

## **Voices of Influence: How Verbal Persuasion Shapes Latinx Superintendent's Careers**

Ligia Alberto, EdD  
Assistant Professor  
School of Education  
University of North Carolina, Wilmington  
Wilmington, North Carolina

Amber Lassiter, EdD  
Assistant Professor  
School of Education  
Felician University  
Rutherford, NJ

### **Abstract**

This study explores the impact of self-efficacy, with a specific focus on verbal persuasion, on the career trajectories of Latinx school administrators. Grounded in Bandura's (1986) theory of self-efficacy, the research investigates how verbal persuasion has influenced the paths of Latinx school administrators toward achieving top leadership roles. By contributing to the literature on educational leadership, this study offers practical insights for promoting diverse leadership within school settings.

### **Key Words**

Latinx school administrators, self-efficacy theory, verbal persuasion, career advancement

## Introduction

In the United States, Latino school superintendents are rare, constituting only a small fraction of the overall school leadership population. Conversely, the Latinx student population within K–12 education is steadily increasing nationwide. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) data, Latinx student enrollment rose from 23 percent in fall 2010 to 28 percent in fall 2021 (NCES, 2023). Latinx now represent the largest minority group in the country, with projections indicating that their numbers will continue to grow in the years ahead (Vespa et al., 2020).

The State of School Diversity in the United States report released by the U.S. Department of Education (2023) highlighted the importance of increasing the number of Latinx school teachers and school administrators of color: “Finding effective ways to recruit, prepare, and retain diverse educators is therefore key to supporting better outcomes for students of color” (p. 9).

Despite their underrepresentation, some Latinx school leaders have ascended to central office administration roles, including superintendent or assistant superintendent. This research investigates the influence of self-efficacy on the motivation and career success of Latinx leaders.

## Purpose

This study examined the role of self-efficacy in the motivation to aspire to and ultimately attain leadership positions, such as the superintendency and the assistant superintendency, among Latinx school administrators in NY/NJ.

## Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

- 1) How does self-efficacy affect the performance and motivation of school leaders?
- 2) What is the role of verbal persuasion in seeking and attaining leadership positions?

## Conceptual Framework

Albert Bandura (1986), within the framework of social-cognitive theory, conceptualized self-efficacy as the way people believe in their ability to achieve or perform a task. In his work, he identified four ways people achieve self-efficacy: enacted attainment, vicarious experience, physiological state, and verbal persuasion.

Enacted attainment refers to how positive or negative experiences influence people’s ability to perform tasks. Vicarious experience is related to how observing similar people perform successfully can increase self-perceptions of efficacy based on the assumption that if one can achieve, others can as well. Physiological state refers to how people rely on their emotions to judge their capabilities. Additionally, verbal persuasion refers to the encouragement of others to make people believe they can perform a task.

Verbal persuasion is enhanced when the person with performance experience is encouraging, positively affecting the person receiving the encouragement. According to Bandura (1986), “People who are encouraged that they possess the capabilities to master given tasks are likely to mobilize greater sustained effort than if they harbor self-doubts” (p. 400). Situmorang (2022) studied 42 nursing students by giving them pre- and post-tests to measure whether verbal persuasion increased their self-confidence and improved their academic English test scores. In addition, the students also completed a written reflection to

measure how their teachers' verbal persuasion influenced their motivation to achieve.

The study showed that the students had higher scores when the teacher used verbal persuasion in each class to encourage them. Lamarche et al. (2013) measured the ability of 68 healthy young adults to complete a tandem eight-minute walk. Their findings demonstrated that verbal persuasion can influence task choice. In their study, the participants had to complete a pre-feedback tandem walk. After this walk, the participants were divided into poor and good feedback groups.

All participants in the good and poor feedback groups reported that they believed the feedback provided to them. Specifically, poor feedback was associated with choosing the least challenging task, while the participants in the good feedback group were more likely to choose the most challenging task.

Zhang et al. (2022) investigated the influence of feedback language, including emotional support and constructive feedback on peers, by analyzing data from an online household sector innovation community that provides free access for registered members to release their ideas and designs.

