

Superintendents' Perceptions of the Assistance Provided by Their Predecessors During A Change in Leadership

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Abstract

This study involving superintendents from four states sought to identify the nature and quality of help provided by outgoing superintendents to their successors, and to capture data regarding differences in the helpfulness of that support, depending on whether the superintendent moved to a new superintendency, retired from the position, or was nonrenewed or terminated. The findings indicate that one third of successor superintendents have a strongly favorable view of the helpfulness of their predecessor. Internally-promoted successor superintendents viewed the helpfulness of their successor significantly more favorably than successor superintendents employed from outside the district. Fellow superintendents, administrative assistants, and district administrators were viewed as a much greater source of support than predecessor superintendents.

Key Words

superintendents, transition, leadership succession, change in leadership, mentoring, superintendent shortage

The need for individuals to fill superintendent positions in the coming years is substantial. A 2003 survey of nearly 2,000 superintendents found that most respondents agreed that the nation was facing a shortage of applicants for the superintendency (L. D. Fusarelli et al., 2003). In a 2015 study, almost one-third of superintendents stated that they planned to retire within five years (Finnan et al., 2015). With well over 13,000 school districts in the U.S. (*NCES Digest of Education Statistics*, 2012), this represents well in excess of 4,000 superintendent vacancies in this period. The shortage of school leaders has been identified as a problem that is global in nature (Ryan & Gallo, 2011).

A great deal of trust is placed in school district superintendents to provide overall leadership for the organization. The effects of the position are not always readily measurable, and many scholars have brought attention to the complexities and stresses of the position (Bird & Wang, 2013; Bjork & Keedy, 2002; Brunner, 2002; Cuban, 2001; L. D. Fusarelli et al., 2002; Glasman & Fuller, 2002; Grissom & Andersen, 2012; Grissom & Mitani, 2016; Hart et al., 2019; Kowalski & Glass, 2002; Leithwood et al., 1999; Petersen & Fusarelli, 2008; Petersen & Short, 2001; Riley et al., 2002; Thompson & Holt, 2016; Webner et al., 2017). Observers generally agree that the position is a critical one in influencing the culture, policy agenda, strategic decision-making, and overall leadership of school districts.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to obtain information about the nature and extent of assistance provided by superintendents to their successors, and to better understand differences in the helpfulness of that support depending on whether the superintendent moved to a new

superintendency, retired from the position, or was nonrenewed or terminated.

The study also sought to identify potential differences in transition experiences related to gender and the size and location of the district. Lastly, the study sought to gain insight into the perceived value of other sources of assistance during the transition to a new superintendency.

Significance of the Study

Given the importance and influence of the position, it stands to reason that the transition from one superintendent to the next merits thoughtful consideration. This study's findings can be expected to contribute to our understanding of the perceived effectiveness of predecessors' efforts to effect a favorable transition.

It is not unusual for a change in leadership at the top to result in a loss of support for previous programs and initiatives to create organizational space for the initiatives promoted by a new leader (Alsbury, 2008a, 2008b; Lechasseur, 2017).

A lack of continuity in leadership can result in a high organizational cost, as districts experience both the abandonment of initiatives associated with a predecessor and the whipsawing effect produced through a successor's arrival (Schwanenberger et al., 2020). Hart and colleagues (Hart et al., 2019) argue that "the superintendency is increasingly viewed as a temporary position, with boards of education and superintendents expecting a lack of longevity among superintendents" (Hart et al., 2019, p. 4). Charan's observations about corporate leadership are also applicable to school district leadership. He noted that "the result of poor succession planning is often poor performance, which translates into higher

turnover and corporate instability” (2005, p. 74).

Review of Literature

Lack of attention to transition planning

Evidence demonstrates that succession planning, particularly at the level of the superintendent, is an area in which most school districts have room for improvement. Deliberate succession planning is not uncommon in fields such as business and health care, but such planning in the field of education is largely centered on the principalship and district administrative positions (Domenech, 2016; B. C. Fusarelli et al., 2018), not the superintendency. It has been argued that “Many organizations do a decent job nurturing middle managers, but meaningful leadership development stops well below the apex” (Charan, 2005, p. 75).

