

Promoting Equity in the Modern Superintendency

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Abstract

This article is based on results from *The American Superintendent 2020 Decennial Study* (Tienken, 2021) that reported the survey results of 1218 of America's seated superintendents. Specifically, for this article, we pull from the data on equity, community relations, and social media (Horsford, Mountford, and Richardson, 2021). This article focuses on how equity operates within and around issues of community relations and social media and further considers the extent to which these issues help or obfuscate promoting equity and the benefits and banes of superintendents attempting to do so.

Keywords

superintendents of schools, *The American Superintendent 2020 Decennial Study*, demographics profiles, equity, leadership

The American Association of School Administrators (AASA) began their decennial study of the American school superintendent in 1923, nearly 100 years ago.

AASA currently publishes a study every ten years as well as an occasional mid-decade update on the state of the American school superintendent. Through these comprehensive studies, AASA documents the shifts in demographics, backgrounds, and current experiences of the American school superintendent. Most questions on the survey have remained the same over the decades, thus affording a comparative analysis. For example, questions persistently focus on career pathways, professional learning, current workloads, self-evaluations, and community relationships.

However, job and societal changes have shifted, and the study has adjusted accordingly. For example, the rise of technology in education has impacted schools and districts and thus is reflected in the content of the current AASA survey. As such, in the most recent iteration, superintendents were asked about social media, educational technology, and personal use of technology. Issues of equity, diversity, and social justice have impacted the fabric of society, and, rightfully, superintendents have found themselves front and center at addressing these issues. In response, on the 2020 survey, *equity* was a focus in ten different instances.

In this article, we endeavor to take another look at the data from *The American Superintendent 2020 Decennial Study* using equity as a lens to reexamine the data set. We will describe the findings from the decennial study but in the discussion, compare and contrast those to the systemic levels of inequity as posited by Radd, Generett, Gooden, and

Theoharris (2021). Additionally, using the framework for action, we will discuss how superintendents might best go about promoting equity and building support for equitable practices in their districts.

Results

We begin by examining the demographics of superintendents and their communities including the concerns of minority/majority stakeholders. Following that, we present the findings regarding community relations and stakeholder involvement in district decisions and discuss how these relations and involvement may or may not be impacting equitable systemic practices.

In the last section, we present findings from the decennial study regarding the role of social media, its effectiveness, and the way superintendents report using social media to monitor community involvement. Finally, we review the decennial findings holistically using the four levels of systemic equity and the five practices of equity-focused leadership (Radd et al., 2021).

Superintendent and district profiles

This section of the article reviews demographic and district data related to gender and race from the *American Superintendent Decennial Study 2020* (Tienken, 2021). These same findings have already been published in the most recent AASA study but detailed herein to provide readers with key demographics of superintendents and the racial profiles of their districts. Changes over time to the profile of superintendents based on earlier AASA ten-year studies are also presented.

It is clear from the results of the *American Superintendent Decennial Study 2020*, that the superintendents' profile might influence their ability to promote systemic equitable practices in their districts and

communities. Superintendents continue to be *overwhelmingly* male and White. The 2020 results showed that 26.68% were female and 72.91% were male. Women worked in districts of all sizes but almost three-quarters (71.46%) of them work for districts with less than 3,000 students. Of the 1,206 superintendents who

responded to the survey item about race, 91.38% reported being White; 3.48% were Black; 2.40% were Hispanic; and 1.74% were Native American or Native Alaskan. Asian, Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, or other races, combined were less than 1.00% of the superintendents surveyed (see Figure 1).

