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Superintendents and Education Service Centers: A Partnership for Student Achievement

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Superintendents and their regional education service centers (ESCs) share a four decade partnership that today is focused tighter than ever on the demands of leading schools for student achievement. ESCs have evolved in scope of services from the media centers of the late 1960's to full service one-stop shops for programs and services supporting school improvement and operations. At the heart of all school improvement efforts is the impact that school district leadership, most notably the superintendent, has on student achievement. Current research links superintendent leadership behaviors to student achievement (Marzano & Waters, 2006).

We recently conducted a statewide study in collaboration with ESC Region 12 in Waco to examine Texas superintendent perceptions of effectiveness of their professional development at ESCs in leading for student achievement in areas identified by the Marzano and Waters (2006) study. We found a high level of agreement among Texas superintendents that their partnership is trending in the right directions related to their professional development for leading student achievement in Texas.

Challenges of the Superintendency

Contrary to ideas emerging from media exposure in larger schools, today's superintendents continue to practice mostly in small towns in rural and suburban America, with fewer than 100 of the nation's 14,000 school districts classified as urban (Glass & Franceschini, 2007). This demographic is reflected in Texas schools also and in our study which had about 80% of respondents from schools in UIL classifications 3A and smaller. Though holders of a very traditional position dating back to the one-room schoolhouse, today's superintendents must possess a rich set of leadership skills as

district chief executive officers capable of weaving educational, social and political complexities into the fabric of student achievement.

Passage of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) and the accompanying demands for school reform further forced the evolution of the superintendency into a role requiring more complex leadership skills. The implications of NCLB, accompanied by resulting funding dilemmas, along with mixed signals from school boards regarding school reform, depict the multitude of expectations facing superintendents leading their districts in search of achievement for all students.

Of 1,338 superintendents responding to a nation-wide study by Glass and Franceschini (2007) for the American Association of School Administrators (AASA), 96% felt they were performing effectively. However, most lacked the experience or desire to implement wholesale reform, as only 9.4% of superintendents responding said they were hired due to previous experience as a change agent. Glass and Franceschini (2007) noted the pace of reform and the resulting disconnect of beliefs among reformers, superintendents, school boards and their communities created a paradox of change seldom discussed in the dialogue of school improvement.

Superintendents and their school boards were described by Glass and Franceschini (2007) as “traditional harbingers of normalcy, valuing gradual rather than radical change” (p. 4). Additionally, they valued the progress made in their local schools and expressed the need for moderate change locally, while they acknowledged the need for radical change for education in general.

As an extension of similar beliefs, Glass and Franceschini (2007) reported communities preferred superintendents who were considered traditional school leaders

and would approach change gradually. Thus, school boards often hire superintendents who lead conservatively with sensitivity for the local community's limited tolerance for change. However, demands for increased student performance have placed superintendents, schools and communities in a position to need increased leadership for radical change to meet current school reform expectations.

Evolving Roles of the ESCs

As conflicting expectations and demands on superintendent leadership skills have increased, so have opportunities for ESCs to support superintendents in leading student achievement reforms (Keane, 2005). The professional literature defines ESCs as educational intermediary institutions acting under the supervision of the Texas Education Agency without regulatory authority over schools. ESCs have the best opportunity to provide support for their regional schools in part because of distance from local political pressures and in part because of the relationships arising from close geographic proximity. ESCs are generally considered in the best position to meet the demands of scale, capacity, efficiency and technical expertise to support schools in meeting demands for student achievement (Arson, Bell, & Plank, 2006).

ESCs are held accountable by the Texas Commissioner of Education through Chapter Eight of the Texas Education Code for promoting student achievement in their regional schools, along with promoting efficiency for schools and supporting statewide initiatives as defined by the commissioner. Each executive director of Texas ESCs is evaluated annually by the commissioner with a focus on student achievement. Through the statewide initiatives domain in the evaluation, ESCs have received expanding roles as part of decentralizing support for schools and downsizing the Texas Education Agency.

What We Did in Our Study

We asked superintendents practicing in the 2008-2009 school year to participate in our study and 292 responded. The responding group was 85% male, 92% white, and 70% were between ages 35 and 56. Seventy-two percent reported practicing as superintendents for 10 years or less. We invited them to give their perceptions of effectiveness of their professional development at regional ESCs.

