Effective Superintendents

ECRA WHITE PAPER

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Introduction

The role of the modern superintendent is often analogized with that of an orchestra conductor or theatrical director (Bird, Dunaway, Hancock, & Wang, 2013; Domenech, 2009). A district leader "conducts" all aspects of the district's educational, financial, and administrative functions, facilitates the performance of all personnel, and responds to and persuades an audience with varying ideas. Like a conductor, superintendents guide a shared vision of exemplary performance, engage disparate components and constituents to ensure progress toward that goal, and serve as a model for inspired leadership. The superintendent, in short, personifies the aspirations and responsibilities of the entire organization (DiPaola & Stronge, 2003). It is no wonder that research literature on educational leadership shows a strong correlation between the quality of district leadership and the achievement of said school district (Plotts & Gutmore, 2014; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005).

Prior to the enactment of the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), school boards and the broader school community defined the superintendency narrowly by the leader's ability to manage fiscal, physical, and personnel resources. NCLB's emphasis on academic achievement and school accountability began shaping a broader definition of school leadership that was far more student-outcomes focused. The reauthorization of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) to the the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) is shaping the role of the superintendent further as the chief facilitator of evidence-based practices to ensure alignment of system resources toward what truly matters for students.

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) and other national initiatives are expanding the definition of student success and calling for local school systems to craft a broader and more personalized definition of success. Furthermore, accountability models are allowing more local autonomy to define and measure student success in ways that are aligned to the priorities of the community. Said policy shifts will require the modern superintendent to possess an expanded set of competencies to lead an evidence-based process to advance the priorities of the community.

The ideal superintendent is one who serves as an instructional leader (Enfield & Spicciati, 2014), communicates strongly, builds relationships, and demonstrates political acumen (Glass, 2005). Phillips and Phillips (2007) believe any conception of the superintendency must be relationship-centered, focusing on how leaders demonstrate vision and initiative through the involvement of stakeholders, the fostering of teamwork, and the building of strong relationships. Superintendents must demonstrate a keen understanding of the teaching and learning process (Portis & Garcia, 2007), emphasize the efficient use of resources, personnel, and data to break down resistance and drive systemic change, empower the Board and personnel to set goals, measure results and develop accountability, and support planning, evaluation, and resource allocation. Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2005) hold the district leader responsible not only for managing organizational and environmental capacity and providing results-driven leadership but also for creating a values-driven culture, defining clear instructional focus, and ensuring accountability for results.

In light of these shifting definitions of district leadership, a true definition of the superintendency must reflect a comprehensive and challenging vision of district leadership, a synthesis of managerial and leadership components, interpersonal skills, and strategic action assessment. Though more reflective of the actual responsibilities and performance of the district leader, these increasingly varied and complex definitions of district-level leadership present a significant challenge to the process of superintendent evaluation. Historically, the evaluation process has been largely unsatisfactory to board members and superintendents alike, defined by overly subjective and vague judgments, little feedback or guidance on performance, and few analytics or relevant metrics to define strengths and weaknesses (DiPaola, 2007).

Mandates in NCLB and other state-level standards-based reforms have required local education agencies to explicitly define the expectations for the district leader and how they will be evaluated, leading to greater availability of common superintendent performance standards and performance-based assessments. However, the results are far too often the sort of generic "checklist" that assesses the superintendent for completion of a task rather than evaluation of performance or growth over the course of a school year. To DiPaola (2007), effective superintendent evaluation must be *formative* in nature - it must guide the superintendent's professional growth, enhance communication between the superintendent and stakeholders, and contribute to improving the educational performance or overall effectiveness of the district.

ECRA Group, Inc. (ECRA) reviewed superintendent evaluation standards from key voices and institutions in the field of educational leadership, including standards developed by the American Association of School Administrators (DiPaola & Stronge, 2003) and the principles defined by Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2005) in *Leadership that Works*. An analysis of these standards and instruments, as well as factor analysis of leadership profile survey results across the nation, led to the development of the four Dimensions of Effective Superintendents: Vision and Values, Instructional Leadership, Community Engagement, and Management.

By adopting and confirming these standards and performance indicators, ECRA has constructed an assessment that defines and identifies leadership behaviors representative of *effective* superintendents.

The Dimensions of Effective Superintendents acknowledge the multifaceted role of the superintendent while prioritizing the instructional focus and school leadership responsibilities that define 21st Century district leaders.

Dimensions of Effective Superintendents

Vision and Values —Items in this category measure the district leader's ability to provide a clear, compelling vision for the future, align district programs to the broader vision of the district, and uphold high expectations for all stakeholders.

Instructional Leadership—Items in this category measure the district leader's capability to guide educational programs, make data-driven decisions, and implement effective change.

Community Engagement—Items in this category measure the district leader's performance as the voice of the district and ability to communicate with and involve stakeholders in realizing the district's vision.

Management and Operations – Items in this category measure the district leader's ability to guide operations, manage resources, recruit and retain highly effective personnel, and create an equitable accountability system for all employees.

Vision and Values

Goal setting, drive, and high expectations are defining qualities of district leaders and their leadership teams. The successful superintendent values change and guides change efforts by developing and articulating a vision and a clear direction for the district in collaboration with the Board of Education, ensuring that the mission of each school within his/her district aligns to this vision (Portis & Garcia, 2007; Waters & Marzano, 2007).