A recent study funded by the Wallace Foundation indicated that only around 10% of large school districts have any form of succession planning (Domenech, 2016). Therefore, systematic efforts to create succession plans or succession management processes do not appear to be undertaken on a widespread basis by school districts. There is even less evidence of such efforts related to the superintendency. The study of superintendents’ efforts to provide for an effective transition between superintendents is quite limited.

Superintendents’ role in successful transition

Though the transition process can take a variety of shapes, there are two primary ways in which superintendents can play a role in contributing to a successful transition. The first is through their role in advising and assisting the board through the process of conducting a search and selecting the next superintendent. The second

is through their role in communicating with and assisting their successor.

Advising and assisting the board

In general, though there may be rare exceptions to this practice, superintendents exercise authority over planning and preparing for the succession of principals and other district administrators. Such efforts may occur through listing known leadership needs, identifying specific potential candidates for future openings, offering encouragement or leadership-development training to aspiring leaders, or assigning mentors to individuals with leadership potential. In contrast, superintendents typically exercise no such authority over planning and preparing for their own succession.

Ultimately, for very sound reasons, the authority for hiring superintendents rests with the governing board. Superintendents may be consulted about such decisions, and in some cases, they may have a role in advising the board. It is not unusual for superintendents to groom a potential successor in the hopes that this will bring a sense of stability and continuity (Bradley, 2016), but such preparations provide no guarantee that one’s protégé will ultimately be the individual selected by the board to lead the district.

Historically, such “sponsored mobility” (Ortiz, 2000, p. 559) has served to perpetuate White male dominance of the profession, as predecessors have tended to groom internal successors most similar to themselves (Dedrick et al., 2016).

Nationally, three-fourths of superintendents are male (Maranto et al., 2018), and the overwhelming majority of superintendents, even those serving in regions with large populations of students of color, are

white. School boards, which in some cases may be more representative of the community than the superintendent, may be in a better position to alter the superintendency as a “gendered profession” (Maranto et al., 2018, p. 12).

Often, notes Dan Domenech, executive director of the American Association of School Administrators, when a superintendent vacancy occurs, even when an internal candidate is seen as a viable prospect for the position, “school boards feel obliged to undertake a formal search to assure the community it has considered other candidates and has concluded no one out there is better than the homegrown product (2016, p. 40).

Communicating with and assisting one’s successor

There appears to have been little research related to superintendents’ efforts to assist with the transition of their successor. Although Kasper (1997) proposed varied approaches to transition planning based on the specific circumstances in a district, there is no model in widespread use to guide superintendents in preparing for a district’s transition to a new superintendent; in fact, such a model may be impractical because of the diverse circumstances that influence the succession process in districts that are in highly varied settings.

The authors of this manuscript recall mentoring a number of new superintendents and advising them to spend much more time listening and learning in the first year, as opposed to speaking and explaining. As a staff and community get to know a new superintendent, their initial observations and conclusions about the superintendent’s character will greatly influence a community’s receptiveness toward the new leader. What staff and community members invariably want

to see is a leader who listens, who is intent on understanding the full breadth and depth of challenges and concerns from varying perspectives, and who is deliberate in making judgments about the nature of the organization’s needs. Superintendents new to a district need to have the opportunity to understand the history of the district, and, often, the best person to provide that history may be one’s predecessor in the role (Dedrick et al., 2016). Lytle advocates “taking time to learn the context before starting to act” (2009, p. 9). Keeping a focus on district goals that preceded the transition process may provide a way to reduce fear and anxiety (Finger, 2016).

It is highly unlikely that individuals who are new to a superintendency will show much interest in being instructed by their predecessor in how to be a superintendent, particularly when they already have experience in the role. Hearn (2019) studied superintendent predecessor-to-successor transition practices at Christian schools in the U.S., in part focusing on whether or not predecessors devoted time to training successors. Hearn found that successors somewhat resented receiving training from predecessors, in that this possibly signaled that the successors were not adequately trained before assuming the new role. A fundamental concern of a superintendent new to a position is to be seen as competent and adequately prepared for the position.

