Research Article

Superintendent Job Satisfaction in an Era of Reduced Resources and Increased Accountability

John J. Bell, EdD
Superintendent
Delaware Valley School District
Milford, PA 18337

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate New York State school superintendent job satisfaction and the potential contributing factors to their job satisfaction in an era of reduced resources and increased accountability. Sharp, Malone and Walter (2002) created a 49-item survey entitled the Positive Aspects and Motivation Survey and used it in a three-state study (Indiana, Illinois and Texas) that found increasing job satisfaction. Padalino (2009) used the same instrument and found increasing superintendent job satisfaction (75%) in New York State. In this study, superintendent job satisfaction was only measured at 60%. This is a 15% decrease in 6 years. Approximately 81% of respondents had positive feelings about working with the board of education. Almost exactly the same 81% of respondents said they would aspire to the superintendency if starting their careers over. Thus, superintendent-board of education relations were far more important to superintendent job satisfaction than any external factors measured in this study.

Key Words

superintendent, job satisfaction, school district leadership, superintendent-school board relations, superintendent motivation

Glass, Bjork & Brunner (2000) wrote that superintendents of public school districts hold one of the toughest jobs in the nation. According to Carter & Cunningham (1997), "Nowhere is there a job with higher expectations and so little trust and confidence. (p. 4)" These statements were made before the No Child Left Behind legislation was passed in 2001, the Great Recession of 2008 occurred and the Common Core State Standards were adopted in 2012. Thus, there has been great change already in this century that has added new pressures to the education system.

With the increasing demands of the job comes increasing stress on the office holder. Faelton & Diamond (1998) found that stress in the superintendency can pose serious mental and physical health consequences for the superintendent. While school employees of all types can experience stress, superintendents tend to experience the highest levels of stress due to their role as leader of the entire organization and the face of the district to the outside world (Unzicker, 2007).

Statement of the Problem

Public education has played a pivotal role in America's growth from its early years as a small, agrarian country to becoming a leader in world affairs. The 20th century has often been called the "American Century" (Luce, 1941) due to the country's ascension to world leader in politics, business, education, entertainment and military affairs.

However, the 21st century has been a difficult one for America with two recessions, two wars and a growing chorus of dissatisfaction with government in general and the public education system in particular (Jones, 2014; Howell, Peterson & West, 2009). When a system is under attack, the leaders receive the greatest criticism.

A review of literature in the first decade of the 21st century pointed to increasing job satisfaction among school superintendents. (Sharp, Malone & James, 2002, and Padalino, 2009). However, in recent years, pressures on superintendents have grown with increased accountability, reduced resources, and the challenges of implementing numerous federal and state policy initiatives. Thus, it was important to learn if this trend of increasing job satisfaction continued or reversed itself.

Job satisfaction could affect superintendent longevity and the quality of candidates in future superintendent searches. Therefore, it was important to the field of education to learn more about the current state of the superintendency as it has implications to the future leadership of school districts.

Furthermore, improving superintendent leadership will help America's public schools improve. This can be accomplished by studying superintendent job satisfaction and the potential contributing factors then making changes accordingly to the superintendency.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this quantitative study was to investigate New York State school superintendent job satisfaction and the potential contributing factors to their job satisfaction in an era of reduced resources and increased accountability. The instrument used in this study was a survey sent to all New York State superintendents.

Sharp, Malone & Walter (2002) created a 49-item survey entitled the Positive Aspects and Motivation Survey and used the survey in a three-state study (Indiana, Illinois and Texas) that found increasing superintendent job satisfaction. Padalino (2009) used the same instrument when studying superintendent job

satisfaction in New York State. The Padalino study (2009), which also found increasing superintendent job satisfaction, served as a baseline for this new study.

In light of reduced resources and increased accountability in the field of education in New York, this new study explored the job satisfaction of today's superintendents and compared these percentages to previous rates as measured in the Padalino study.

Research Questions

Four research questions guided this study:

1. Given the increased stress and pressures inherent to the position, was there a downward trend in superintendent job satisfaction among New York State superintendents?
2. What factors most contributed to superintendent job satisfaction and dissatisfaction?
3. What motivated current superintendents to pursue the superintendency?
4. What percentage of superintendents would aspire to the position again if starting their careers over?

Review of Related Literature

Public schools in America are under scrutiny from all directions. Local taxpayers have fought against higher school taxes, state governments have reduced funding to school districts and the federal government's role in education has grown dramatically in recent years.