Marzano and Waters (2006) conducted a meta-analysis of 27 studies conducted since 1970, involving 2,817 districts and 3.4 million student achievement scores, searching for common superintendent behaviors that led to student achievement. Their research identified six areas of superintendent leadership with positive correlations to student achievement. From those leadership behaviors we selected the following three behaviors to investigate:

1. establishing non-negotiable goals for student achievement
2. establishing board alignment with and support for district goals
3. monitoring goals for achievement and instruction.

We designed a survey instrument to collect superintendent perceptions of effectiveness of their ESC-based professional development for these three superintendent leadership behaviors. Respondents gauged their perceptions on a Likert scale from 1(not effective) to 4 (effective) and then responded narratively to three open-ended questions addressing their preferences for future professional development, barriers, and ways that ESCs could help them overcome barriers to their professional development.

What We Found

Findings from the study indicated an overall perception of effectiveness among superintendents regarding their ESC-based professional development for leading student achievement. The average response from all questions on the survey in the “effective” (highest) category was 32%; the average response in the “mostly effective” (next highest) category was 41%.

The greatest occurrence of “effective” and “mostly effective” scores from superintendents were for professional development in the area of guaranteeing that the curriculum meets the needs of all students, followed closely by establishing efficient delivery of the district curriculum, establishing clear priorities for instructional goals and objectives, then agreement with the board on the effectiveness of board training.

The lowest occurrence of “effective” and “mostly effective” scores were in the areas of professional development to establish five-year non-negotiable goals, followed by use of a management system for instructional change, and then using an evaluation system to monitor implementation of instructional goals. The highest levels of response for the open-ended questions were superintendent concerns for professional development in school finance, the barrier of time to receive professional development, and the recommendation that ESCs offer more distance learning opportunities for superintendents to overcome time and monetary barriers.

Statistically significant differences in superintendent responses were found in three of nine demographic areas – UIL classification, school enrollment, and money spent on superintendent professional development.

By UIL Classification

Table 1 illustrates results when compared by UIL classification. Statistical significance was found in the areas of non-negotiable goals for achievement and instruction, board alignment with and support of district goals, and monitoring goals for achievement and instruction. Higher mean scores of smaller school superintendents indicated a higher level of agreement of effectiveness among smaller school superintendents when compared to responses of larger school superintendents. Consistently throughout the study, mean scores among superintendents of smaller schools were found higher when compared to mean scores of superintendents of larger schools.

Table 1
Comparisons By UIL Classification

Non-negotiable Goals			
<i>UIL Classification</i>	<i>Mean Score</i>	<i>UIL Classification</i>	<i>Mean Score</i>
2A	12.66	3A	11.25
Board Alignment and Support			
1A	16.17	3A	13.97
1A	16.17	5A	13.16
2A	16.12	3A	13.99
2A	16.12	5A	13.16
Monitoring Goals			
1A	15.68	3A	13.74
1A	15.38	5A	13.14
2A	15.57	3A	13.74
2A	15.57	5A	13.14

By School Enrollment

Table 2 illustrates results when considering school enrollment. Response differences were found statistically significant among superintendents of school enrollments 1-499 when compared to those of superintendents of school enrollments 2,000-3,999 in the area of board alignment with and support of district goals. Significance was also found when comparing responses from superintendents of school enrollments 500-999 to those of superintendents from school enrollments of 2,000-3,999. In both instances, consistent with the analysis by UIL classification, higher mean scores of smaller school superintendents indicated a higher level of agreement of effectiveness among smaller school superintendents when compared to mean responses of larger school superintendents. These results are illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2
Comparisons By School Enrollment

Board Alignment and Support			
<i>Enrollment</i>	<i>Mean Score</i>	<i>Enrollment</i>	<i>Mean Score</i>
1 - 499	16.07	2,000 - 3,999	13.90
500 - 999	16.24	2,000 - 3,999	13.90

By Money Spent

Significant differences appeared when we compared responses by amounts of money districts spend on superintendent professional development. In the area of board alignment with and support for district goals, higher mean responses of superintendents from schools spending less than \$10,000 per year, which were typically the smaller

school superintendents, indicated a higher level of agreement of effectiveness among those superintendents versus superintendents from schools spending \$10,000 or more.