Once in a position, one’s professional network can be a source of support. Dias (2019) conducted qualitative case study research examining the career pathways of female superintendents. This research revealed the importance of informal mentors and networking during the transition to a new position. In a rare example of a lengthy period of mentoring for new superintendents, Gildea (2012) studied six first-year superintendents,

half of which were internal hires, and half of which were external hires. Two of the three participants hired from outside the district had the opportunity to shadow their predecessors for an extended period of time, and both credited this opportunity with helping them to create connections to the community and the district. Consequently, five of the six participants had the opportunity to learn from their predecessors (either by working under the supervision of their predecessor or by shadowing the predecessor).

Assistance with the transition to a superintendency may be a more critical need in rural districts than in those located in or near metropolitan areas. Rural districts are generally smaller, which means they are less likely to have district-level administrative positions where candidates can gain experience in those responsibilities associated with the superintendency.

Moreover, rural district superintendents are more likely to be in need of support in transitioning to a new position, as, according to Grissom and Andersen, “rural districts have less success in hiring experienced superintendents than their more urban counterparts when turnover occurs” (2012, p. 1173).

Limited research has been conducted in recent years regarding the areas in which superintendents new to a position need information and support. One area where a small amount of research has been conducted has to do with aspiring and novice superintendents. Gandhi (2019) studied the experiences of five superintendents transitioning to their first superintendency. Challenges common to all five superintendents included board-superintendent relations, change management, and personnel issues. Burmeister (2018) interviewed six practicing

rural superintendents regarding the steps which aspiring rural superintendents can take to best prepare for the position. This research highlighted the importance of being the right person for a specific position and of having a grounding in areas including school finance, human resources, and relationships with the board.

Research Questions

This study sought to address the following questions:

1. Do superintendents view their predecessor as a source of assistance in their transition to a new superintendency, and do those views vary in relation to the superintendent’s reason for leaving the position?
2. Do superintendents’ views of the assistance provided by their predecessor vary by gender, location or size of district, and the previous position held by the successor?
3. In what areas do departing superintendents tend to advise and assist their successor?
4. How does the support from predecessors compare with the support of others?
5. In relation to other priorities, how high of a priority are board relationships during the transition to a new position??

Instrumentation

With the assistance of professional membership associations in four states, a 25-question survey was distributed to all superintendents in these states. This survey was developed as a collaborative effort of the authors, all of whom had served as superintendents in at least one of the states where the survey was administered. The survey collected demographic information, as well as information related to the

superintendent's level of experience overall, in the superintendency, and in the current position. Superintendents were asked to report on the size and location (urban, rural, suburban) of their current district. An email explained the scope and purpose of the study and included a link to the online survey. A follow-up email was sent approximately two weeks later.

Sample

Responses were received from 240 superintendents in the states of Arizona, Kansas, Minnesota, and Washington during the fall and winter of 2019. The number of responses represents 28% of the school districts in the states surveyed. Seventy eight percent of respondents were male, and 22% were female. Participants largely represented rural school districts, with rural superintendents making up 71% of the sample, suburban superintendents comprising 23%, and urban superintendents making up 6% of the sample.

The largest percentage of participants reported the size of their district to be less than 1,000 students in their district (n=93, 38.8%), with the next largest group reporting enrollment of 1,000 – 4,999 (n=83, 34.58%). Districts of 5,000 – 9,999 (n=33, 13.75%), 10,000 – 19,999 (n=20, 8.33%), and 20,000 or more students (n=11, 4.58%) made up the

remainder of the sample. Nearly one-half (n=115, 47.91%) plan to retire from the superintendency within five years.

Findings

Research Question 1

Do superintendents view their predecessor as a source of assistance in their transition to a new superintendency, and do those views vary in relation to the superintendent's reason for leaving the position?

Question 16 asked participants to rate, on a scale of 0 ("Not at all helpful") to 10 ("Extremely helpful") the extent to which one's predecessor was helpful in assisting with the transition to one's current role. The mean overall rating of the helpfulness of the predecessor was 4.71. One-third of respondents (n=80) reported that their predecessor was very helpful (reflecting a rating of 8-10) during the transition, while 41% of respondents (n=98) reported that their predecessor was very unhelpful (reflecting a rating of 0-3). Notably, one in five respondents (n=48) rated the helpfulness of their predecessor as "0," which suggests an extreme absence of cooperation on the part of the predecessor.

