

Navigating the Politics of the Superintendency

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Abstract

This study examined how P-12 superintendents understand and respond to political influences on their decision-making regarding matters of student success. Participants included seven recently retired superintendents from two states. Findings revealed that the major influences on superintendents' decisions were school boards, parents, community members, and teachers, who attempted to influence superintendents in matters pertaining to accountability and fiduciary responsibilities, as well as with schools and facilities. Strategies most often used to respond to political influences were identifying key stakeholders, deciding the best course of action, networking and forming coalitions, and communication. Results should be beneficial to practicing and aspiring superintendents in helping them to identify, acquire, develop, or refine the skills needed to understand and respond to political influences of the superintendency.

Key Words

superintendency, politics, district/school administration, decision-making

Introduction

School districts are considered to be social systems comprised of internal and external stakeholders (Hoy & Tarter, 2008). As in other organizations, the success or failure of the school system rests on the shoulders of the chief executive officer (CEO), known in educational circles as the *superintendent* (Stenmark & Mumford, 2011). Across the nation, approximately 14,000 public school superintendents are responsible for the success of 77.2 million students (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016).

In addition to the normal challenges of running a human-intensive complex organization, superintendents often must contend with low student achievement, high dropout rates, dysfunctional operating systems, difficult school boards, facilities in need of repair, labor issues, and funding deficiencies (Stenmark & Mumford, 2011). The challenges are further compounded because superintendents operate within a highly political, media-intensive, bureaucratic, and highly-regulated public environment (Gil, 2013; Quinn, 2010; Noppe, Yager, Webb, & Sheng, 2013). As such, the superintendent must be aware of, “the social, political, and economic forces in the environment surrounding the school district that impinge on the organization” (Lunenburg, 2010, p. 28).

In these social, political, and economic contexts superintendent work is marked by pressures at the local, state, and federal levels (Gil, 2013; Lunenburg, 2010). Thus, superintendents find it necessary to manage and develop internal operations while concurrently monitoring the environment and anticipating and responding to external demands.

Additionally, superintendents must cope with various expectations for their behavior,

particularly as it pertains to decision-making for the school district (Lunenburg, 2010).

In tracing the history of the superintendency, the position was created between 1837 and 1850 (Cuban, 1976; Kowalski, 2006) when school districts grew to be too large and complex to be managed by lay boards and was considered to be *apolitical*. As the position evolved, it moved from one of clerical assistant (Cuban, 1976) to teacher-scholar, manager, democratic leader, applied social scientist, and, currently, communicator (Callahan, 1966; Kowalski 2006). In the midst of these transitions in form and function of the role was the stock market crash of 1929 and Great Depression of the 1930s (Kowalski, 2006); it was at that time that superintendents were forced to become political as they lobbied on behalf of their districts for scarce resources.

According to the current Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium Standards (ISSLC) standard six, superintendents must understand, respond to, and influence the larger political context in order to promote the success of students (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015). At one point or another, superintendents must focus on the political realities that exist within and outside of their school districts (Bolman & Deal, 2013). At every level of the superintendents’ involvement in the governance of their districts, they encounter some form of politics.

In addressing the challenging nature of the superintendency, Quinn (2010) commented, “The fact that schools are most often the biggest spenders of local taxpayer dollars and are charged with the care and development of the community’s most precious resources - its children - places everything superintendents do under the community’s magnifying glass” (p.16).

As such, superintendents sometimes find themselves in the position of having to respond to community influences and challenges.

Quinn referred to this aspect of the superintendency as being politically astute or playing politics. Like Quinn, other researchers (e.g. Bolman & Deal, 2013; Casto & Sipple, 2011; Hoy & Tarter, 2008; Polka, Litchka, Calzi, Denig, & Mete, 2011) have also maintained that superintendents must understand the politics of the job. From the perspective of the superintendent, “playing politics is simply the exercise of common sense and sensitivity to the interests of others in a sometimes highly volatile environment” (Quinn, 2010, p. 52). As school districts are held more accountable for improved student achievement, superintendents must make a plethora of decisions regarding teaching and learning. It is not uncommon for superintendents to encounter political manipulations as they make decisions for the good of the school system (Blase & Bjork, 2010; Callan & Levinson, 2011; Hoy & Tarter, 2008).

As the chief executive officer of schools, the superintendent is ultimately accountable for the operation of the entire school system. The high turnover rate of superintendents in school districts across the nation points to the complexities of the job. Superintendents must assume various roles that require specific knowledge and skills for effective practice. Adding to the myriad of job responsibilities, superintendents must be responsive to various constituencies as they make decisions regarding matters of leading student success. These competing demands can be considered a significant part of the politics associated with the position.