The data were collected over 18 months, from May 2020 to October 2021. The researchers found that emotional approval positively influenced peer idea contributions, especially if the encouragement came from someone of higher status.

The researchers analyzed over 30,526 ideas and 90,813 comments. Their findings revealed that interactions with emotional approval and status positively affected the individuals' idea contributions. Their findings confirmed the crucial role of verbal persuasion in stimulating the participants' innovation and contribution to the website.

## Methodology

This study was designed to explore the participants' lived experiences. For that reason, a qualitative methodology was considered the most appropriate (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Creswell, 1998, 2009). A narrative research design was used. Narrative inquiry collects people's stories, narratives, or descriptions to understand their lived experiences (Clandinin, 2007).

Narrative research is focused on interpreting the participant's perspective through the lens of a framework (Wertz et al., 2011). Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured, open-ended, face-to-face interviews. Responses to the interview questions were recorded using an audio tape device after obtaining permission from the participants. Before the interviews, biographical questionnaires were used to gather general descriptive information about the participants.

## Participants

To complete this study, a solicitation letter was sent to the respective chapters of the New Jersey and New York Association of Latino School Administrators. A solicitation flyer was posted on social media, and individual participants were also invited to participate. Participants had to meet specific criterion sample (Miles et al., 2020) to participate in the study:

1. Be of Hispanic/Latinx descent.
2. Have a NY/NJ school administrator certificate in NY/NJ.
3. Have attained an assistant superintendent/superintendent position in a public school in NJ/NY.

Sixteen participants met the qualifications and agreed to take part in the study (eight females and eight males). The data

showed that five participants were assistant superintendents, 11 were superintendents, three were between the ages of 30 and 40, seven were between 40 and 50, and six were between 50 and 60 years of age. Ten participants worked in urban districts, and six worked in

suburban districts. However, all participants had worked in urban districts at some point in their careers, working with predominantly minority students. Seven participants earned a doctorate, while nine had a master's degree.

Table 1

Characteristics of the Participants

#	State	Gender	School	Age	Position	Degree
P1	NY	Female	Urban	50–60	Assistant S.	Masters
P2	NJ	Female	Urban	50–60	Assistant S.	Doctorate
P3	NJ	Female	Urban	40–50	Assistant S.	Doctorate
P4	NY	Female	Urban	40–50	Assistant S.	Doctorate
P5	NJ	Male	Suburban	40–50	Superintendent	Doctorate
P6	NJ	Male	Urban	40–50	Superintendent	Doctorate
P7	NJ	Female	Suburban	50–60	Superintendent	Masters
P8	NJ	Female	Urban	50–60	Superintendent	Masters
P9	NJ	Male	Urban	40–50	Assistant S.	Masters
P10	NY	Male	Urban	30–40	Superintendent	Doctorate
P11	NY	Female	Suburban	50–60	Superintendent	Masters
P12	NJ	Male	Urban	40–50	Superintendent	Masters
P13	NJ	Male	Suburban	30–40	Superintendent	Doctorate
P14	NJ	Female	Urban	50–60	Superintendent	Doctorate
P15	NY	Male	Suburban	40–50	Superintendent	Masters
P16	NJ	Male	Suburban	40–50	Superintendent	Masters

## Data analysis

The collected textual data were analyzed using a process that allowed the systematic analysis of sixteen transcripts. The **initial** step of the data analysis process involved performing transcript verification and formatting the interviews. **Second**, we read all the transcripts to comprehensively understand the participants' responses.

Re-reading the transcripts helped us identify the general concepts discussed by the participants, which were recorded in a reflective journal. **Third**, we imported the transcripts into Dovetails and performed initial coding, which involved bracketing text chunks and formulating representative terms (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). A second cycle of codes using descriptive codes was then generated (Miles et al., 2020). The salient identified codes were self-efficacy and verbal persuasion.

## Findings

The participants' experiences provided insight into how they became interested in the field of education, how they were praised for their work, how they were encouraged to pursue leadership programs, and how they knew when it was time to leave when they perceived they were not being supported or were passed over for promotions. Moreover, the findings show how self-efficacy, specifically verbal persuasion, led to career advancement opportunities that allowed them to reach the top leadership positions in school administration.

