Excessive School District Superintendent Turnover: An Explorative Study In Texas, 1(6)

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Abstract

Studies conducted over the last 10 years indicate that the average national turnover rate for superintendents is 13.5%. In Texas the rate has increased from near 15% in 1992 to almost 19%. This study of the 183 professionals who left the superintendency in Texas after the 1994-95 school year shows that changes in employment positions often involve poor working relationships with school boards. Some superintendents exited that role. A high level of stress may perhaps be linked with this exiting phenomenon. The study points to needs for improved training in superintendent preparation programs and board training, and to a need for further study of both turnover and exiting.

It was not a typical school board meeting. After opening the meeting and welcoming the guests, the board president announced the board would go into executive session. The board members silently filed through the door of the folding wall that had already been secured, dividing the large space used both as a cafeteria and auditorium. The audience members knew there was strife between the board members and the superintendent. She had previously been charged with 22 counts of mismanagement. All but two of the counts had been dismissed, and the two remaining were described by the hearing officer as "trifling." The public had wanted to witness the
scheduled discussion of recent and current school district events; now their presence seemed moot. By design, executive sessions were confidential so that statements could be made without benefit of public scrutiny.

After the door closed behind the board members, the public witnesses relaxed and began to talk softly among themselves. Before long, however, other voices could be heard. As the witnesses became silent once more, they could distinguish the board president's voice, raised in volume and punctuated with expletives and disrespectful phrases that would cause a student in this district to be punished severely. He was obviously addressing the superintendent. The tirade continued for what seemed an eternity to those made uncomfortable in the exterior room. The superintendent's voice was never heard, nor did any other board member come to her defense. When the board meeting ended, a few of the members of the public who supported the superintendent shared with her their ability to hear nearly every word of the board president while in executive session. The superintendent realized that this was, indeed, a fateful Thursday evening. The shame and humiliation of the attack, devastating when she thought it was private, now seemed even more overwhelming and ruinous. On Friday, the superintendent appeared to conduct business as usual but on Saturday she placed a gun barrel to her head and pulled the trigger. Thus ended not only her role as superintendent but also ended her life's work which had been spent in service to children, community, and public education. This true-to-life vignette illustrates that stress, sometimes great stress, is in the role of superintendent. This paper addresses many of the issues relevant to superintendents who enter district positions full of hope, energy, and vision only to leave abruptly in subsequent years before the actual planned exit date. Sometimes they are recruited to larger districts with attractive salary and benefit packages. Other times they leave frustrated, discouraged, and disillusioned.

The American Association of School Administrators (AASA) routinely conducts surveys. The latest survey, released in 1992, included 18 beginning superintendents (Glass, 1992). Chapman (1997) referred to Glass's 1992 report and listed a number of job-related stressors that first-time superintendents reported. Among those stressors included were:

1. high visibility
2. diverse constituencies
3. employees who were incompetent or charged with sexual assault
4. pressure from right-wing political groups
5. becoming acquainted with the district and community
6. deciding who to trust
7. lack of people in whom to confide.

Such stressors or issues might seem to be overwhelming challenges even to experienced superintendents.

Chapman (1997) also contended that districts seek heroes, as do other corporations, such as those described by Deal and Kennedy (1982). Heroes are expected to be great motivators and magicians. Chapman observed the belief that superintendents can be heroes/rescuers to public education in recent titles such as Managers of Virtue (Tyack & Hansot, 1982) and Keepers of the Flame (Kowalski, 1995). Indeed, Bullard and Taylor (1993) have described remarkably
successful modern superintendent heroes. Yet, heroic efforts may produce disappointing results, and many (Bennett, 1991; Kerr, 1988; Murphy, 1991) believe that the rapid turnover of superintendents is a severe liability to effective school management and education reform.

In studies with more experienced superintendents, Holmes (1991) surveyed chief executive officers (CEO's) of Canadian school districts using semantic differential word pairs. Kowalski (1995) did a similar study with 17 superintendents in various U.S. states. Both samples described superintendents' working lives as hectic, exciting, demanding, and political. One difference between the two samples was that the American superintendents described their jobs as surprising, and the Canadians described their jobs as predictable. Kowalski noted that as early as 1976, jobs of urban superintendents were described as replete with turnover and turmoil (Scott, 1976). Scott delineated three reasons for the turnover and turmoil, and Kowalski maintained they were still valid in the nineties. The reasons were that urban districts:

1. reflected the negative impact of a society in flux
2. desperately lacked the resources required to satisfy their responsibilities
3. had such diverse groups and individuals that the superintendents had to become superb politicians in order to endure.

Kowalski also surveyed the relative importance of factors affecting a superintendent's decision making. Table 1 displays the ranked order of the factors. Obviously, monetary resources outrank all other factors. After money, decisions are made according to personal beliefs. The last factor affecting decision making is concern for personal survival.