Politics, in particular, has been singled out as the primary reason superintendents are fired from the job or choose to leave the position (Quinn, 2010). The challenge facing superintendents is to acknowledge the reality that politics is a part of their daily routine. Knowing how to navigate the politics of school district administration is important for superintendents to survive in the position. In order to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding of the political context, successful superintendents utilize specific strategies to gain acceptance or reduce resistance from various stakeholders as they make decisions relative to student success.

Several researchers have investigated the influence of political entities on superintendents’ decision-making (e.g. Denig, Polka, Litchka, Calzi, & Brigano, 2011; Gil, 2013; Noppe et al. 2013; Polka et al. 2011; Tyler, 2014). The consensus among the researchers is that political influences can positively or negatively impact a superintendent’s tenure. Specifically, the researchers posit that when superintendents are caught between competing interests, they sometimes proceed cautiously and do not make the necessary decisions in order not to offend specific interest groups. The political nature of the superintendency has made this a position that requires skills that are not necessarily listed in the formal job description. The superintendent must be able to understand and respond to the various stakeholders that seek to influence decisions regarding matters of leading student success.

The problem that this study addressed was that school superintendents are sometimes ill-prepared to manage political influences and counter restraints that impact their decision-making regarding matters of leading student

success. Therefore, the purpose of the study was to examine how P-12 school superintendents understand and respond to political influences on their decision-making regarding matters of leading student success.

Research Questions

An overarching research question guided the study: How do P-12 school superintendents understand and respond to political influences, particularly as they relate to decision-making regarding matters of leading student success?

Additionally, the following sub-research questions were addressed:

1. Who are the individuals and groups that seek to influence P-12 superintendents' decision-making regarding matters of leading student success?
2. How do the identified individuals and groups influence P-12 superintendents' decision-making regarding matters of leading student success?
3. What strategies do P-12 superintendents use to respond to political influences?

Procedures

A semi-structured interview protocol to collect data for the study was developed, pilot-tested, and revised based on feedback. The protocol consisted of six open-ended questions; questions were developed based on the literature review and, thereby, had content validity. Study participants included seven retired superintendents from two southeastern states who were selected through purposive sampling. While five to 10 participants is an appropriate number for a phenomenological study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), the fact that participants were only representative of two states does limit the transferability of the findings to other states with differing cultures

and political structures exist, specifically when examining non-union versus union states.

The decision to use retired superintendents was based on the fact that some sitting superintendents might feel uncomfortable answering questions regarding the nature of politics in their districts. However, it is important to note that all seven participants were recently (within three years) retired and, therefore, not far removed from the day-to-day roles and responsibilities of the superintendency. Data analysis involved coding participants' responses to the interview questions; initial coding was based on a preliminary coding list developed from the literature. Initial coding then led to categorical aggregation, direct interpretation, and naturalistic generalizations to reveal predominant themes (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) to answer the research questions.

Findings

The findings revealed several sources of political influence on superintendents' decision-making in matters regarding leading student success; however, the major influences were school boards, parents, community members, and teachers.

These individuals and groups attempted to influence the superintendents in matters pertaining to accountability and fiduciary responsibilities, as well as with schools and facilities. This influence was evidenced through myriad examples in the participants' responses. The strategies most often used by superintendents to respond to the political influences were identifying key stakeholders, deciding the best course of action, and networking and forming coalitions.

Additionally, the superintendents indicated that they relied on the interpersonal skill of communication to help them navigate

the political waters. These findings were addressed according to the research questions.

Demographic profile of respondents

Participants consisted of seven retired P-12 superintendents from two southeastern states; five were female and two were male. Four of the superintendents were Caucasian and three were African-American. Participants' years in the superintendency ranged from 3 to 17 years; all had been appointed by an elected school board. As stated previously, participants were retired for a maximum of three years.

Understanding and responding to political influences

The seven superintendents who participated in the study acknowledged that the position of superintendent was, in and of itself, political. Thus, they were making all of the decisions regarding matters of leading student success within a political context. They indicated that it was important for them to know who would support and who would come out against their decisions. As such, they utilized a repertoire of strategies to respond to political influences on their decision-making.

The superintendents interviewed viewed politics as an ever-present and necessary challenge of the job. Their remarks indicated that they were aware that politics, both positive and negative, came with the position.

