

Summer 2013

Examining Variability in Superintendent Community Involvement

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Kowalski, Theodore J.; Young, Ila Phillip; and Petersen, George J., "Examining Variability in Superintendent Community Involvement" (2013). *Educational Leadership Faculty Publications*. 25.

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Examining Variability in Superintendent Community Involvement

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Abstract

This study examined the extent to which four independent variables (age, gender, education level, and district type) accounted for variability in superintendent community involvement. Two covariates associated with levels of community involvement (disposition toward community involvement and district enrollment) were infused to assess the impact of the independent variables. Analysis revealed that the model accounted for 8% of the variance as indicated both by R^2 and by adjusted R^2 . Given the number of respondents (1,867), this is considered a medium effect having practical implications in the applied setting. Among the four independent variables, only a single main effect (district type) was found.

Key Words

community involvement, democratic localism, education leadership

School district superintendents have a broad range of responsibilities, but they are typically categorized as either management-related or leadership-related. The former require decisions about *how* to do things; they commonly encompass actions such as controlling resources, supervising personnel, and organizing operations (Hanson, 2003).

The latter require decisions about *what* needs to be done to improve a district and the schools in it; they commonly encompass actions such as inspiring others, building coalitions, and facilitating collective reform efforts (Yukl, 2005). Research on superintendents has established that managerial functions have been more pervasive and uniform than leadership functions, largely because the former stem from laws and policies and the latter stem from professional norms (Johnson, 1996).

Over the past few decades, the focus of school reform has shifted more toward the local level. Specifically, most states now require districts to engage in inclusive strategic planning so that reforms can be tailored to real student and community needs. Stakeholder participation in pivotal activities, such as visioning and goal setting, presents new challenges for superintendents, especially in the realm of direct community involvement. As examples, the success of locally-driven reforms usually depends on factors such as coalition building, political support, and sufficient economic resources (DuFour, 2012; Duke, 2008).

Despite the espoused importance of community involvement in extant literature, studies of superintendents conducted since 1990 (e.g., Glass, 1992; Glass, Björk, & Brunner, 2000; Rutherford, Anderson, & Billig, 1997) have reported considerable variability in this activity. Unfortunately, little effort has been made to account for this inconsistency.

This study, deploying selected data from a national study of superintendents (Kowalski, McCord, Petersen, Young, & Ellerson, 2011) addresses this void. The analysis was guided by the following research question: Do four independent variables (*age, gender, district type, and level of education*), individually or in combination, account for variance in a single dependent variable, *community involvement*? In answering this query, two covariates (*dispositions toward involvement and district enrollment*) were infused to more accurately determine the possible influence of the independent variables.

First, a theoretical framework, addressing civic engagement, dispositions and behavior, and superintendent involvement, is provided. Second, the study methods are explained and findings reported and discussed.

Theoretical Framework

Justifications for community involvement

Superintendent involvement in the local community has been advocated for philosophical, professional, and political reasons. Philosophically, public schools, as democratic institutions, should allow citizens to pursue individual and group interests (Levin, 1999). Prior to 1950, this was accomplished by stakeholders having a direct voice in important decisions (e.g., via town hall meetings).

Such participation, known as democratic localism (Levin, 1999), was valued because public school policy was forged at the point where societal rights—the experiences, influence and values society wants reproduced through a common public school curriculum—intersected with individual rights—the experiences, influence and values parents want expressed to their children in local schools (Gutmann, 1987).

In this governance structure, superintendents had no choice but to be

immersed in community activities. After 1950, however, democratic localism gave way to representative democracy, a governance structure in which boards of education, preferably guided by superintendents, made decisions for the community.

The transition allowed many superintendents, especially those in larger and more urban districts, to limit direct involvement with stakeholders (other than board members and district employees). Considering the potential dark side of representative democracy, Melby (1955) advised superintendents and principals to not insulate themselves. Rather, they advised them to continue releasing “the creative capacities of individuals” by mobilizing “the educational resources of communities” (p. 250).

Professionally, the value of superintendent community involvement did not become apparent until research on systems theory was conducted in school administration approximately six decades ago. Previously, administrative behavior was analyzed in relation to internal operations only. Systems theory research produced a deeper understanding of how external legal, political, social, and economic systems affected organizations and the behavior of individuals and groups in them (Getzels, 1977).

Over time, systems thinking has required administrators “to accept that the way social systems are put together has independent effects on the way people behave, what they learn, and how they learn what they learn” (Schlechty, 1997, p. 134). Today, community involvement is normative in the education profession; scholars (e.g., Murphy, 1991; Schein, 1996) posit that the activity enhances assessments of and responses to evolving social conditions.