## Entering the teaching profession

Fifteen of the 16 participants entered the leadership ranks after becoming teachers. The participants entered the teaching profession in multiple ways. Three participants knew they wanted to be teachers in high school and indicated having positive memories of teachers or counselors. For example, P8 said, "My teachers were encouraging. I always had a good relationship with my teachers." Similarly, P2 indicated, "I got very positive experiences ... I grew up in the schools where I now work, and the community was amazing ... my mom was friendly with the teachers because she was part of the community at the school."

However, some participants reported that they had negative experiences in high school. For example, P10 recalled, "All I heard out of this counselor's mouth was no, that I was not good enough for anything I wanted."

Additionally, inductive coding was used to formulate three themes associated with verbal persuasion: words of encouragement, praise and recognition of work, and intrinsic self-motivation.

**Fourth**, we created themes in Dovetails' node folder by (a) clicking on create, (b) selecting the node feature, and (c) typing the first theme in the pop-up window. Processes b and c were repeated when creating all themes. We coded the relevant participants' responses to the specific themes by (a) opening the first transcript, (b) selecting the relevant chunk of the participants' responses, and (c) coding the content to the selected node.

**Finally**, we repeated the process for all the transcripts and nodes, facilitating a systemic thematic analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Wertz et al., 2011).

P7 shared a similar experience: My experience was negative ... My guidance counselor said to me ‘Perhaps you should not consider college and you should consider more of a technical school or a clerical school and going to, you know, maybe secretarial school’ (counselor) which is nothing wrong...we need great secretaries and things like that. But it wasn’t something that I wanted to do. I wanted to pursue college. So, I didn’t apply to those schools that she said. And one of my aunts actually helped me a little bit in terms of trying to navigate the college application.

Other participants did not consider education, as they wanted to pursue other careers. However, they realized they wanted to help children and eventually changed their careers to education.

P13 changed his mind after his first year in college: It was after my first year in college. I was a criminal justice major. I started to reflect on some of the experiences I had in high school, where I saw a lot of students that look like me that were ending up either in jail or they were ending up getting shot and killed. And so, I really wanted to do something outside of criminal justice because I didn’t want to be sort of like, like dealing with the byproduct of, of what happens in a society when students don’t have access to opportunities and resources ... I worked as a camp counselor and then that’s what started to change my, my view on what I wanted to do as a career.

### **Praising hard work**

One of the salient themes was that participants recalled receiving verbal persuasion in their careers related to their work ethic. They had a strong desire to learn and frequently went above and beyond their responsibilities. P1 stated, “My very first year, my principal came to the classroom and said, ‘you are putting the work in, and I like what I see. I want to make your room a lab site.’” Her principal took an interest in becoming her mentor, and ultimately, she was promoted to become a vice-principal in that school.

P11 recalled being praised by her principal about her ability to work with children: Her principal said, “You know, I think you have really good skills. I think that you work really well with students.’ Similarly, P8 said she was praised for her skills by her supervisor and told about her potential. She remembered her supervisor telling her “No, no, you need to get out of the classroom. You’re a shining star, you need to shine.” Not only supervisors but also peers noticed the participants’ talents. This recognition motivated them to take on more leadership duties in their schools. For example, P4 shared that she started taking on more leadership duties to help her school operate more efficiently. She stated, “My colleagues would frequently nominate me to serve in various leadership roles in our building. I accepted the leadership roles because I just wanted to help the school function better.”

P14 shared that while working as a reading coach, she was praised by her peers and school administrators for her ability to take the initiative and think outside of the box by strategically and creatively implementing a school-wide literacy initiative. She further explained, “I developed a reputation for finding a better way to help children learn and help support teachers embrace change” (P14)

### Encouragement to seek advanced degrees

To become a public-school administrator in New York or New Jersey, educators must obtain a master's degree or complete a school leadership certification program to become certified. Most of the participants completed their master's degree while working as teachers. Seven participants were verbally persuaded to obtain their school leadership certification by someone in their schools, frequently their supervisor.