According to Participant S3: "Political influences keep us grounded in kind of a check and balance process for what we do every day with students. They keep us transparent in what and how we go about the business of improving student success. Some viewed it as a positive, almost like a system of checks and balances where they might capitalize on the politics of certain groups in order to acquire necessary resources.

Understandably, others view political influences as a challenge, particularly when the political influences had conflicting motives and goals that deterred their work. This conflicting motive often is seen happening when there might be a single-agenda board member or parent group. Participant S4 spoke to this issue: "The ability of the superintendent and the school board is greatly hampered when you have naysayers who have individual agendas that have nothing to do with student success. Although it was clear that each superintendent had his or her own style of responding to these political influences, the most frequently identified strategies fell into three categories: identifying key stakeholders; deciding the best course of action; and, networking and forming coalitions.

Political influences on the superintendents

Superintendents' responses regarding individuals and groups that seek to influence them confirmed that they constantly found themselves in the position of having to contend with internal and external political influences on their decision-making regarding matters of leading student success. Not surprisingly, those influences mainly consisted of the board, the community, parents, and teachers.

While the superintendents were quick to declare that for the most part they had no conflicts with all board members, the majority of participants perceived that school board members exerted the most influence on their decision-making regarding matters of leading student success.

Participant S3 remarked, "Boards of education many times have members who have personal agendas that conflict with and contradict what is best for students. They attributed this to the hierarchical nature of school systems; they reported to the board and,

therefore, were subject to influences from the board. Most participants attributed the root causes of these political issues to conflict, power struggles, and/or ethics.

After the board, the superintendents deemed the community to be a significant political influence on their decisions regarding matters of leading student success. Each superintendent stressed the importance of getting to know the school community, especially the key political players. As Participant S2 remarked, “There can be somebody that’s very well thought of in the community who stands out and they just want their way. They spoke of the need to communicate with the community regarding new initiatives in order to mitigate opposition, citing the benefits of communication and collaboration with the community. Participant S1 stated: “My number one concern was not allowing fallout from decisions that I made to affect the politics of the community.

In addition to the board and the community, superintendents commented on the political pressure from parents, which was especially prevalent during times of change. This was especially noted when these parents’ children would be affected by the proposed changes or initiatives. As participant S1 stated, “When you’re doing something that is different and it affects the way things are and students are reacting, parents don’t necessarily like it. In addition to change, other initiatives that led to conflict with parents were school closings or consolidations, curriculum and program offerings, student placement, and provision of resources. Participants expressed mixed beliefs regarding parent influence being positive or negative, indicating that it was situational.

Teachers also exerted influence on superintendent decision-making regarding matters of leading student success. While the

four of the seven (57%) superintendents reported that they valued teacher influence and tried to use teachers to help propel their agendas, the primary challenges presented by teachers pertained to changes involving curriculum and instruction, program offering, evaluations, staff handbooks, and policies and procedures. Participants indicated that teachers and/or teacher representatives were slow to embrace change. Other sources that influenced superintendents’ decisions regarding matters of leading student success included government officials, the state department of education, other superintendents, and other school districts; the first two were found to challenge their decisions, while the second two served to provide support for their decisions.

Ways in which individuals and groups seek to influence superintendents

Data revealed that the identified ways in which individuals and groups were most likely to exert influence were in terms of accountability. When the superintendents spoke of accountability, the specific types of political influences and the sources of influences were varied. Most often, the superintendents cited local, state, and federal school effectiveness measures, charter legislation, evaluation and grading of schools, federal legislation, state and federal testing requirements, and, funding compliance.

The sources of these political influences were board members, parents, community, the state department of education, and government officials. The superintendents viewed such influences as having an adverse impact on their decision-making in matters regarding student success. For example, participant S3 stated, “There are all kinds of federal, state, and local political influences, such as legislation and policies that tend to focus more on compliance than a true comprehension of the systems and processes that influence continuous

improvement for student achievement. Other participants commented on state or federal paperwork and testing mandates that took precedence over teaching and learning.

Another area of political influence encountered by the superintendents was regarding fiduciary matters. As participant S6 expressed, “The part that politics plays most of the time has to do with funding. The breadth of this influence was widespread and ranged from the allocation of resources, and appropriation and management of the budget to local, state, and federal funding and various taxes and assessments. Participant S5 summed it up as: “Things such as funding compliance cause the hands of educators to be tied regarding spending for what is truly needed versus just compliance with the funding guidelines made by people who have no clue.