### Table 1

**Kowalski's (1995) Ranked Ordered Factors Affecting Superintendent Decision Making**

1. Fiscal resources
2. Personal beliefs
3. Educational research
4. Input from administrative staff
5. Community socioeconomic conditions
6. School board member positions/opinions
7. Input from teachers
8. Community politics
9. Teacher union positions/pressure
10. Concerns for personal survival

Blumberg and Blumberg (1985) interviewed superintendents who described the loneliness and isolation associated with the position. Familiar phrases, such as "lonely at the top" and "totally alone," characterized the perception of distrust experienced by superintendents. Yet,
superintendents admitted that they were surrounded by people and talked with them on a regular basis. Still, the nature of the job dictated that a superintendent must be circumspect at all times. Thus, socially fraternizing or sharing personal problems with any of the staff was not viewed as genuinely possible. It was difficult to know to whom they could turn for help and support when problems escalated. Chapman (1997) also maintained that the loneliness associated with the superintendency is a potent stressor.

Carter and Cunningham (1997) believe that superintendents today deal with more complex and threatening forces than their predecessors. Additionally, there are increasing demands on the district superintendent who had better have exceptional leadership skills to meet the enormous overt and covert demands. Challenges and dilemmas delineated by Carter and Cunningham included negotiating community politics, responding to education reform initiatives, weathering fiscal cutbacks, resolving conflicts with school boards, as well as coping with the daily crises of the position. One dilemma that may be more prevalent today than in past years is a superintendent's personal security in relation to violence and actual physical assault.

Conflicting studies have suggested that fewer people will seek to become superintendents for both personal and professional reasons (Hall & Difford, 1992) and that the superintendency is still an attractive career option because of the high degree of control and authority associated with the position (Daresh & Playko, 1992). Once in the job, the terms "pushes" and "pulls" have been used to describe reasons for which superintendents leave their current positions (Allen, 1996; Tallerico, Burstyn & Poole, 1993). Pushes would include factors within the district that contribute to involuntary departures, and pulls would include challenges and opportunities in alternate locations that encourage voluntary departures.

Recent statistics have demonstrated an astounding number of turnovers in superintendent positions within the past several years. In 1984, the turnover rate in rural Kansas was 13% (Wilson & Heim, 1984). Giles and Giles (1990) found that the turnover rate in California's 1000+ districts averaged 16+% for the previous six years. Hall and Difford (1992) maintained that the national average for annual turnover in the superintendency was 13.5%; but the greatest rate, a 16% average, of turnover is associated with smaller schools with enrollments of fewer than 350 students. Parker (1992) indicated that the turnover rate in Texas approached 15%. The data for this study indicated that the turnover rate in Texas is increasing and is now approaching 19%, an increase above the earlier findings of Parker (1992) and a substantial increase above the national average. The following study attempted to determine the circumstances of resignations and the individuals' current positions among school districts in Texas.

**Procedures**

People leaving a superintendency in 1994-1995 were traced to determine their current location and status. The Texas Education Agency (T.E.A.) reported that 183 people left a superintendency in 1994-1995. An analysis of the disposition of the 183 individuals indicated that 60 (32.8%) moved to another superintendency, 56 (30.6%) retired, 26 (14.2%) took employment outside of education, 25 (13.7%) assumed some other school role either in a school district or in a region education service center, 12 (6.6%) were unable to be located, and 4 (2.2%) were deceased at the time of inquiry.
A protocol of interview questions was developed, and all procedures were approved by the Sam Houston State University Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects. Recording devices and supplies were obtained so that, with participant permission, interviews could be accurately recorded. Interviews were then transcribed.

Results

Twenty-three of the 85 people still employed by the public schools were randomly interviewed by telephone to determine the circumstances of their leaving and their reaction to the transition. Interview responses indicated that eight of the 23 were "pulled" to more attractive positions or relocated for personal reasons such as geographic preference or to be closer to aging parents. Fifteen of the 23 changes in employment positions involved poor working relations with the district's school boards. Examples of their similar responses regarding relationships with their respective boards included:

- The board was just not listening to my guidance.
- The board's philosophy was different from mine.
- The board and I were just not getting along.
- We both knew we needed a divorce. It was just a matter of finding a school district that I wanted to go to.

Five of the 15 cases indicated termination or a resignation under pressure. The term "buyout" was used in four of the cases and a direct "nonrenewal/termination" was used in the fifth case. Three of the four buyouts were initiated by the superintendent after what was described as an intolerable set of events and/or a series of decisions that conflicted with their personal values, standards, and recommendations.

A high level of stress was indicated by all five who indicated termination or a forced resignation. One superintendent commented:

- The stress just inundated me.

Additional questions included: (1) What about your mental health? and (2) What kinds of emotions have you experienced as a result of the exit? Responses included:

- I find it awful (sic) hard to go back to the previous district, although I have lots of friends there... It is very difficult to talk to some people from there because of circumstances of what happened. It was not really anything that I think I did. I think they wanted a change.