Table 1 summarizes the overall ratings of predecessors' helpfulness.

Table 1

Overall Ratings of the Helpfulness of Predecessors

Rating	n	Percent
0-2	98	40.83%
3-7	62	25.83%
8-10	80	33.33%

There were marked differences in the perceived helpfulness of predecessors on the reason the predecessor left the position. Table 2 includes information about differences

between respondents' ratings of the helpfulness of their predecessor based on the reason for the predecessor's departure.

Table 2

Ratings of Predecessors' Helpfulness, Based on Predecessors' Reason for Leaving The Position

Reason	n	M	SD
Retirement from the superintendency	132	6.23	3.54
Accepted another superintendency	7	4.16	3.19
Nonrenewal or termination of contract	54	1.57	2.13
Other	17	3.88	3.98

A one-way ANOVA was conducted to determine if there was a significant difference in a predecessor's perceived helpfulness based on a superintendent's reason for leaving. There was a significant difference in the perceived level of helpfulness from one's predecessor, $F(2, 220) = 41.421, p = .000$, based on the predecessor's reason for leaving the position. Predecessors who retired from the position were perceived as most helpful ($M=6.23$). Although not rated as favorably, superintendents who accepted another superintendency were rated higher ($M=4.16$) than superintendents whose contracts were nonrenewed or terminated ($M=1.57$).

Research Question 2

Do superintendents' views of the assistance provided by their predecessor vary by gender, location or size of district, and the previous position held by the successor?

The responses to Question 16 were analyzed to determine if there were differences in responses based on the variables in Research Question 2. Table 3 includes information about the gender of participants and their ratings of the helpfulness of their predecessor. Although males rated the predecessor's helpfulness slightly higher, an independent samples t-test revealed that this difference was not statistically significant.

Table 3

Ratings of Predecessor's Help Based on Successor's Gender

Gender	n	M	SD
Female	52	4.54	3.578
Male	186	4.75	3.798

Table 4 includes information about the size of districts and superintendents' ratings of the helpfulness of their predecessor. Although the largest districts rated the predecessor's

helpfulness slightly higher, a one-way ANOVA established that there was not a significant difference in the perceived helpfulness of a predecessor based on the size of the district.

Table 4

Ratings of Predecessor's Help Based on District Size

Size of district	n	M	SD
Under 1,000	93	4.35	3.732
1,000 - 4,999	83	4.63	3.695
5,000 - 9,999	32	5.59	3.706
10,000 - 19,999	20	4.25	3.932
20,000 or more	11	6.73	3.580

Table 5 includes information about the location of districts and superintendents' ratings of the helpfulness of their predecessor.

A one-way ANOVA established that there was not a significant difference in the perceived helpfulness of a predecessor based on the location of the district.

Table 5

Ratings of Predecessor's Help Based on District Location

Location of district	n	M	SD
Rural	171	4.61	3.672
Suburban	54	5.07	3.855
Urban	14	4.64	4.343

Table 6 includes information about the superintendents' prior positions and their ratings of the helpfulness of their predecessor.

A one-way ANOVA established that there was not a significant difference in the perceived helpfulness of a predecessor based on their previous position.

Table 6

Ratings of Predecessor's Help Based on Successor's Prior Position

Prior position	n	M	SD
as a district administrator in another district	41	4.41	3.605
as a district administrator in my current district	36	6.11	3.616
as a principal in another district	49	4.06	3.738
as a principal in my current district	28	5.71	3.895
as a superintendent in another district	68	4.47	3.605
other position	17	3.71	4.043

However, when responses were grouped as internal or external successors, differences emerge. Table 7 compares the ratings of predecessors based on whether the successor was hired from within the district or outside the district.

Table 7

Ratings of Predecessor's Help Based on Whether Successor Was an Internal or External Candidate

Size of district	n	M	SD
Internal	64	5.94	3.716
External	158	4.33	3.628

A one-way ANOVA was conducted to determine if there was a significant difference in a predecessor's perceived helpfulness based on whether the successor was hired from within the district or outside the district. There was a significant difference in the perceived level of helpfulness from one's predecessor, $F(1, 220) = 8.827, p = .003$, depending on whether the new superintendent was a newcomer. Successors who were promoted internally viewed their predecessor as more helpful than not ($M=5.94$). Superintendents who were newcomers to the district rated their predecessors as less helpful ($M=4.33$).