Although the participants were already taking on leadership duties in their schools, they only perceived themselves as a leader once it was mentioned to them, as noted by P9: My colleagues would say that I should become an administrator. At first, I thought they said it because I dressed professionally, always wearing a shirt, tie, and jacket. I thought maybe they think this because of the optics... My supervisor said 'you really need to consider this'... He said, 'you should also get your principal certificate' is what he said to me. I said, I don't want to be a principal. He said, 'listen I think you could do it.' So that's when I really started to think about it.

Similarly, P10 only perceived himself as a school leader once he was encouraged by his vice principal to obtain his school leadership certification: "My vice principal said, 'I think you have a future in administration.' That was the first time I ever thought about it."

Not all participants experienced verbal persuasion within their school organizations. Some exhibited an intrinsic high level of self-efficacy due to other experiences and encouragement outside of their schools. For example, P2 developed her self-efficacy through enacted attainment experiences. She was passionate about learning and began to increase her professional social networking group, which allowed her to facilitate professional development training.

As a result, she was motivated and inspired to obtain her credentials to become a school leader. P5 knew early on in his career that he wanted to be an administrator as a result of his personal motivation to provide for his family: I knew I always wanted to be a father and a husband, and I knew I wanted to be a provider. So, I knew I was going to take a path that was going to eventually get me to a point where I could earn the highest wage possible so that I could provide for my family and my future to the best degree possible. So, in the back of my mind, I always knew an administrative degree in education would have been my greater chance of earning the highest wage. So, when I became an educator, it was always with the expectation that at some point I would ascend through administration.

### Knowing when to leave

In this study, the participants had the ability to self-identify when they should move to another district. Some participants had developed a high level of self-efficacy through their prior enacted attainment experiences and verbal persuasion from others. These experiences validated their abilities to leave the district and accept other opportunities.

For example, P7 resigned from her administrative position after advocating for higher pay while working as a director with many responsibilities explained that she started looking for another job and became an assistant superintendent and subsequently the superintendent in that district: The reason I left was because I did not feel that I was compensated fairly for my position ... So, I began to advocate to be compensated fairly. I started to look, for jobs ... actually, my current superintendent had reached out to me and said, 'I heard that you are great at what you do. Would you be interested in

meeting and learning about the position here and potentially applying?’ And that’s kind of how it happened.

Eight participants were passed over for leadership positions when there were positions available in their districts. However, they did not let that stop their determination to succeed as school leaders. When this happened to them, they had a strong sense of self-efficacy and were confident in their leadership abilities.

For example, P12 was passed over for a promotion in his district after he had tried to help the district. He immediately sought other opportunities and found a leadership position in another school. He described his experience: I felt I was the most qualified person ... I came to that interview, gave him my best, and had a vision for where we should go and how to unify everybody and the whole deal. And they just passed, and I said, OK, that means you don’t believe in me. I didn’t have anybody come back and give me any feedback ... and that’s when I started looking, and that’s when I got the job with the other district because there was a lack of care.

P9 was disappointed not to get the principal position he wanted, as he had been encouraged to apply for the position by his soon-to- retire principal, who had been his mentor and who had groomed him to take the position: “My heart sank when I was told ... unfortunately, they went with another candidate ... then I took a deep breath, I knew I had just to look out, you know, move on. So, it was tough.”

### **Mastered self-efficacy**

When the male participants already held central office positions, they had mastered self-efficacy and were confident in their ability to lead schools. However, the data revealed that females still needed the validation of others. Seven of the eight male participants obtained their position as assistant superintendent or superintendent by leaving their previous districts. Additionally, they no longer needed verbal persuasion while seeking positions.

For example, P6 realized he could serve as a superintendent through the enacted attainment leadership duties he completed while working in a central office administrator position. He said, “It was the next logical advancement once I became assistant superintendent; I knew I wanted to be a superintendent” (P6).

P5 exhibited high self-efficacy when he decided to apply for two superintendent positions after being appointed interim assistant superintendent. He recalled, “I was doing the job anyway. I had spent enough time working in complex environments that I could do this wherever I go. So, I never doubted my ability to do the work” (P5).