At the same time, politicians are advocating for charter schools and vouchers while the media remains fixated on America's less than stellar standing on international tests. Teachers in many states feel under attack due to the new teacher evaluation systems implemented under the federal Race to the Top (RTTT) requirements. Many parents and conservative groups across the country are vehemently against the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), which has been a key component of RTTT.

In 2010, New York State was awarded approximately $700 million in RTTT funds from the U.S. Education Department (U.S. Education Department, 2010). The Regents Reform Agenda is New York's plan for implementing RTTT. The agenda includes three major areas: the implementation of the New York State P-12 Common Core learning standards, teacher and leader effectiveness, and data-driven instruction (engageny.org, 2015).

These education policy changes on the federal and state levels have created a period of great change in public education. At the same time, education funding in New York State has undergone major changes as well. In terms of reduced resources, the decrease in state aid to school districts, called the Gap Elimination Adjustment (GEA), under Governor Patterson in 2010 (New York State Budget, 2010) caused districts to lose millions of dollars in state aid. This resulted in thousands of layoffs in school districts across the state. In addition, Governor Cuomo signed into law the 2% property tax cap in 2011 (New York Governor's Office, 2011) thereby limiting the amount of revenue a district could raise locally through property taxes.

While the job satisfaction of New York State superintendents has been measured before (Padalino, 2009), it was prior to the federal and state education policy changes, and the state school finance policy changes outlined above. In light of these changing conditions in the field of education in New York State, a new

study was warranted to gauge the job satisfaction levels of today's superintendents and to compare these levels to previous levels as measured in the Padalino study.

This study investigated New York State school superintendent job satisfaction in an era of reduced resources and increased accountability. Specifically, it examined whether job satisfaction decreased in recent years and what factors most contributed to job satisfaction and dissatisfaction.

In addition, the study investigated what motivated superintendents to pursue the position initially and whether they would seek the position again if starting over. The literature and research behind this study's thesis was explored in three sections: the current state of the superintendency, job stress and job satisfaction research in education and other fields, and the future appeal of the superintendency.

Current State of the Superintendency

Today's superintendents are stuck between two competing forces—increased accountability and reduced resources. The phrase "do more with less" is very appropriate for this time in education. "The education world is facing transformational forces and challenges that are unprecedented in its history" said Brandon Busteed, executive director of Gallup Poll Education (2013, p. 3).

American Association of School Administrators (AASA) executive director Dan Domenech said, "The superintendent's job is one of the most difficult jobs in America and one of the most important" (2014, p.42). Recent educational research has emphasized the importance of effective leadership by district leaders (Marzano & Waters, 2009). A meta-analysis of district leadership and student achievement studies from 1970 to 2005 identified 27 studies that included data from 2,817 school districts across the country. Marzano & Waters (2009) found a correlation between district leadership and student achievement of 0.24 with 0.05 being significant. Therefore, a district with leadership that has increased one standard deviation from the average would raise student achievement from the average of 50% to 59.5%. Thus, their research says leadership does matter.

Several other studies have found a relationship between the superintendent and student achievement (Bredeson, 1995; Brunner et al. 2002; Hoyle et al. 2005; Kowalski & Brunner, 2005). Multiple studies found a correlation between district office staff and student achievement as well (Elmore, 2005; Fullan, 2008; Honig, 2012, 2013; Iver, 2010; Leon, 2008; Reeves, 2002).

Increased accountability and reduced resources have placed a strain on school district employees, in general, and superintendents, in particular. This strain creates stress on educational leaders which can lead to shorter superintendent tenures. Shorter tenures can wipe away the positive effects of district leadership on student achievement as cited by Marzano & Waters (2009).

Job stress

New, tougher academic standards, complex new teacher evaluation systems and decreased public support for public education overall have combined to make the role of superintendent more stressful. In addition, all of the fiscal issues in New York State only compounded the situation. According to research sponsored by the American Association of School Administrators (AASA), Glass's (2000) "Study of the American Public School Superintendent" indicated that stress levels were increasing in the superintendency

due to under-financing, high-stakes testing and special interest groups. Cooper's (2000) "Career Crisis in the School Superintendency?" found a shortage of applicants for the superintendency because many found it unappealing, too great of a time commitment or too stressful. These findings were prior to the Great Recession of 2008.

Since the Great Recession, superintendent job stress has increased. Terranova et al. (2012) "Snapshot of the Superintendency" study reported that 75% of New York State superintendents found the job more stressful than expected compared to just 56% in the 2009 iteration of this triennial study.

This time frame would take into account many of the financial issues facing New York State superintendents but was prior to implementation of RTTT. Thus, a new study taking into account both the increased accountability and reduced resources issues was needed.