Research Question 3

In what areas do departing superintendents tend to advise and assist their successor?

Participants were asked to respond to question 17, "In what areas did your predecessor provide insights and/or advice." Respondents were able to select one or more of seven items, along with indicating "other." Table 8 includes information about participants' responses.

Table 8

Areas in Which the Predecessor Provided Insights and/or Advice

Size of district	Percentage	Count
Personnel	54.58%	131
Board relationships	51.67%	124
Potential or ongoing legal action	33.33%	80
District goals and strategic objectives	24.58%	59
Initiatives related to curriculum, instruction, and assessment	23.33%	56
Other	22.92%	55
Upcoming elections	16.67%	40
School improvement plans	12.50%	30

As indicated, over half of the participants responded that the predecessor provided information about issues related to personnel and board relationships. Less than one in four were reported to provide information about matters related to curriculum, instruction, and assessment or school improvement plans.

Research Question 4

How does the support from predecessor superintendents compare with the support of others?

In question 19, participants were asked to “Please indicate the usefulness of the support that you received from the following positions when you transitioned to your current position.” Eight positions were provided, and, for each group, superintendents were asked to indicate whether the support received was “Extremely useful,” “Moderately useful,” or “Not at all useful.” Responses to this question are summarized in Table 9.

Table 9

Usefulness of the Support Received from Identified Positions

Position	Extremely useful		Moderately useful		Not at all useful	
	Percent	Count	Percent	Count	Percent	Count
Administrative Assistant(s)	61.26%	136	31.98%	71	6.76%	15
Fellow Superintendents	56.65%	132	38.20%	89	5.15%	12
District Administrator(s)	46.80%	95	45.81%	93	7.39%	15
Board Members	35.32%	83	56.60%	133	8.09%	19
Previous Superintendent	29.91%	64	35.98%	77	34.11%	73
Teachers	23.48%	54	59.57%	137	16.96%	39
Students	11.11%	21	58.20%	110	30.69%	58
Business Leaders	10.66%	21	52.28%	103	37.06%	73

Table 10 summarizes this same information as shown in Table 9 by combining the number of “Extremely useful” and “Moderately useful” responses. As indicated, the usefulness of the support provided by one’s predecessor ranks near the bottom of this list, with respondents indicating that more useful support was received from fellow superintendents, administrative assistants, district administrators, board members, teachers, and students.

Table 10

Usefulness of the Support Received from Identified Positions, Combining “Extremely useful” and “Moderately useful” Responses

Position	Percent
Fellow Superintendents	94.85%
Administrative Assistant(s)	93.24%
District Administrator(s)	92.61%
Board Members	91.91%
Teachers	83.04%
Students	69.31%
Previous Superintendent	65.89%
Business Leaders	62.94%

Research Question 5:

In relation to other priorities, how high of a priority are board relationships during the transition to a new position?

Question 23 asked participating superintendents to indicate, “In relation to other priorities, how high of a priority were board relationships when you first transitioned to your current position?” As indicated in Table 11, 59% of responding superintendents indicated that these relationships were a much higher priority than other relationships.

Table 11

Relative Priority of Board Relationships to Other Priorities During Transition

Relative priority	Percentage	Count
Much higher than other priorities	59.00%	141
About the same as other priorities	35.98%	86
Much lower than other priorities	5.02%	12

Discussion

The data and findings from this study point to the following conclusions regarding superintendent transitions:

1. Overall, superintendents are not viewed by their successors as a significant source of support and assistance. A large majority of successor superintendents have an unfavorable view of the helpfulness of their predecessor. Just 33% of superintendents gave their predecessor a rating of 8, 9, or 10 in assisting them with the transition to their current role. Participants in the study reported that 22.5% of the predecessor superintendents were nonrenewed or terminated, and these superintendents were rated as very unhelpful ($M=1.57$).
2. It is entirely possible that, having fallen out of favor with the governing board, these superintendents may have been instructed not to communicate with their successor. Predecessors who left the position to move to another superintendency were also not viewed as particularly helpful ($M=4.16$). The only group of superintendents with a moderately favorable rating were those who retired from the superintendency ($M=6.23$).
3. There appears to be little difference in the perceived helpfulness of the predecessor superintendent based on the successor's gender, or on the size or location of the district.
4. Superintendents leaving a position appear more likely to feel an obligation to assist with their successor's transition when that successor is an internal candidate. It stands to reason that

predecessors would be more invested in individuals that they have helped to groom or mentor. Internally-promoted successor superintendents viewed the helpfulness of their successor significantly more favorably ($M=5.94$) than successor superintendents employed from outside the district ($M=4.33$).

5. Predecessors appear to see issues related to personnel and board relationships as of significant importance during a transition, as a majority of successor superintendents identified these as areas in which the predecessor provided insights or advice. Also, for the majority of successors, board relationships were a much higher priority than competing priorities.
6. Fellow superintendents, administrative assistants, and district administrators were viewed as a much greater source of support than predecessor superintendents.

Implications for Practice

A number of implications are suggested by this study.

First, professional associations may be able to play a critical role in providing training sessions or seminars for superintendents who are retiring or moving to another superintendency. These could provide a forum for discussing strategies to assist successors and bring attention to the importance of superintendent transitions. Given the high percentage of superintendents expected to retire in the next five years (the expectation of 48% of the participants in this study), it appears likely that such discussions would be well-received by the field.

Second, the establishment of informal mentoring relationships for superintendents new to a district, an area, or a state may help to build on a relationship which is already perceived to be beneficial. In this study, successor superintendents rated the support of their fellow superintendents quite high. Professional associations may be in a position to capitalize on the credibility in these relationships to provide support and mentoring.

Third, even though this study does not offer significant evidence that outgoing superintendents are seen as especially helpful to their successors, they nonetheless do have an important role to play. Rather than attempting to single-handedly assist their successor, outgoing superintendents could endeavor to build a network of support intended to engage a representative group of district administrators, administrative assistants, board members, principals, and teachers in a transition team.

Such a team could develop brief descriptions of schools, departments, and programs throughout the district, create a calendar of significant annual events, and summarize major challenges the district is expected to face. By creating a collective picture of the district that reflects diverse perspectives, this may help to reduce the one-upmanship that can be expected during superintendent transitions.

Recommendations for Future Research

There are some limitations to this study that suggest future research. This study sought information from those on the receiving end of assistance. As a result, it may have failed to capture forms of assistance that did not involve direct communication between the predecessor and successor. For instance, in some cases, predecessors may have requested specific

forms of assistance from neighboring superintendents, district staff, or community leaders that contributed to a more successful transition, but that was unknown to the successor. Consequently, future studies that capture the views of both predecessors and successors could shed light on practices that are meaningful and productive.

Another limitation of this study was that the gender of successor superintendents was identified, but not the gender of predecessors. It may be helpful in future work to examine whether there are significant differences in the four different gender-related transitions that are possible (female-female, female-male, male-male, and male-female).

A sizable percentage of the participants in this study (N=103, 42.92%) had been in their positions for over five years. Since memory can fade over time, it may be helpful to focus attention on the transition experience in the first year or two so that those experiences are captured while they are still fresh in the minds of predecessors and successors.

Research that closely examines transitions involving both internal and external successors could help to identify effective practices under each scenario. Such research could also help to increase our understanding of practices related to the promotion of individuals from underrepresented groups to the superintendency.

One of the suggestions made above was for training sessions or seminars for superintendents who are retiring or moving to another superintendency. Research that examines the impact of such trainings or seminars on the transition experience could help to assess any benefits of such efforts and to determine how they can be improved.

Concluding Remarks

Scholars including Alsbury (2003) have pointed out that superintendent transitions can produce a lack of continuity in district goals and poor outcomes for the entire organization. Although leaving a position is a career move that all superintendents will experience at some

time, this transition has received too little attention by both practitioners and scholars. Considering the changes now underway in the makeup of district leadership, this is an area of practice that would benefit from greater attention by both scholars and practitioners.

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