As with accountability, the primary sources of these fiduciary political influences were board members, community, parents, and government officials in terms of power to sway decisions. For example, according to S7, “When it comes to politics, it’s about scarce resources because everybody wants a share of something, and there’s not enough money to go around. When you have a money problem, you’re going to operate in a political frame.”

Schools and facilities were also disclosed by the superintendents as areas involving much political influence. The sources of political influence included school administrators, board members, community, parents, students, teachers, other districts, and other superintendents. The types of influences were regarding curriculum and instruction, curricular and extracurricular participation, discipline, personnel matters, policies and procedures, programs and services, resources, schools, and student placement.

Strategies used to respond to political influence

Analysis revealed that four principal strategies for dealing with political influence emerged: identifying key stakeholders, deciding the best course of action, networking and forming coalitions, and communication. The main mode of response to political influences was the importance of identifying key stakeholders in order to accomplish goals as the educational leaders of the district. Superintendents stated that being able to identify potential sources of conflict that could hamper their effectiveness also played a large role in the strategy. They believed identifying potential sources of conflict to be a priority in accomplishing their goals for the district, particularly as it applied to their board members, the powerbase of the community, parents, and teachers, particularly when trying to promote change. As Participant S1 declared, “When you’re doing something different and it affects either the way things are, or it gets into the lives of students in some way, they don’t necessarily like it, so they react, and then, their parents react.

Participants in this study revealed that deciding the best course of action was an important leadership attribute for superintendents. Although the superintendents agreed that it was necessary to collaborate with stakeholders, they contended that the task of deciding the best course of action was solely the responsibility of the superintendent and should involve communicating with others internal and external to the organization. It also involves skills such as transparency, agenda setting, communication, consensus-building, and being able to anticipate conflict and resistance.

A contextual difference discussed by the superintendents was whether or not the superintendent was from within the district

versus coming from outside the district. For example, according to the superintendents, this factored into how they responded to political influences. Specifically, participants contended that if the superintendent came from within the district, he or she might have more support; however, if the superintendent came from outside the district, he or she had to work harder to identify key players, network, form coalitions, and get consensus.

As participant S7 commented, “You always need to know who is connected to whom.”

The next political skill described by the superintendents as essential to responding to political influences was networking and forming coalitions. Participants indicated that building alliances and forging relationships involves a combination of identifying key stakeholders and deciding the best course of action. They were specific as to with whom they needed to network—and this included board members, teachers, parents, or the community.

While they all described networking and forming coalitions as essential to understanding the political landscape, they also noted that networking and forming coalitions needs to be used in conjunction with other strategies, particularly when confronting conflict or opposition or trying to engender support.

Most often, superintendents spoke of networking with other superintendents, lobbying and working with legislators, and building internal and external teams. However, they agreed that the most important coalition was with board members. In terms of building relationships, each of the seven superintendents cited networking and forming coalitions with the board members as their top priority.

However they spoke of cultivating relationships with all board members as opposed to focusing on singular relationships, stressing that forming individual alliances with board members can be dangerous. This is supported in the literature, in that social influence has been noted as essential in the superintendent’s need to develop and maintain a cooperative working relationship with all board members and the community at large (Petersen & Short, 2001).

A common thread throughout superintendents’ responses was the need for open and two-way effective communication. More than anything else, the superintendents referred to communication as the key to their success. At the top of the list was communication with the board for the purposes of building a working relationship with the board, engendering trust, providing information, and making sure that the board understood what the superintendent was trying to do. For example, participant S6 declared, “Communication is such a major part in leadership where you communicate not just inward, but, outward as well. You’re really a salesman.

Throughout their interviews, participants consistently declared the interpersonal skill of communication as one of the strategies used to respond to political influences from internal and external stakeholders. In a manner similar to participant S6, participant S2 commented on the need for superintendents to dispel feelings that they are trying to hide something: “You have to communicate with stakeholders as much as you possibly can. Be clear in what your goals and objectives are, and that way, it’s not the first time anybody’s heard it.

They spoke of keeping the lines of communication open with different stakeholders by using various modes of

communication. Other interpersonal skills interspersed throughout interviews where the following: accessibility, visibility, transparency, building trust, teambuilding, honesty, and integrity.

Discussion

School superintendents do not make decisions in a vacuum (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011). Rather, their decisions are made within social systems that are made up of various stakeholders. Thus, it is not uncommon for superintendents to encounter political manipulations as they make decisions regarding matters of leading student success (Blase & Bjork, 2010; Callan & Levinson, 2011). The seven P-12 superintendents in this study were explicit in discussing the numerous political challenges and attempts to exert influence on their decision-making. Their responses to the interview questions revealed similarities, as well as contradictions to data reported in the review of literature.