Superintendents' views on the superintendency

Superintendents' views on the superintendency are moving in a negative direction. Terranova et al. (2012) found that only 55% of New York superintendents would encourage a son or daughter to pursue the superintendency down from 68% in 2009. Padalino (2009) found approximately 84% of superintendents surveyed said they would enter the superintendency again compared to 93.2% in the 2002 Sharp et al. survey. Glass & Franceschini's (2007) national study found that only 80% of superintendents in districts with less than 1,000 students would choose the career again.

Terranova et al. (2012) identified a desire to take on a greater challenge and having a greater influence on the lives of children as the strongest incentives for applying for their first superintendency. The greatest barriers identified were having school-age children, the scope of the role and loss of job security. Kowalski et al. (2011) in "The American School Superintendent 2010 Decennial Study" found 69% of superintendents were satisfied with their career choice but only 63% would definitely become a superintendent again if starting over.

In summary, the talent pool is shrinking for both professional and personal reasons. Professionally, superintendent pay, job insecurity, and school board relations are detractors. Personally, job stress, hours required to perform the job and time away from family deter candidates from applying.

Methodology and Procedures

This quantitative study used survey methodology. To gauge job satisfaction across New York State with superintendents from all types of districts, the use of a survey provided an effective and efficient way to garner such necessary information. This survey was sent to 684 superintendents throughout New York State and completed by 280 superintendents (41% response rate).

The Positive Aspects and Motivation Survey (Sharp et al. 2002) was selected as the survey instrument because it has been used in multiple studies (Sharp et al. 2002 and Padalino, 2009) and in multiple states (Illinois, Indiana, Texas and New York) to measure superintendent job satisfaction. Using this survey specifically in New York in the past (Padalino, 2009) and again in this 2015 study allowed a comparison of responses across different time frames. The original 49-question survey was amended to add five new questions regarding current issues in education in New York State.

While there have been various studies of superintendent job satisfaction over the years, few have been conducted in New York State. With the many changes to the education landscape in New York State since the Padalino study of 2009, this study provides a gauge of the level of job satisfaction of New York State school superintendents.

Limitations and Delimitations

Several factors may affect the interpretation and generalizability of this study's results.

1. The sample size was based on the voluntary survey return rate of 40.9%. While this is a high response rate, it is not the total population so generalizability to all superintendents is limited.
2. The study was limited to New York State superintendents only. Therefore, the results may not be applicable to other states.
3. The researcher was a school superintendent at the time of the study, although not in New York State.

Findings

The findings for each of the four research questions are detailed in this section.

Question 1: Given the increased stress and pressure inherent to the position, was there a downward trend in superintendent job satisfaction among New York State superintendents?

Overall superintendent job satisfaction decreased more than 15% since the Padalino (2009) study. In addition, all four current policy initiatives were identified as being negative in the opinion of respondents: the rollout of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), new Annual Professional Performance Review (APPR) teacher evaluation system, the Gap Elimination Adjustment (GEA) state funding cuts, and the 2% property tax cap. The one governance issue, working with Board of Education, was identified as being positive by the respondents. Of the superintendents who responded to the questions related to job satisfaction, 60.21% rated their overall job satisfaction as high or very high (Table 1). From a historical perspective, this was a lower rate of job satisfaction than the Padalino (2009) study of New York State superintendents in which 75.6% felt that way. This was a decrease of 15.39% over a six-year time span.

Table 1

Overall Superintendent Job Satisfaction

	Very Low	Low	Average	High	Very High
Percentage	2.87%	10.04%	26.88%	40.50%	19.71%
Frequency	8	28	75	113	55

Table 2

Correlation Between Superintendent Job Satisfaction and Five Current Issues in Rank Order

	r
Working with BOE	.461
CCSS Rollout	.169
New APPR	.113
2% Property Tax Cap	.084
Gap Elimination Adjustment	.054

The four current policy initiatives were identified as having a negative effect on their position as superintendent: the 2% property tax cap, the Gap Elimination Adjustment state funding cuts, the new APPR teacher evaluation system and the rollout of the CCSS. With ratings between 75% and 93% negative, the survey respondents overwhelmingly disapproved of these policy issues. However, the Pearson coefficient did not show a significant correlation between the superintendents' feelings on these four issues and superintendent job satisfaction. Working with the Board of Education was found to have a significant positive correlation to superintendent job satisfaction.

Question 2: What factors most contributed to superintendent job satisfaction and dissatisfaction?

The survey asked superintendents, "What do you like most about being a superintendent?" The respondents were asked to rate the items using five possible choices: very weak, weak, neutral, strong or very strong.