To enable and implement positive change, the district leader implements and **oversees effective strategic planning processes** to ensure a continual focus on what matters most to all stakeholders served by the district (Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005). The superintendent sets goals that are rigorous yet attainable, aligns these goals with the district's existing plans and initiatives, and includes meaningful success/progress indicators and annual performance targets to review and revise goals as reform is implemented (Bennett, 2009; Waters & Marzano, 2007).

District leaders **commit the district to continuous improvement**: stipulating clear and non-negotiable priorities, building progress monitoring tools into the routine process of each school, and establishing a district culture in which personnel are invested in the process and outcomes of change (Domenech, 2009; Waters & Marzano, 2007). The effective district leader **maintains high expectations** for school performance and for all participants involved in this achievement — students, personnel, and the community — and maintains a relentlessly positive approach to helping others realize their potential (Lukaszewski, 2008; Waters & Marzano, 2007).

Instructional Leadership

Effective superintendents embrace their function as the **primary instructional leader** for their district, prioritizing student achievement and effective instructional practices as the foremost goals of the district (DiPaola & Stronge, 2003; Enfield & Spicciati, 2014; Waters & Marzano, 2007). More than simply a cheerleader of good pedagogy, the superintendent hones a clear and collaborative vision of teaching and learning, one whose goals for student achievement and the instructional program represent a synthesis of relevant research and the specific needs of the district (Portis & Garcia, 2007; Waters & Marzano, 2007).

Because the superintendent is accountable for overall district performance educationally, financially, and administratively, he/she must be a **subject matter expert** in many areas of educational leadership and continually update their knowledge as trends and mandates change (Eadie, 2003; Phillips & Phillips, 2007). The district leader must pay close attention to what **data and research** say about learning and achievement, and apply new leadership frameworks and practices to ensure improved student achievement (American Association of School Administrators, 2007).

School leaders are responsible for **identifying achievement goals** and **facilititating discussions and learning** to enhance the educational process (Corda, 2012). Instructional leadership includes not just the identification of challenges and adoption of best practices but also the planning, follow-through, monitoring, evaluation, and reassessing of programs and initiatives necessary to optimize impact (Hickley, 2014; AdvancED, n.d.). Superintendents must be **leaders of data-driven practice**: using student achievement data to identify gaps in learning, examining instructional practice, and informing future curricular and instructional decision making (Waters & Marzano, 2007). Superintendents have the equally important role of supporting, developing, and **strengthening school-level leaders' roles** as instructional leaders for their buildings (Chang, Leach, & Anderman, 2015; Enfield & Spicciati, 2014; Honig, 2012).

Community Engagement

The successful superintendent **communicates timely and relevant information** to all stakeholders (Waters & Marzano, 2007). By being a proactive communicator, the superintendent builds trust, provides actionable guidance on personnel and programs he/she supervises, and demonstrates responsiveness to situations that arise (McCullough, 2009). Bird, Dunaway, Hancock, and Wang (2013) found a superintendent's development of meaningful relationships, communication with stakeholders, and willingness to seek the opinions of others facilitates the implementation of practices proven to increase student outcomes.

A superintendent's success is based upon their ability to **build and maintain relationships** (Banks et al, 2007; Phillips & Phillips, 2007; Portis & Garcia, 2007). Coalitions, collaborations, and motivation determine the efficacy of outcomes and initiatives — so district leaders must build trust, focus attention on the process, and employ political savvy to ensure buy-in (Phillips & Phillips, 2007). Effective superintendents develop their own constituency among business and civic groups, thereby enlisting the support of the wider community (Portis & Garcia, 2007).

The effective district leader **involves key constituents** in the goal setting process, shares and publicizes relevant school data, mobilizes parents and community members, builds local and state-level coalitions, and communicates timely and relevant information to personnel (Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005). The model superintendent recognizes that effective leadership is shared leadership, one in which teams and **ongoing collaborations** help define and commit to a common vision, to a culture of respect and openness, and to methods of decision making that ensure every child receives the best possible education (Weast, 2008).

Management and Operations

Though the focus of superintendent evaluation has in recent years shifted from management to leadership, Glass (2005) argues that managerial and leadership imperatives cannot be separated from one another. That is, a superintendent is a strong leader only when he/she **effectively allocates time, money, personnel, and resources** in ways that align with the goal of achievement for all students (Portis & Garcia, 2007; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005).

The superintendent must employ a system-wide, district-centered approach to manage both the millions of taxpayer dollars invested annually in the district and the ever-increasing array of demands resulting from federal- and state-level centralization of education policy (e.g., NCLB). To ensure efficient usage of tax dollars and a smoothly functioning management base, the district leader must balance setting clear, non-negotiable goals about how the district is to be operated while providing school leadership teams with the responsibility and authority for determining how to meet those goals.

Essential managerial duties of the role therefore include **fiscal responsibilities**, such as setting spending priorities, distributing funds, and forecasting projected revenues, **regulatory responsibilities**, such as ensuring compliance to accounting and auditing systems, **operational responsibilities**, such as facilities management, purchasing and contracting, property and supply management, and **personnel responsibilities**, such as labor relations, employee development, and retention. All of these resources and services must be effectively planned and coordinated to support short-term and long-term district needs (Glass, 2005; Waters & Marzano, 2007). It is also critical that the superintendent have significant knowledge of legal issues affecting education; they must also **keep abreast of changes** to mandates, school governance and polices, legal requirements, and compensation/retirement systems at the state level (Plotts & Gutmore, 2014; Glass, 2005).

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