  There was just too much prejudice, too much pressure. The Hispanic principal just could not put up with the Hispanic board members. He said, "I am Hispanic and they are bothering me What does that tell you?"
I started having personal problems ... My marriage started going downhill, and then the Board was not going to renew/extend my contract there. I got really depressed. I went through some pretty severe depression.

I questioned everything. I really didn't want to see those, the past people... because in a way, I felt like I let a lot of people down, those that I had worked so hard for... I knew I couldn't help myself. I couldn't help them... a lot of anxiety, just generally not feeling good. Very, very tired and run down and just couldn't think real clearly.

A little bitter, a little bitter about... man's inhumanity to man... I feel like in my little term and regime, that I feel like it was underappreciated. It was still a lot of little, small town partisan politics. I kind of resented that.

Further comments regarding participants' emotions revealed much anger after the one-and-a-half year interval:

- I think anger to an extent. It was a very difficult decision on my part, and I actually initiated the action.

I finally decided having lots of bottles of Tums around was not worth it.

Isn't it a heck of a note that nonprofessional people that don't know anything about education decide the destiny of professional administrators?

I wish these things wouldn't happen to people, and I am not even talking so much of myself as all those children that are being affected by this... I wish that Boards could have the proper training.

I saw a few illegal decisions... In my opinion [the boards] run the districts like little fiefdoms, and I think TEA... is still allowing them to do that.

Before actually leaving the superintendency, those participants who were forced to resign or were involuntarily terminated frequently developed major health problems. Physical problems reported were weight gain and obesity, asthma, and cancer; and many were taking prescription medications.

Only one of the five sought professional assistance through counseling. He was no longer serving as a superintendent but was content to serve as what he termed, "assistant superintendent." Two others indicated no assistance whatsoever through the transition and the last two said that friends and colleagues were used as sounding boards and/or counselors:

- We worked through this thing together.

Discussion
Clearly, the pushes and pulls described by Tallerico et al. (1993) and Allen (1996) were evident in the 23 superintendents interviewed. From a mental health perspective, the eight who were "pulled" maintained a balance between personal and career agendas. However, the 15 who perceived themselves as being "pushed" may have reported more current happiness with their present positions but also reported more bitterness and continuing effects of stress. Obviously, their experiences of hurt, anger, and disappointment that sometimes resulted in health problems indicates a less mentally healthy balance. When their personal beliefs and decisions were not supported, particularly by the school boards, the resulting conflict appeared to have had a very personal impact.

Although superintendent stress has only recently been addressed from a health perspective, Chapman (1997) suggests membership and active involvement in professional organizations may provide networking and support. Such support may provide empathy and constructive feedback that possibly could provide perspective for the stressed and conflicted superintendent. Why superintendent turnover in Texas has increased over the last few years and if it has also increased across the nation are topics for future research. A related issue is the exiting rate, the rate at which those qualified for the superintendency actually leave that role before retirement. An area of further research obviously would be the relationship between superintendent and the district school board. Note that the pushed outnumber the pulled almost two-to-one. Additionally, specific stress-reducing interventions for superintendents must be developed and implemented and possibly be included in preparation programs. Whether the present system is actually designed to provide rapid turnover of superintendents and is actually working as it should, or the contentious relationships between some superintendents and school boards negatively impacts all concerned also should be addressed. Finally, the conflict between school boards and superintendents is only summarized from the superintendent's view in this paper. It would be important to ascertain school boards' perspectives as well.

Conclusion

Identifying trends and causes for superintendent turnover as well as superintendent exits from the role of district leader could have significant impact on education reform efforts. If, as Bennett (1991), Kerr (1988), and Murphy (1991) allege, the lack of stability in leadership of public school districts has a significant negative effect on productivity and student achievement, then intervention strategies to balance and rectify the situation could be particularly important to the life of public schools in the future. At a time when some are questioning whether public schools will survive, when charter schools, vouchers, and home schooling are growing movements, when almost 20% of the school district leadership is changing in one of the largest states, it seems prudent to address these issues with further research and to put in place new intervention strategies to afford current leaders more time to address issues in one site. The musical chair scenario may satisfy political agendas but may not well satisfy the needs of children.

References


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Marion Czaja has 33 years of experience in education. She has served as a teacher, assistant principal, acting principal, curriculum director, and superintendent of schools. Now Associate Professor of Educational Leadership at Sam Houston State University, she has a specific research interest in the superintendency with a current focus on superintendent training and preparation. Leadership in public schools at all levels remains a broad research interest.

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Marsha Harman has had a broad range of experience in education over the last 20 years. Her training is in elementary education, counseling education, and counseling psychology. She has served as a teacher, school counselor, and Assistant Director of Counseling Services at the university level. She now serves as an Assistant Professor at Sam Houston State University in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction and Psychology. In addition to teaching full-time, she consults as a school psychologist and works with individuals and children in private practice. Her research interests revolve around multi/cross-cultural and gender and mental health issues.