Table 3

All 17 Factors That Contributed to Superintendent Job Satisfaction Ranked by the Combined Strong and Very Strong Percentages

Item	Combined Strong and Very Strong Percentages
1. An opportunity to impact students	97.43%
2. Substantial input into direction of school district	95.97%
3. Opportunity to build a team of educators	94.14%
4. Able to utilize the skills I have	94.13%
5. Make a difference in teaching and learning	92.28%
6. Have daily challenges in this job	91.18%
7. Can interact with a wide variety of people	87.18%
8. Enjoy the school district culture	78.31%
9. Opportunity to work with people I like	76.29%
10. Enjoy being the CEO, making final decisions	69.79%
11. Can influence community decisions	66.54%
12. Enjoy working with the Board of Education	63.37%
13. Well paid for this job	53.41%
14. In control of my daily schedule	47.06%
15. Enjoy the status of the job	44.12%
16. Able to work twelve-month job, not a separate summer job	36.53%
17. Like the high visibility of the job	30.89%

Providing more information on the factors contributing to job satisfaction and dissatisfaction, Table 4 lists the top three items in rank order based on mean scores.

Table 4

Three Highest Rated Factors That Contributed to Superintendent Job Satisfaction in Rank Order by Mean Score

Item	Mean Score
I have an opportunity to impact students.	4.58
I have substantial input into the direction of the district.	4.55
I have an opportunity to build a team of educators.	4.47

Table 5 shows the correlation between superintendent job satisfaction as measured in Table 2 and the 17 factors superintendents were asked to rank from very weak to very strong in Table 3. "Enjoy working with the Board of Education" had the highest rating of r = .474. This compares to the earlier question where "Working with the Board of Education" scored r = .461. The next four items in terms of correlation were "enjoy the status of the job", "enjoy the school district culture", "an opportunity to impact students" and "opportunity to build a team of educators". In fact, 13 of the 17 items in Table 5 had a higher correlation than any of the four current issues listed in Table 2.

Table 5

Correlation Between Superintendent Job Satisfaction and 17 Factors in Rank Order

	Overall Superintendent Job Satisfaction r
Enjoy working with the Board of Education	.474
Enjoy the status of the job	.340
Enjoy the school district culture	.322
An opportunity to impact students	.299
Opportunity to build a team of educators	.299
Opportunity to work with people I like	.291
Substantial input into direction of school district	.275
Make a difference in teaching and learning	.262
Well paid for this job	.235
Like the high visibility of the job	.215
Can interact with a wide variety of people	.209
Can influence community decisions	.208
Able to utilize the skills I have	.207
Enjoy being the CEO, making final decisions	.155
Able to work twelve-month job, not a separate summer job	.125
Have daily challenges in this job	.121
In control of my daily schedule	.097

Question 3: What motivated current superintendents to pursue the superintendency?

The respondents were asked to rate 12 items using five possible choices: very weak (1), weak (2), neutral (3), strong (4) or very strong (5). Table 6 ranks all 12 items when combining the strong and very strong percentages. Only three items scored above 90% - "I thought I could make a difference," "the job enabled me to provide leadership," and "the job would allow me to move the district forward."

Table 6

Motivating Factors to Pursue the Superintendency Ranked by the Combined Strong and Very Strong Percentages

Item	Combined Strong and Very Strong Percentages
1. I thought I could make a difference	96.65%
2. The job would enable me to provide leadership	93.33%
3. The job would allow me to move the district forward	91.08%
4. The job would give me a broader span of influence	76.96%
5. The job was a logical progression in my career	73.50%
6. I wanted to be all that I could be	64.93%
7. I wanted to go beyond the building administrator level	64.55%
8. I thought I could do a better job than those who came before me	48.51%
9. The job would provide me with financial security	38.80%
10. Other superintendents I knew or worked for seemed to enjoy their work	38.79%
11. I thought I would like working with the people in the district office	27.34%
12. I had "paid my dues"	5.27%

Table 7 lists the 12 items in rank order based on mean scores. The highest mean score was "I can make a difference" with a mean of 4.58. "I had paid my dues" had the lowest mean score of 1.88.

Table 7

Reasons for Liking the Job of Superintendent Ranked by Mean Score

Item	Mean Score
I can make a difference.	4.58
The job would enable me to provide leadership.	4.32
The job would enable me to move the district forward.	4.21
The job would give me a broader span of influence.	3.92
The job was a logical progression in my career.	3.90
I wanted to be all that I could be.	3.79
I wanted to go beyond the building administrator level.	3.66
I thought I could do a better job than others that came before me.	3.40
Other superintendents I knew or worked for seemed to enjoy their work.	3.16
The job would provide me with financial security.	3.15
I thought I would like working with the people in the district office.	2.99
I had "paid my dues.	1.88

Question 4: What percentage of superintendents would aspire to the position again if starting their careers over?