P16 demonstrated high self-efficacy when he decided to apply to be superintendent after working in the central office as a business administrator. He shared the following experiences: You really just need to put yourself in other people’s shoes and determine how things are done. So, I did just that and I thought, ok, if I was the superintendent, I didn’t really know a lot about what the superintendent has to do other than just running the school, low and behold, there’s a lot more than just running the school. So, I thought if I could do that, then maybe I could do something really worthwhile. And do something to where we can improve the outcome for a lot of these students. (P16)



On the contrary, most of the females in this study received their big break from within their districts, as five were promoted to assistant superintendent or superintendent positions within their districts. Supervisors or board members recognized their talents and skillsets and encouraged them to apply for positions. For example, P3 shared, “I think matching the right leader to the need is why I was encouraged to apply.”

Similarly, P1 was encouraged to apply for an assistant superintendent position, but she declined the position twice before ultimately accepting to move to central office: At the time he asked me if I would be interested in moving forward into district office work ... I said no, twice. I turned it down twice. I did not want to leave my principalship when we had that conversation. Then my superintendent said you can take the body of work you have done in your school and begin to translate it throughout the district.

Another example of the need for validation and verbal persuasion was presented by P14. She was already working as an assistant superintendent and had a strong desire to become a superintendent. However, she indicated she needed the approval of her longtime mentor, who had already retired at the time she was offered the position of superintendent: The first thing I did, I called my mentor and said, do you think I should apply for it?” I won’t do it unless I have your blessing... she said, ‘Your madrina (god-mother) is giving you her blessing ... I think you are gonna be good there. I think that you can do it. I think that you can get that job. I think you have good experience. I’m giving you permission. Go.’ Cause I wouldn’t leave unless she told me that I was good. (P14)

## Discussion

The study’s findings demonstrated how verbal persuasion increased the participants’ self-efficacy levels. Verbal persuasion included positive feedback and encouragement from others, such as praising their work ethic, encouraging them to obtain their school leadership credentials, and encouraging them to apply for and accept leadership positions.

As a result of verbal persuasion, the participants were able to believe in themselves and their abilities to teach and consequently become school leaders. Self-efficacy was a critical factor in motivating the participants to pursue career paths toward becoming assistant superintendents/ superintendents. Some participants had a stronger sense of self-efficacy due to their enacted attainment of leadership opportunities, which produces the highest level of self-efficacy. In other words, these participants felt confident in their

capabilities to be effective leaders and did not need validation.

However, others needed validation to believe they could be effective school leaders. The male participants in this study exhibited stronger self-efficacy compared to the female participants. When the male participants decided to become assistant superintendents or superintendents, they had no doubt they could do those jobs. However, their female counterparts needed verbal reassurance in their leadership abilities and encouragement to believe they were going to be successful in those roles.

## Implications for Practice/Future Research

To increase the pool of Latinx school leaders, districts must purposefully prioritize the recruitment and retention of Latinx teachers. Additionally, administrators should be trained

to be aware of their influence and how they can profoundly impact the career trajectories of future Latinx school leaders. To foster this objective, school districts and higher education institutions should establish collaborative partnerships aimed at offering professional development opportunities focused on self-efficacy. These initiatives should target prospective high school students, aspiring educators, certified teachers, and individuals aspiring to become school leaders.

The findings of this study underscore the positive relation between self-efficacy and

career advancement opportunities among Latinx participants. However, further research is essential to determine whether these outcomes are specific to race or if self-efficacy is the primary determinant of career advancement, regardless of gender and ethnicity.

Further research should explore the potential significance of alternative forms of self-efficacy, such as enacted attainment, vicarious experience, or physiological state, in terms of enhancing leadership prospects for Latinx individuals.

### **Author Biographies**

Ligia Alberto is an assistant professor at the University of North Carolina, Wilmington. She has experience in K–12 education as a director, principal, counselor, and teacher. She holds certifications, including district administrator, building administrator, counselor, and teacher. E-mail: [albertol@uncw.edu](mailto:albertol@uncw.edu)

Amber Lassiter is an assistant professor in the school of education at Felician University, Rutherford, NJ. She has held administrative and teaching positions in K–12 and higher education. She is certified as a reading specialist, schoolteacher, supervisor and principal. E-mail: [lassiteram@felician.edu](mailto:lassiteram@felician.edu)

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