At a third level, community involvement has been promoted as a means for acquiring political capital, an asset allowing superintendents to project a positive image and to build relationships with a broad range of stakeholders. The need for political capital increased markedly after states adopted directed autonomy as a reform strategy (Baumann, 1996).

Beginning in the late 1980s, most states set broad state benchmarks, granted school districts leeway to determine how these goals would be met, and then held boards of education and superintendents accountable for the outcomes (Weiler, 1990). This revised strategy required superintendents to galvanize policymakers, employees, and other stakeholders (Howlett, 1993) in order to build political coalitions that would support proposed change (Leithwood, Begley, & Cousins, 1992).

Despite persistent philosophical, professional, and political justifications for community involvement, not all boards of education have required or even encouraged their superintendents to be highly involved in community activities (Björk & Gurley, 2005; Björk & Lindle, 2001). In urban and suburban districts, for example, it is not uncommon for superintendents to reside outside the employing district.

Apprehensions about community involvement

One reason why some superintendents have been apprehensive about community involvement are persistent and inevitable tensions between democracy and professionalism. According to Wirt and Kirst (2005), stakeholders expect public school administrators to be both professional leaders directing and facilitating school improvement and domesticated public employees subservient to the will of the people.

Recognizing the dissimilarities in the two roles, numerous authors such as DuFour (2012), Evans (1996), and Fullan (1993) have urged administrators to develop a culture of empowerment and collegiality, an ethos in which administrators encourage and guide democratic discourse intended to result in pivotal school-improvement decisions (Epstein, 1995).

Anxiety towards community involvement also has stemmed from concerns about excessive conflict. Cooper, Bryer, and Meek (2006) noted that citizens seek to influence public policy in three dissimilar ways; they categorized them as being antagonistic, communicative, or electoral.

Elections, the most obvious form of influence, are typically required by law and do not result in direct confrontations between citizens and school officials. The other two types of engagement, however, often produce tensions resulting in political or philosophical disagreements. Antagonistic approaches are based on the assumption that citizens can achieve their goals by aggressively confronting governmental officials. This behavior almost always had negative residual effects, such as destroying relationships (Feuerstein, 2002) and causing superintendents to avoid future community involvement (Kowalski, 2013).

The communicative approach to citizen involvement also entails open exchanges of ideas but for positive motives, such as school improvement (Kowalski, 2011). Commonly referred to as deliberative democracy, the process is characterized by joint action, shared commitment, and mutual responsibility (Cooper et al., 2006; Etzioni, 1993; Fishkin, 1991). This type of civic engagement, however, is difficult and time consuming. Moreover, superintendents must be prepared to facilitate discussions that inevitably expose dissimilar

and often conflicting views about public education (Cooper, Fusarelli, & Randall, 2004).

Communication competence, although a widely-recognized standard for superintendents (e.g., Hoyle, 1994; Shipman, Topps, & Murphy, 1998), has received relatively little attention in relation to academic preparation and competence (Osterman, 1994). Communication scholars, such as Wiemann (1977), posit that competence and performance are entwined across professions; that is, a competent practitioner knows what constitutes appropriate behavior and he or she possesses requisite skills.

McCroskey (1982) added that dispositions, values and beliefs that trigger intentional behavior (Splitter, 2010), are critical. In the realm of district administration, apprehensions about personal competence logically affect dispositions toward communicative approaches for civic engagement (Kowalski, 2005).

Research on superintendent community involvement

The foci of studies on community involvement have varied. Some have sought to describe effective superintendent involvement. Ahillen (2010), for example, identified emergent themes and concluded that effective community engagement entailed (a) maintaining high visibility, (b) communicating with all stakeholders, (c) collaborating with stakeholder groups, (d) creating opportunities for dialogue, and (e) promoting inclusive decision making. Baxter (2007), found that a combination of effective communication, collaboration, and empowerment were associated with effective community engagement.

In her study of superintendents, Bolla (2010) found that both gender and the demographic nature of the district were

associated with levels of community involvement. Specifically, female superintendents and superintendents in urban districts were more likely to report higher levels of community involvement.

Hopper (2003), Jensen (1989) and Nguyen-Hernandez (2010) studied both the quantity of community involvement and possible associations between levels of involvement and selected independent variables. In all three studies, superintendents were found to have had dissimilar levels of involvement. Both Jensen (1989) and Nguyen-Hernandez (2010) found that a strong relationship between positive dispositions of community involvement and a high level of community involvement. Hopper (2003), on the other hand, found that levels of engagement varied even among those with positive or negative dispositions.