Of the respondents in this study, 81.29% responded yes while 18.71% responded no. This is a slight decrease from the Padalino (2009) study of New York State superintendents in which approximately 84% responded in the affirmative that they would again aspire to the superintendency if starting their careers over.

Table 8

"If I Had to Do It All Over Again, Would I Become a Superintendent?"

Response	Percent
Yes	81.29%
No	18.71%

It was interesting to find that more than 80% of the respondents said they would seek the superintendency again despite their extremely negative responses to the four policy initiatives currently confronting them in their roles. As detailed in Table 2, the respondents had very strong negative feelings about the two key financial policies (2% tax cap and GEA) as well as the two key academic policies (new APPR and the CCSS rollout). Therefore, it appears these outside forces would not deter current superintendents from seeking the position again if starting their careers over.

A large majority of respondents in this study (81.43%) felt positive about working with the Board of Education. A similar number (81.29%) said yes to the question: "If I had to do it all over again, would I become a superintendent?" Further analysis showed that those who felt positive in terms of working with the board of education were the same people who said they would be a superintendent again if starting over.

Thus, superintendent-school board relations are far more important to superintendent job satisfaction than any outside factors such as Common Core, APPR, 2% tax cap or the GEA.

In summary, more than 40% of superintendents across New York State participated in this study representing all regions, district sizes and socioeconomic levels. The overall job satisfaction of the participating superintendents was 60.21% when the high and very high ratings were combined. This was more than a 15% decrease compared to the Padalino (2009) study of New York State superintendents.

Conclusions

The data analysis and findings of the study present the following three conclusions:

1. Superintendent job satisfaction in this era of increased accountability and reduced resources, as measured in this survey, decreased more than 15% since the Padalino (2009) survey completed six years earlier. However, there was little or no correlation between the external factors examined and current superintendents' willingness to seek the position again if starting their careers over.

2. More than 81% of the respondents rated "working with the board of education" as a positive experience. Further- more, those respondents who felt positive about working with the board of education were the same people who said they would be a superintendent again if

starting over. Thus, superintendent-school board relations are far more important to superintendent job satisfaction than any external factors. Perhaps having such strong, negative external forces helped the superintendents and school board members work together against the common enemy of certain government policies.

3. When respondents were asked to rank their reasons for liking the job of superintendent, the highest ranked items were factors that were more intrinsic in nature (opportunity to impact students, substantial input into the direction of the district, and opportunity to build a team of educators). Meanwhile, the lowest ranked items were more extrinsic factors (enjoy the status of the job and like the high visibility of the job). Most educators have a strong desire to help others when entering the profession. Still possessing this intrinsic motivation later in their careers shows that despite the many external pressures, superintendents still strive to make a difference in the lives of children.

Recommendations for Practice

The demographics of the sample showed great diversity among respondents in terms of length of service as a superintendent, years in education, number of superintendencies held, gender and age. The same can be said about the characteristics of the districts where the superintendents served, as the sample was diverse with regard to student enrollment, socioeconomic status and location in New York State. Most of the superintendents who responded to the survey were male (70%) and between the ages of 46 and 60 (61%). The largest percentage worked in a district with less than 2,500 students (70%) and had been a superintendent for six years or less (53%). Based on survey response, the average number of years as a superintendent was 7.6. More than 50% of superintendents were in their first six years and more than 75% were in their first 10 years. The following recommendations for practice emerged from this study:

1. Superintendents and school boards must continually find ways to cultivate their relationship. It is incumbent upon superintendents to invest the time (perhaps as much as 40-50% of their time) to build relationships with board members and provide them with high-quality professional development.

2. Superintendents in this study had very negative feelings about the four major policy initiatives. Superintendents should play a key role in advocating for the proper course of action as it relates to educational policies particularly on the state level.

3. Administrative preparation programs should use this study to reflect on their current coursework and compare how it aligns with the respondents' answers particularly in three major areas: cultivating a positive relationship between superintendents and school boards, as well as superintendent training in leading system change, and effectively advocating for legislative changes.

Author Biography

John Bell has been superintendent of the Delaware Valley School District in Milford, PA since 2012. He is also an adjunct professor in the graduate school of education at East Stroudsburg University. His areas of research interest include the superintendency, organizational leadership, and the economics of education. He is president-elect of the Pennsylvania Association of School Administrators and past president of New York State ASCD. E-mail: jbell@dvsd.org

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