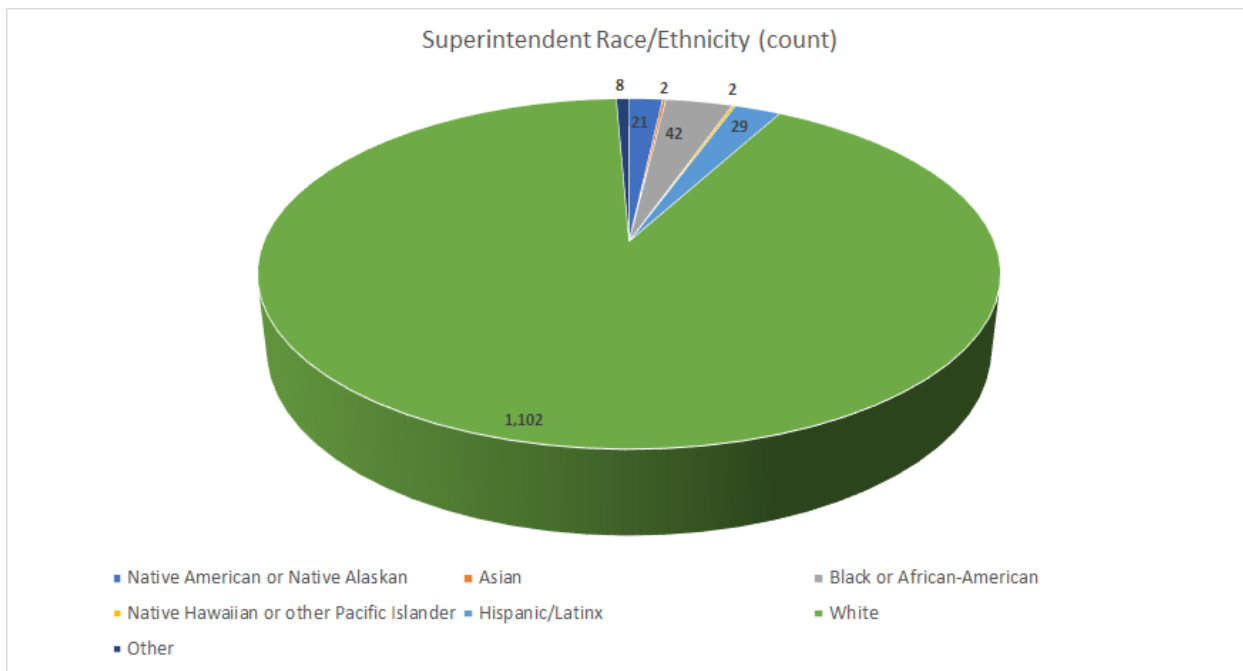


Figure 1. Superintendents by race/ethnicity.

Slightly over a quarter (25.23%) of the superintendents in the study were between the ages of 41-45 when they were first hired.

Slightly less (20.53%) were between the ages of 46-50 when hired for their first superintendency. The average tenure of superintendents was between 1 and 13 years with most

superintendents serving 4 years in the same district. Figure 2 shows that superintendents were split into almost even thirds when it came to political party affiliation.

Results indicated that 31.34% reporting being Democrat, 33.02% reported being Republican, and 32.60% reported being Independent.

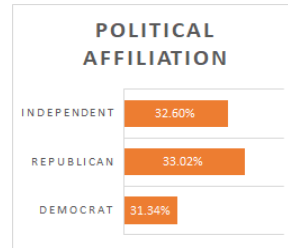


Figure 2. Political affiliation.

The majority (93.58%) of superintendents reported holding a Master's degree as the highest degree earned followed closely by a Bachelor's degree (86.50%). Almost half (44.28%) of superintendents had earned an Ed.D. or Ph.D. More than half (52.67%) of these degrees were in the field of educational leadership. Another 34.16% of these superintendents had a doctoral degree in the field of education administration/supervision.

Current profile of the American superintendent

The data show that in 2020, a superintendent was most likely to be male and White, beginning their first superintendency between the ages of 40-50. The tenure of the modern superintendent ranged broadly from one or fewer years to 13 or more years. A superintendent in 2020 likely holds a Master's, Ph.D., Ed.D. in educational leadership or educational administration/supervision.

Slightly over half (54.78%) of the superintendents worked in rural districts, whereas 20.76% worked in suburban districts and 18.86% worked in a small town or city. District enrollments of less than 300 students accounted for 11.76% of survey responses and

only 5.60% of the superintendents worked in urban districts which tended to have the largest enrollments and be the most racially diverse.

Profile changes over time

There have been modest changes in the demographic data since 2000. The number of females in the superintendency has grown to 26.68% in 2020, while it was 24.10% in 2010 (Kowalski, McCord, Petersen, Young, & Ellerson, 2011), and 13.1% in 2000 (Glass, Bjork, & Brunner, 2001).

Essentially, it took two decades for the number of women working as superintendents to double. However, the distribution of female superintendents across enrollment types stayed fairly steady. Slightly more females reported serving in districts with the largest enrollments. Results from the 2000 AASA study (Glass et. al., 2001) indicated that only 5% of superintendents were not White.

The number of superintendents of color edged up slightly by 2010 (Kowalski et. al., 2011) to 6%, and further to 8.62% in 2020 (Tienken, 2021). However, these modest increases do not match the increase in student diversity in school districts as detailed in Figure 3.