Superintendent Community Involvement

Extant literature extols the virtues of superintendent community involvement and verifies that levels of engagement vary substantially. Even so, the reasons underlying dissimilar behavior remains a debatable topic.

In this vein, this study was guided by the following research question: Can the variance in superintendent community involvement be accounted for by certain demographic characteristics (age, gender, and type of district), by a human capital endowment (level of education), or some combinations (interactions) of these variables.

Methods

The study population consisted of 1,867 public school superintendents who completed either an electronic or paper survey for a national study sponsored by the American Association of School Administrators. The instrument was

developed by the authors and content validity was established by a panel of former superintendents, who at the time of the study were professors of school administration. Respondents were initially contacted via email. Data were compiled by a commercial research firm and then analyzed by the authors.

This article focuses on eight questions that were included on the national survey. Because some respondents did not answer all these questions, the number of responses to each question varied slightly. The dependent variable was level of community involvement and the analysis categories were *considerable*, *moderate*, *limited*, and *none*. Four independent variables (three demographic characteristics and a human capital endowment) were analyzed. To operationalize them, a dichotomized scoring scheme was used.

Categories were established as follows:

- Age (*less than 50*, *50 or older*)
- Gender (*female*, *male*)
- District location (*non-rural*, *rural*)
- Education level (*less than a doctorate*, *doctorate*)

Two covariates were used to assess the impact of independent variables. One was superintendent disposition toward community involvement. This temperament was determined by responses to two questions. The first pertained to the perceived value of community involvement to the superintendent; the response options were *major asset*, *minor asset*, *neither an asset nor a liability*, *minor liability*, and *major liability*.

The second was the perceived value of superintendent community involvement to the school district; the response options were *major asset*, *minor asset*, *neither an asset nor a liability*, *minor liability*, and *major liability*. A composite score was computed by summing

responses to both items, and a reliability assessment for this composite score yielded a Chronbach's Alpha coefficient of .84.

The other covariate was district size determined by student enrollment. According to Poppink and Schen (2003), rural school districts differ from non-rural school districts in many ways, especially from a cultural perspective but not necessarily from an enrollment perspective.

Many suburban school districts, for example, have enrollments similar to those in rural school districts. Moreover, size and location are distinct variables; for example, there are both large and small urban districts (Hentschke, Nayfack, & Wohlstetter, 2009). Therefore, district enrollment was treated as a covariate. The response categories were <300, 300-2,999, 3,000-24,999, and >24,999. By controlling these sources of variations *a priori*, adjusted means for the independent variables were calculated.

To answer the research question, superintendent responses were cast into a 2x2x2x2 completely crossed factorial design. This factorial design permitted consideration to each main effect ($n=4$) as well as to all possible interaction effects ($n=11$). The statistical technique used in this study was an ANCOVA where a calculated value for community involvement and the size of a school district served as covariates.

Findings

The modal respondent in this study was a male between ages 50 and 60. The respondents were divided with respect to possessing a doctorate, with those not possessing the degree constituting a slight majority.

Likewise, respondents were divided with respect to being employed in a rural versus non-rural district with those in the former category constituting a slight majority. Data regarding the independent variables are in Table 1.

Table 1

Independent Variables and Dichotomized Categories

| <i>Variable</i> | <i>Categories</i> | <i>Number</i> | <i>Percentage</i> |
|---------------------------------|------------------------|---------------|-------------------|
| Age ($n=1,843$) | Less than 50 years old | 910 | 49.4 |
| | 50 years old and older | 933 | 50.6 |
| Gender ($n=1,786$) | Male | 1,356 | 75.9 |
| | Female | 430 | 24.1 |
| Educational level ($n=1,846$) | Less than a doctorate | 1,009 | 54.7 |
| | Doctorate | 837 | 45.3 |
| District type ($n=1,780$) | Rural | 920 | 51.7 |
| | Non-rural | 860 | 48.3 |

Applying the methods previously described, the ANCOVA was calculated and the resulting data are reported in Table 2. To interpret information contained in this table, a common statistical criterion was used to define a meaningful difference in this largely uncharted area. Although data in Table 2 are population parameters rather than sample estimates and thus, are not subject to sampling errors (e.g., Type I or Type II), a meaningful difference among population parameters was similarly defined. That is, a meaningful difference was equivalent in magnitude to one

that would have been detected by an inferential sample using an alpha level of .05.

As can be observed in Table 2, the overall model accounts for 8% of the variance associated with a superintendents' perceived level of community involvement as indicated both by R^2 and by adjusted R^2 . This amount of variance is nontrivial, especially given the large number of respondents. By most statistical standards (see Huck, 2012), 8% is considered a medium effect having practical implications in an applied setting.

