

Chapter 46

Leadership Characteristics of the Ideal School Superintendent

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses the characteristics of the ideal school superintendent based on research findings. Research has seen that the challenges to American education have become more complex with the advent of each decade of this century. The effective school superintendent of today and tomorrow must be a principled, empathetic visionary who is able to lead by facilitating and to actively encourage the development of others. While inferences may be made from the efforts of apparently successful superintendents, research is needed to scientifically validate excellence and to differentiate between superficially apparent success and long-term effectiveness.

INTRODUCTION

Leadership Characteristics of the Ideal School Superintendent

Like CEOs in large business organizations, school superintendents are hired to efficiently and effectively operate the systems in their charge. Likewise, a superintendent is expected to demonstrate characteristics of effective leadership (Berg &

Barnett, 1999; Brewer & Marmon, 2000; Carifio & Hess, 1987; Hoyle, 1989; Morton, 1990). Reporting directly to the school board, the superintendent is primarily responsible for the operation of the administrative staff, the compilation and execution of budgets, and the maintenance of communication facilities (Smith, 1982). The superintendent is also responsible for implementing the school board's policies. Although these responsibilities are managerial, superintendents play a significant role in formulating district policy. Using their professional expertise and resources, effective

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superintendents can provide school boards with accurate analyses of problems and can lead boards in making thoughtful, informed decisions. Above all, the superintendent should be an educational leader (Kirby, Paradise, & King, 1992; Klauke, 1988).

Effective educational leadership is most clearly needed when politics enter into the superintendent-board relationship. Analyzing this relationship, Salmon (1992) sketched four types of boards and discussed typical situations in which superintendents might become entangled. The two most common types, *sanctioning boards* and *factionated boards*, are discussed below.

A *sanctioning board* thoroughly reflects the values of a homogeneous community. Consequently, a strong sense of trust between the superintendent and board members develops. Such boards function primarily as their superintendent's interpreters to the community, explaining and defending their joint decisions.

A *factionated board* is made up of individuals who hold strong and conflicting perspectives on such major controversial issues as busing, taxes, and the nature of basic education. These members reflect their community's divergent views, thus making effective leadership even more important. Salmon (1992) pointed out that the increasing complexity of education and the evolving nature of modern America's pluralistic society has led to a decrease in the number of sanctioning boards and a rise in the number of factionated boards. To deal effectively with a factionated board, the superintendent must develop strong personal qualities and communication skills (MacCoby, 1990).

BACKGROUND

Leadership Qualities and Skills

Toth and Famer (n.d.), in their report on a 1997 survey of West Virginia school superintendents, defined leadership style as "evidenced by a

specific leader is a combination of task-oriented behavior and people-oriented behavior" (p. 4). What are the qualities and skills that characterize effective leadership style? Generally speaking, superintendents are expected to demonstrate all of the qualities found in other good supervisors (Ellis & Dell, 1986). They must be empathetic and understanding; and they must exhibit unconditional positive regard, congruence and genuineness (Carifio & Hess, 1987). Any leader who has employees to supervise is in a relational position. The relationships should be goal-oriented, constructively monitored, open, trusting, supportive and collaborative (Carifio & Hess). Hoyle (1989) asserted that these essential traits would not change substantially even in the next century. Hoyle listed the skills he considered most desirable for a 21st century superintendent in three categories: human skills, technical skills and conceptual skills. Human skills included behaviors that exhibited respect for self and others, high tolerance for ambiguity, a preference for using persuasion rather than coercion and a well-developed sense of humor (Morton, 1990). Technical skills included ability to use a broad range of instructional strategies—such as microcomputers, satellite link-ups, and interactive television. Effective superintendents possess a willingness to think broadly about the educational mission, including community education and education for the industrial and corporate labor force; and they must demonstrate a well-developed ability to communicate effectively through writing, listening and speaking.

Conceptual skills dealt with the appropriate and balanced use of reason and intuition. The superintendent should have a broadly defined sense of how the school system works holistically and an ability to express himself/herself creatively in defining the district's educational vision. To define an educational vision for a district, a superintendent needs substantial leadership abilities and a strong commitment to a collaborative work ethic (Beckner, 1990; Freeman, Underwood & Fortune, 1991; Hoyle, 1989; Kirby et al., 1992).

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