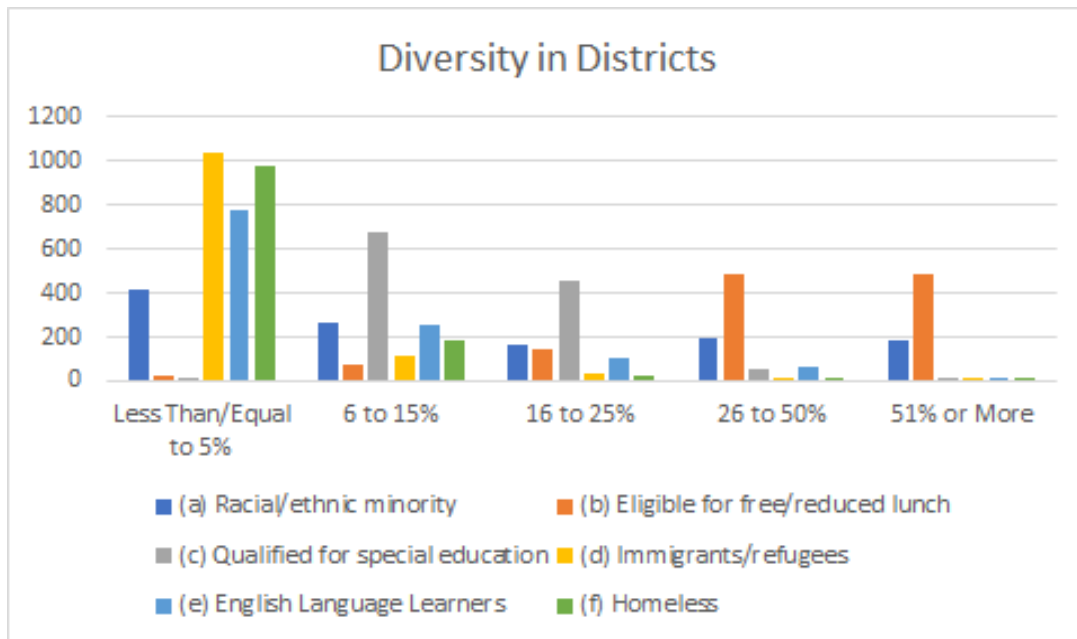


Figure 3: Diversity of students in districts.

Community stakeholders

One of the main functions of the superintendency is to serve as a human hub (Mountford & Alsbury, 2007) for the community, not unlike the school buildings as facilities hub.

With regard to the level of support from their local community, almost all superintendents, 95%, reported feeling either

“very supported” (64%) or “somewhat supported” (31%) by their local community (see Figure 4).

However, when superintendents were asked about their relationship with the largest “minority” community, only 83 percent of superintendents reported feeling very or somewhat supported (see Figure 5).

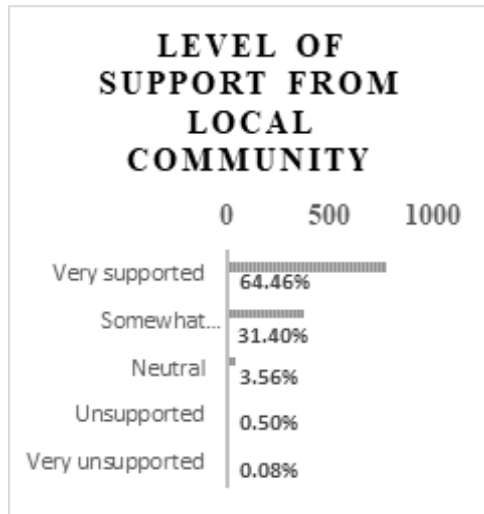


Figure 4. Level of support from local community.

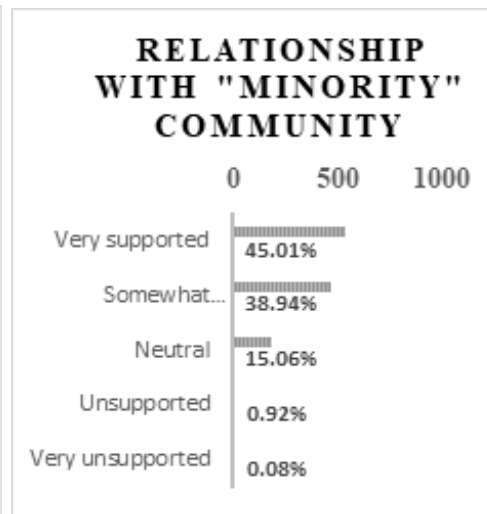


Figure 5. Relationship with "minority" community.