Table 2

ANCOVA for Superintendents' Level of Community Involvement

| <i>Source</i> | <i>Type III sum of squares</i> | <i>df</i> | <i>Mean square</i> | <i>F</i> | <i>Sig.</i> |
|-------------------------------|--------------------------------|-----------|--------------------|----------|-------------|
| Dispositions | 21.768 | 1 | 21.768 | 40.556 | .000 |
| Enrollments | 28.326 | 1 | 28.326 | 52.776 | .000 |
| Gender (A) | .932 | 1 | .932 | 1.737 | .188 |
| Age (B) | 1.060 | 1 | 1.060 | 1.974 | .160 |
| Type of district (C) | 2.195 | 1 | 2.195 | 4.090 | .043 |
| Education level (D) | .005 | 1 | .005 | .010 | .921 |
| A x B | .064 | 1 | .064 | .119 | .730 |
| A x C | 1.933 | 1 | 1.933 | 3.601 | .058 |
| A x D | .336 | 1 | .336 | .627 | .429 |
| B x C | .318 | 1 | .318 | .592 | .442 |
| B x D | .007 | 1 | .007 | .012 | .912 |
| C x D | .002 | 1 | .002 | .004 | .950 |
| A x B x C | .852 | 1 | .852 | 1.587 | .208 |
| A x B x D | 1.219 | 1 | 1.219 | 2.271 | .132 |
| A x C x D | .092 | 1 | .092 | .172 | .678 |
| B x C x D | .018 | 1 | .018 | .033 | .856 |
| A x B x C x D | .041 | 1 | .041 | .075 | .784 |
| Error | 956.998 | 1783 | .537 | | |
| Total | 19091.000 | 1801 | | | |
| a. R Squared = .08 | | | | | |
| b. (Adjusted R Squared = .08) | | | | | |

Both the composite score for the value of community involvement and the composite score for school district enrollment were found to have a far smaller probability (i.e., $F = 40.56$; $df = 1, 1,783$; $p = \leq .00$ and $F = 52.76$; $df = 1, 1,783$; $p = \leq .00$, respectively) than is required by the traditional alpha level of .05. After controlling both superintendent dispositions (values placed on community involvement) and district size (enrollment) via adjusted means, only a single main effect was noted among the independent variables, school district type (i.e., *rural* versus *non-rural*).

Specifically, after the composite values for community involvement and for the size of a school district were infused as covariates and after consideration was given to the lack of interaction effects among all independent variables, superintendents employed in rural districts (mean = 3.28) were found to have reported higher levels of community involvement than did superintendents employed in non-rural districts (mean = 3.05).

Discussion

Research has repeatedly shown that superintendents do not involve themselves in community activities to the same degree. The reasons for this variability, however, remain largely unknown. In seeking to address this information void, this study examined the extent to which selected variables accounted for inconsistent levels of community engagement.

Although not a specific point of interest in this study, data reveal a positive association between the perceived importance of community involvement (both from personal and institution perspectives) and reported levels of involvement. This relationship is congruent with literature in other disciplines. Communication scholars (Dilenschneider,

1996; McCroskey, 1982; Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984), for example, contend that administrators who have positive dispositions toward interacting with persons outside the organization actually behave in this manner.

Moreover, several previous studies have reported higher levels of community involvement among superintendents who believed that the activity has a positive effect on student learning (e.g., Jensen, 1989 & Nguyen-Hernandez, 2010) or on community economic development (e.g., Thomas, 2002).

A single main effect for district type was found in this study; rural-district superintendents reported higher levels of community involvement than did non-rural superintendents. This finding is generally congruent with research by Jenkins (2007) that found rural superintendents had greater transparency locally and more exposure to community stakeholders than did other superintendents.

Conversely, the finding is inconsistent with Bolla's (2010) research reporting that the most community involved superintendents were in urban districts. She concluded that social complexity and political activity inherent in urban settings accounted for the finding. Categorical definitions (*rural* versus *non-rural* in this study and using *urban* as a separate category in her study) may partially explain the inconsistent findings.

In seeking to expand the knowledge base on superintendent community involvement, several lines of inquiry are recommended.

Specifically, greater attention to dispositions is needed. For example, what causes superintendents to embrace dissimilar values and beliefs about civic engagement?

To what extent do boards of education assess dispositions when employing superintendents? Other recommended lines of inquiry include possible discrepancies between

perceived and actual community involvement and the direct effects of independent variables on actual levels of community involvement.

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