In understanding that politics is inherent with their jobs, the superintendents in this study maintained that they had to *know how to play politics* in order to survive in their positions. This need to be politically astute was illustrated in prior research (Bolman & Deal, 2013; Casto & Sipple, 2011; Gil, 2013; Hoy & Tarter, 2008; Polka et al. 2011). Likewise, the research of Denig et al. (2011) and Gil (2013) concluded that effective superintendents are conscious of and willing to participate in the political process if they are to survive in the position.

Superintendents also understood that they could expect to encounter some form of politics at every level of their involvement in the governance of their school districts. Additionally, superintendents were cognizant that in their position, they had to be flexible in terms of their leadership style. As such, at one time or another, they assumed all the historical

role perspectives of the superintendent depicted in the literature: teacher-scholar, manager, democratic leader, applied social scientist, and communicator (Callahan, 1996; Cuban, 1976; Kowalski, 2006). As with the earliest of superintendents, the superintendents in this study did not have the option of being apolitical. They were required to engage in political activity and lobby on behalf of their school districts. They had to be spokespersons for their districts and advocates for their students. As such, they relied on a repertoire of strategies to respond to political influences.

The literature review revealed various individuals and groups that sought to influence superintendents (Denig et al. 2011; Noppe et al. 2013). These included school board members, parents, principals, teachers, students, community, business people, labor unions, government officials, and the media.

The seven superintendents in this study identified the same individuals and groups as was found in the literature. However, primarily the superintendents spoke of challenges faced with board members such as blurred roles of governance, micromanagement, and personal agendas. They spoke of the challenging position they were put in of having to choose what is best for children or what is morally right over appeasing or alienating board members.

For example, the literature noted that “The fact that schools are most often the biggest spenders of local taxpayer dollars and are charged with the care and development of the community’s most precious resources, its children, places everything superintendents do under the community’s magnifying glass” (Quinn, 2010, p. 16). The superintendents viewed politics as ever present and a necessary part of the job. Participant S3 asserted, “Political influences keep us grounded in kind

of a check and balance process for what we do every day with students. They keep us transparent in what and how we go about the business of improving student success. The superintendents referenced operating in what they called “the political frame” whenever they faced issues. However, the superintendents stressed the importance of understanding how to navigate the politics of the job to avoid conflict.

Superintendent concerns about appropriate board member role understanding and the challenging nature of boards are found throughout the literature (Gil, 2013; Kowalski, 2006; Noppe et al. 2013; Polka et al. 2011). Kowalski (2006) specifically cited three historical tensions existent in the superintendent-school board relationship: blurred lines regarding roles and responsibilities, power struggles, and questionable motives for serving on the board. In a manner similar to Kowalski (2006), all of the superintendents referenced these tensions as barriers to productive relationships with their boards.

The superintendents in this study also spoke of other political influences, some from within the school district and others outside of the school district. Specifically, the superintendents spoke of problems with parents, teachers, or community groups over competing agendas, interests, curriculum, special programs, or allocation of resources.

However, the superintendents spoke more about dealing with parent or community factions than with teachers. When they did speak of teachers, they also spoke of teacher unions or collective bargaining groups. The superintendents’ responses were consistent with prior research (Bolman & Deal, 2013; Durlak et al. 2010; Lunenburg, 2010) that superintendents must contend with various

entities to enhance acceptance or reduce resistance to decisions.

The superintendents revealed that internal and external stakeholders attempted to exert influence on their decisions regarding matters of leading student success. This influence specifically pertained to accountability and fiduciary matters and these areas of influence resemble those discussed in prior research (Kowalski, 2006; Noppe et al. 2013).

In regard to schools and facilities, the superintendents indicated that they were expected to communicate detailed information to internal and external stakeholders regarding school openings and closings, curriculum and instruction, assessment, personnel, and needed resources. These findings were reflected in prior research by Kowalski (2006) and Noppe et al. (2013) illustrating that the nature of conflict in the superintendency is the result of competing resources or resistance to change. Prior research also spoke of the need for school superintendents to engage the community as they communicated their districts’ needs for resources and advocated regarding school taxes (Noppe et al. 2013).

The literature review revealed that effective superintendents know how to work with various constituencies in order to move along their agendas and accomplish their goals (Denig et al. 2011; Noppe et al. 2013; Polka et al. 2011). The study found that superintendents had to interact with various constituencies and engage with different groups prior to making decisions regarding matters of leading student success.