Superintendent engagement with community

In 2020, respondents were asked about what issues consumed the most time as the superintendent. Slightly less than 54% of respondents reported that equity and diversity were addressed monthly, 14.10% addressed these topics weekly, and only 2.56% of superintendents addressed these topics on a daily basis. Of those superintendents who addressed equity daily, all felt they were effective at doing so.

More specifically, of those who addressed issues of equity weekly, only 17% did not feel they were effective in doing so. That number dropped if the issue is addressed monthly, where a third did not feel they were effective in doing so.

The data were similar when addressing diversity issues where 50% of superintendents who addressed this topic monthly did not feel they were effective. This indicates that those superintendents who dealt with the topics of

equity and diversity more regularly felt more effective in doing so. Of interesting note, only 10.11% of superintendents reported that racial tension was a topic that generated political action in the past three years.

Superintendents were asked if the minority community has concerns that differed from the majority community in the district. Over half of respondents indicated that this is the case for all topics including conflict management, finances, school reform, student discipline, and curriculum issues. However, almost 75% of these superintendents in 2020 reported that differences existed around issues of educational equity and diversity.

This topic was by far the most divisive among minority and majority parents, which is almost 20% higher than the next most divided topic being school board member relationships. With that said, only 27.93% of respondents included parents and community members when dealing with issues of equity and diversity.

Superintendents' use of social media for equity, diversity, and inclusion

Social media activism was a topic that community members organized around in over 70% of rural, 75% of small, and 85% of urban districts. For those superintendents who rated themselves as very effective at addressing issues of equity, almost 74% used Facebook and almost 70% used Twitter. Though the survey did not ask if these superintendents used social media to address equity and diversity, one would assume they did so.

More than three out of five superintendents urged principals and teachers to maintain social media accounts to communicate with parents and students. Of those superintendents who were very effective at dealing with issues of student equity, over 75% were daily social media users.

Discussions and Implications

One of the unique features of *The American Superintendent 2020 Decennial Study* is the addition of several survey questions asking superintendents to comment on equity issues within their school districts as well as strategies superintendents used to promote equity in their districts.

While previous AASA 10-year studies (see for example the 2000 or 2010 superintendent studies) asked superintendents about race, class, and gender discreetly, the 2020 study included questions about the ways race, class, gender, socio-economic status (SES), disabilities, and majority-minority districts impacted a superintendent's ability to promote equity in the school district and build community support for doing so.

Understanding the empirical, and often praxis-based, literature related to leaders effectively promoting equity in the surrounding community is also important. As noted in Horsford, Mountford, and Richardson (2021): Throughout the twenty-first century, it became increasingly clear that certain segments of the community were feeling alienated from their local school community with school desegregation efforts limiting the ability for parents representing minority¹ communities to engage and contribute to school events, activities, and decision making. (p. 65)

Strategies for promoting equity and building support in the community in schools often center around the fundamental question as to whether students, regardless of race, gender, socio-economic status, ability, sexual orientation, and cultural or religious backgrounds, get the educational resources they need to thrive as adults in a democratic society.

Earlier literature tends to focus on the *equality* of resources distributed across different stakeholder groups and whether all resources were distributed equally to each group.

Equity demands students get the resources they need to learn and succeed regardless of more resources go to them than other students who may not need those additional resources (Horsford, Grosland, & Gunn, 2011; Theoharris & Scanlan, 2015; Tillman & Scheurich, 2013).

In other words, while equality demands students get the same resources and are treated the same way regardless of their demographic profiles, equity means some students or groups

¹ We use the term "minority" to be consistent with the survey questions, recognizing that this term is problematic in that it is primarily used by dominant group members to describe non-White students, groups, and populations.

may get more resources than others because they may need those additional resources to succeed to be a participant citizen of a democracy.

Promoting equity in school districts then becomes a primary directive of today's superintendents, regardless of whether they are leading in large urban centers, the suburbs, or in rural areas (Mountford & Wallace, 2019). The problem is that schools are not equitable. Some argue this has to do with their funding formulas and others argue it has more to do with where schools are located. Regardless, a lack of equity in a school system means some students will succeed while others will not.

Promoting equity in schools

Superintendents are faced with an uphill battle when it comes to promoting equity in their districts and maintaining community support to do so. Superintendents must convince all their educational stakeholders that the district will afford more of their precious, and often dwindling, resources to some students and not others.

But it is not that simple.

Promoting equity in schools occurs at multiple levels concurrently. Some researchers have suggested superintendents first analyze district policies at various organizational levels within and outside school districts where bias and inequitable practices are likely *baked in*.

