making (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2011).

With policy-making moving increasingly to the state level, the

superintendent was not discharged of his duty to be involved in that policy-making (Hoyle, Bjork, Collier, & Glass, 2005).

This study suggested there were concrete steps superintendents should take in order to increase their levels of effectiveness in the state house: becoming active in professional

organizations, particularly the IASA and IASB; being employed in a number of administrative positions prior to becoming a superintendent; and understanding the apparent innate power in particular school district configurations.

First, superintendents should become active in professional organizations or other groups that provide access to legislators. Two organizations in particular were perceived to grant greater access to and therefore provided greater influence in superintendents' cause of garnering resources for the students of their districts: the IASA and the IASB. Although the PELS and NELP standards appear to reduce the emphasis in the ISLLC and ELCC standards regarding district level leaders being influential actors in educational legislation and policy-making, the IASA (Illinois Vision 20/20, n.d.a) was encouraging the opposite role by asking superintendent's voices to be heard.

The IASA's admonition was fully in step with those of researchers in the field such as Bjork, Kowalski, and Browne-Ferrigno (2014), who noted in their research that the superintendent's role was largely defined by politics and the political environment.

Second, superintendents should be more active in the number of administrative roles prior to becoming a superintendent. Involvement in multiple administrative roles prior to becoming a superintendent increased one's ability to be influential in state-level education legislation and policy-making.

Illinois public school superintendents who had held three or more prior administrative positions were much more likely to perceive success in being influential as compared to their peers who had been in a lesser number of administrative positions prior to becoming a superintendent.

This implied that superintendents who were more broadly experienced in administrative roles were critical in helping shape state-level educational policy-making.

An additional implication was that educational organizations should recognize a need to focus on superintendents with less broad administrative backgrounds in order to develop their political skills and influence.

Third, Illinois public school superintendents should be aware that the configuration of the district in which they are employed appeared to play a role in the superintendent's ability to influence state-level education legislation and policy-making.

High school district superintendents were more likely to report success than unit district superintendents, and much more likely to do so than elementary district superintendents. This indicates the possibility of a power structure, whether innate or contrived, related to school district configurations.

One possible implication for superintendents was to recognize such a power structure, and encourage superintendents in high school districts to take visibly active leadership roles in efforts to further influence legislators and state-level educational policy-making.

Another possible implication for educational organizations was to recognize these power players in the state and utilize their leadership abilities within these organizations to further leverage affirmative educational policy-making.

Conclusions

The need for superintendents to be influential in state-level education legislation and policy-

making, as resources for school districts and the students of the state of Illinois continue to shrink, appears to be increasing, not only as driven by the ISLLC and ELCC standards, but also by professional organizations such as the Illinois Association of School Administrators.

This study revealed there are methods superintendents can utilize to improve their ability to influence state-level education legislation and policy-making, including being active in professional organizations that advocate for Illinois public schools. The study

indicated a superintendent's professional background, specifically the number of prior administrative roles prior to becoming a superintendent, may play a role in the superintendent's effectiveness in influencing state-level educational legislation and policy-making.

Finally, the study appeared to show that a superintendent's effectiveness in being influential may be subject to the superintendent's school district's configuration.

Author Biographies

Daniel L Oakley is superintendent at Fieldcrest Community Unit School District 6 in Minonk, Illinois. His research interests focus on superintendents and state-level politics. Prior to Fieldcrest, he served as a teacher, principal, and superintendent in other districts in Illinois. E-mail: doakley1964@ymail.com

Sandra Watkins is professor of educational leadership at Western Illinois University with research interests focusing on district leadership, school boards and the advanced learner. Prior to WIU, she served districts as a teacher, counselor, psychologist, principal, and associate superintendent. E-mail: sg-watkins@wiu.edu

Bridget Sheng is an associate professor of educational leadership at Western Illinois University. She teaches research and statistics courses in the educational leadership program and provides dissertation research support for doctoral students. Her research interests focus on applying quantitative methods to educational issues. E-mail: zb-sheng@wiu.edu

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