These results are illustrated in Table 3.

Table 3
Comparisons By Money Spent

Board Alignment and Support			
<i>Amount Spent per Year</i>	<i>Mean Score</i>	<i>Amount Spent per Year</i>	<i>Mean Score</i>
\$0 - \$999	12.84	\$10,000	12.28
\$1,000 - \$1,999	12.78	\$10,000	12.28
\$2,000 - \$4,999	12.46	\$10,000	12.28
\$5,000 - \$9,999	13.59	\$10,000	12.28

Superintendent responses from the remaining demographic areas studied show no significant differences: gender, ethnicity, age, number of days out-of-district for professional development, years as a superintendent, and number of years in their current superintendency.

What We Learned from Our Study

Responses related to non-negotiable goals for student achievement, maintaining board support for goals, and monitoring and evaluating the district instructional program, all resulted in two common conclusions:(a) superintendents from smaller schools have a higher level of agreement of effectiveness; and (b) superintendents from schools spending less than \$10,000 per year on superintendent professional development have a higher level of agreement than those spending \$10,000 or more.

The highest scores of effectiveness from superintendents appeared in areas with a longer history of emphasis by ESCs and superintendent expectations for ESC-based professional development. Professional development areas such as board training, curriculum development, and training for instruction to meet the needs of varied student populations, for example, are long-standing staples of the ESC training repertoire.

The areas of least incidence of “effective” and “mostly effective” responses are areas becoming more important to superintendent leadership as accountability standards increase. Professional development for sustaining five-year goals for student achievement and using systems to implement and monitor instructional change, for example, are not new to ESC training. Consequently, lower effectiveness scores in these areas indicate an emerging importance for superintendents in these areas of practice.

Superintendents from smaller schools reported ESC-based professional development as more effective than their larger-school colleagues. Additionally, superintendents from schools investing more money in superintendent professional development perceived ESC-based professional development as less effective than those from schools spending less money. The findings of differences in professional experiences related to school size and money spent might impact superintendent perceptions of effective professional development.

Responsive Professional Development

Superintendent perceptions from this study provide guidance for Texas ESCs in their continued effort to create and refine relevant professional development opportunities for superintendents in leading for student achievement. Areas of leadership training for student achievement related to more recent accountability standards scored lower for

superintendent perceptions of effectiveness. Themes emerging from this study suggest areas of importance and interest for superintendents, serving as guides for ESCs in developing present and future professional development opportunities.

Schools in classifications 1A-3A represent the core clientele of ESCs based on their rate of response and their higher level of agreement of effectiveness. For ESCs to remain the key providers of superintendent professional development, they will be required to create innovative and relevant solutions responsive to the perceived barriers and recommendations of superintendents. For example, superintendents suggested distance learning as a possible solution to perceived barriers. ESCs possess the technology and capacity to expand distance learning, on-line courses, and virtual training activities for superintendents.

Relationships with school leaders and their communities will remain vital through ESCs' responses to superintendents' stated needs. ESCs depend on superintendents as their core customers purchasing professional development services for themselves and their schools. On-site training will no doubt remain popular and must be improved and expanded in the student-achievement areas indicated by superintendents in this study.

The Partnership's Future

Our study affirmed and expanded what we know about Texas school superintendents and the ESCs that provide much of their training. School superintendents are the pinnacle of educational leadership and often the end-recipients of accountability. As chief executive officers of their school districts they bring a high level of skill to managing a multitude of competing social systems as suggested by Fullan (2005) within their schools, communities, and governmental entities -- systems populated

by people concerned for their children and the efficient and effective operation of their schools. Competing interests are often in disagreement, though always with the same goal in mind of educating children. The superintendent seeks to create coherence from the chaos of competing ideas.

ESCs are often staffed by former superintendents and fellow educators who have followed similar career paths while holding firmly to the ideas of improving the world through education. ESCs are in the best position to assist superintendents because of those common experiences often gained within the locale of the ESC region. Shared commitment and trust arising from those relationships will continue to bind ESCs and superintendents on the mission to lead schools for student achievement, the only true accountability standard.

Biographical Notes

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