While there are multiple ways for superintendents to approach equity practices in their districts; concomitantly, superintendents, and really all school leaders, should develop their own intellectual advancement around issues of equity. By engaging in deep learning around equity, some superintendents may come to better understand their own biases and prejudices before attempting to change

inequitable practices within their school district (Radd, Generett, Gooden, & Theoharis, 2021) and build community support.

There has been a recent movement in this direction often referred to as culturally responsive school leadership (Khalifa, Gooden, & Davis, 2016). Culturally responsive school leadership sets up four distinct task areas for school leaders.

First, school leaders should reflect on their own biases and behaviors. Second, school leaders need to develop culturally responsive teachers. Third, school leaders must promote inclusive school practices while, fourth, engaging students and parents and Indigenous contexts.

More recently, Radd, Generett, Gooden, and Theoharris, (2021) posited five practices necessary for school leaders to build an equity-focused system. According to the authors, school leaders need to prioritize equity, prepare for equity, develop equity leadership teams, build equity-focused systems, and sustain equity.

For Radd, Generett, Gooden, and Theoharris, (2021), the key difference in this approach to other theories for promoting equity is that they take into consideration the different types of inequities occurring at different levels of a system simultaneously. While such an approach would surely be difficult, the authors believe change can occur if a "systemic and transformative approach is taken" (p. 9).

Here, systemic means "the problem lies in the system and the inequities are symptoms and results. In other words, although inequities breed inequities, it is not the cause but the result of a system that is set up to produce inequities" (p. 9). Further, they posit that the process is transformative for the leader because

the leader must consciously act differently and with purpose within and across each level of systemic inequity.

Levels of systemic inequity

According to Radd, Generett, Gooden, and Theoharris, (2021), four levels of systemic inequity occur simultaneously. These levels are historical, structural, institutional, and individual/personal. The historical level is described as “problems we face today have their roots in centuries of human experience” and that “people carry their histories. Your histories inform what you think, how you feel, and how you react” (p. 11).

Structural inequities are “built and organized predictably and lead to the types of disparate outcomes that exist today” (p. 12). Segregation and housing patterns are posited as examples of structural inequities. Laws, rules, and institutional policies are examples of *institutional* levels of inequity.

Finally, believing only others perpetuate hate, violence, discriminatory acts, and holds biases “when science has concluded inarguably that everyone carries unconscious biases” (p. 14).

When comparing school district profiles with the profiles of superintendents who responded to the 2020 survey, it becomes evident that there is a disconnect regarding a demographic match between the two. Alsbury and Whitaker (2007) resolved that superintendents needed to expand their understanding of social justice and prioritize issues of inequities within their districts.

Without a closer examination of how superintendents promote social justice and equity in their districts, they may inadvertently repeat and legitimize inequitable racial practices in themselves, their districts, and the

community. Superintendents may be well served by focusing on the four levels of systemic inequity posed by Generett, Gooden, and Theoharris, (2021) and simultaneously address historical, structural, institutional, and individual/personal inequities.

Conclusion

The American Superintendent Decennial Study 2020 (Tienken, 2021) deeply informs the field of the current experiences of what it means to be a modern superintendent. In 2020, a core experience that we all faced was around equity, diversity, and social justice.

In the era of ‘I can’t breathe,’ the onus is on leaders of school systems to remove those constraints that might be causing some groups of students to not ‘breathe’ as well as others. If the modern superintendent is likely to be a White male and middle-aged where half have achieved the highest degree in their field, yet the districts they serve are becoming increasingly diverse (e.g., racially, ability, language proficiency, SES, newcomer status, and homeless), then understanding how superintendents can better address equity amidst this disconnect is a topic of dire import.

The data showed that very few superintendents address equity and diversity on a regular basis. Of those who did, they felt they are doing so effectively. This indicates that those superintendents do not address equity and diversity, simply do not feel they can do so effectively.

This leaves a gaping hole of neglect across America’s school districts. The astute reader might ask if it is not possible that these issues are simply not relevant to those school districts where these conversations are not happening. But that is likely not the case given that 75% of superintendents noted differences in concerns between minority and majority

community members around many topics, but especially equity and diversity.

Simply putting one's head in the sand does not make the issue go away. Equity, diversity, and social justice have become core challenges of the modern superintendent. It is time that the system (e.g., states, districts,

schools, and universities) step up to address this need. This is the challenge of our generation. Let us hope that another ten years do not go by and the data return to paint a bleaker picture. The time is now for district leaders to be more equity-minded, more socially justice, and more critically aware of issues of diversity.

Author Biographies

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