The superintendents understood that moving a school district forward required engagement with both internal and external stakeholders. As in the review of the literature,

these activities forced the superintendents to rely on their political skills to achieve district goals (Cuban, 1976; Kowalski, 2006). However, although they had to engage the stakeholders as they communicated district goals and had to be careful not to alienate them.

In spite of political influences on their decision-making, the superintendents in this study took a hard stance to preserve what they considered best for their respective school districts. They expressed that while it was incumbent upon the superintendent to pursue a role that is politically savvy, it was also necessary to remain steadfast in maintaining and improving the school district. This viewpoint was a contradiction to prior research (Denig et al. 2011) that asserted that superintendents give in to political pressure.

The superintendents in this study did not deny political influences on their decision-making in matters of ensuring student success. However, they asserted that they respond to these political influences by using various skills or strategies. While each superintendent had his or her own particular best practices, among the seven superintendent participants the commonalities were identifying key players, deciding the best course of action, networking and forming coalitions, and communication. The superintendents considered these strategies as paramount to their efficacy in the position. Prior research supports the use of these strategies (Cuban, 1976; Denig et al. 2011; Hoy & Tarter, 2008; Kowalski, 2006; Polka et al. 2011).

Central throughout the strategies used by the superintendents was the interpersonal skill of communication. Other strategies mentioned by the superintendents were not separate and apart from the skill set laid out by Bolman and Deal (2013), Cuban (1976), and Hoy and Tarter (2008) in their work. Included

in the other strategies was visibility, use of consultants, accessibility, and vision, which were all integral parts of all of the political frames.

Conclusions

The political nature of the superintendency has made this a position that requires skills that are not necessarily in the formal job description and that are not taught in educational leadership preparation programs. What is seen from this and prior research is the growing acceptance of political behavior as a positive skill set critical to the role and success of superintendents.

Superintendents are caught between serving the needs of children and responding to the needs of adult stakeholders. The superintendents in this study responded to the individuals and groups that sought to exert influence on their decisions by applying a combination of the interpersonal skill of communication, and three strategies from varied leadership models: identifying key stakeholders, deciding the best course of action, and networking and forming coalitions. The superintendents recognized communication as the key to accomplishing their goals.

As with all research, there were limitations to this study that may affect the reader's interpretation of the findings. As the study was limited in scope to seven participants in two states and participants were purposively and not randomly selected, results may not be generalizable. In addition, the study only addressed contexts or situations perceived by superintendents as political. The assumption was made the participants were open and honest in their responses, providing accurate insights into the problem under study.

Implications

The increasing prominence of politics in education has given rise to the need for the

school superintendent to understand, practice, and become adept at political leadership (Gil, 2013; Quinn, 2010; Noppe et al. 2013). As the superintendency continues to become more complex, superintendents must make innumerable judgments that have no established criteria or protocol. Superintendents are engaged with conflict, problems, and issues that require political acumen.

Superintendents are practitioners who need to be able to recognize the significance and implications of a political situation. Thus, how superintendents learn political leadership skills should be included in leadership training. To note, traditional preparation programs and professional development available through professional organizations may be inadequate in preparing superintendents for the myriad of leadership demands that characterize their roles. Undoubtedly, superintendents must have unique skill sets to respond to the demands and influences from a multitude of stakeholders. Beyond traditional leadership skills, they must know how to navigate the political waters of the superintendency.

This study addressed a gap in the educational literature regarding how superintendents understand and respond to political influences on their decision-making regarding matters of leading student success. The study contributes to the body of research on the superintendency by providing insight for

superintendents who are struggling with the political aspects of district-level decision-making. The study also identifies the skills needed to understand and respond to political influences on superintendents' decision-making. The results of the study could be instructive for aspiring superintendents on understanding and responding to political influences. Additionally, the results of the study could inform educational leadership programs on how to train superintendents to use specific skills to manage political influences on decision-making.

The findings for this research study resulted from examining the phenomenon related to navigating the politics of school district leadership. The P-12 superintendents in this study understood that their position was, by nature, political. They acknowledged that board members, parents, teachers, and community members sought to influence their decisions regarding matters of leading student success. Specifically, these individuals and groups attempted to influence the superintendents' decisions regarding accountability and fiduciary matters. The superintendents responded to the political influences by identifying key stakeholders, deciding the best course of action, and networking and forming coalitions. Additionally, the superintendents relied on the interpersonal skill of communication to help navigate the political waters.

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