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Factors Contributing to Successful Transitions into the Role of a New Superintendency in Texas: A Mixed Methods Triangulation Convergence Inquiry

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The study used a mixed methods research design, employing the triangulation convergence model, to investigate the possible factors contributing to successful transitions into the role of a new superintendency. Participating superintendents indicated that the training and education they received had adequately prepared them for the role of a new superintendent. Also, participants indicated that school board relations were important during the entry period and that their interaction with the board played an important part in the entry plan. Analysis of qualitative data resulted in three themes, namely, community, learning, and goals and expectations. In accordance with the convergence model, the quantitative and qualitative findings were synthesized and discussed.

Keywords: superintendent, entry period, leadership, mixed methods

The superintendent position is like that of a Chief Executive Officer (CEO) in the corporate world. In terms of accountability and responsibility, the job is ever-demanding. Although there are programs, graduate courses of study, and professional development to assist people who want to become superintendents, there appears to be very few that provide guidance for the transition involved in the entry period to a new superintendency. There is a small amount of literature-based research on the entry period of a superintendent. However, the reviewer of literature on leadership has no difficulty finding numerous articles and studies for the business world that can be appropriately tailored to the superintendent position.

Suggestions for transitions and change vary in the number of steps and details from different authors, but all of them are fairly consistent in their basic ideas. This tends to indicate that there may not be one correct approach to this type of transition, but that certain key steps need to be in place to be effective. Kotter (2007) stated that the change process goes through a series of phases, which includes eight steps to transform an organization. Sharp and Walter (2004) listed 11 suggestions for new superintendents. Other authors provided various steps to facilitate change or transformation (Collins, 2001; Watkins, 2004). This would tend to indicate that there is no one correct approach to the transition, but that knowing and implementing a type of process or steps into a new position would be key to a successful transition.

Purpose

The purpose of the study was to examine the factors contributing to a successful transition into the role of a new superintendency. The study utilized information gathered from urban, suburban, and rural school district superintendents in Texas

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework used in the study was that actions by a new leader (such as a superintendent or CEO) in the first 90 days of a new position will largely determine whether he/she succeeds or fails in the position over the long term. This is documented from research of business practices by Watkins (2004) and Kotter (2007). Their re

search shows that the goal should be to have a formal plan to accelerate an effective transition in a new position and that there are certain steps that most successful leaders take in the beginning of a new position, such as developing the same terminology with others in the new position, creating a collaborative vision for the new school district, creating coalitions, and negotiating or building early successful achievements (Watkins, 2004; Kotter, 2007).

Kotter (1996) discussed an eight-stage process dealing with change. The steps are 1) creating a sense of urgency, 2) establishing a guiding coalition, 3) developing a vision, 4) communicating the vision, 5) empowering employees for action, 6) producing short term successes, 7) combining the gains, and 8) generating additional change and securing the new approaches in the culture of the organization. Kotter indicated that these steps are sequential and that it is important not to skip any in the process.

Watkins (2004) proposed 10 steps to accelerate change, namely, 1) promoting oneself, 2) accelerating one's learning, 3) matching strategies to situations, 4) secure early successes, 5) negotiating success, 6) achieving alignment, 7) building the team, 8) creating coalitions, 9) keeping one's balance, and 10) expediting everyone in the organization. Several of these steps are similar to Kotter's. These include securing early successes, building the team, and creating coalitions and expediting or empowering everyone. Additional similarities between the two include both authors' view that learning should be ongoing.

Design

This was a mixed methods descriptive study. Specifically, a triangular designed mixed methodology with a convergence model was employed. Triangulation design is the most common and well-known approach to mixing methods. The purpose and intent of this design is to best understand the research problem and to bring together differing strengths and weaknesses of quantitative and qualitative methods. The design is used to expand quantitative statistical results with qualitative results. In the convergence model, quantitative and qualitative data are collected separately at about the same time and then the different results are converged or joined during the interpretation. The purpose of the triangular designed mixed methodology with a convergence model is to give both quantitative and qualitative data equal emphasis, to converge the results during the interpretation, and to draw valid and well-substantiated conclusions about the research problem (Creswell & Clark, 2007). In this mixed methods design, the qualitative and quantitative data were collected separately and then the results were converged by comparing and contrasting both results during the interpretation of data.

Data Collection

The study used an electronic survey to collect the quantitative data. The instrument consisted of six sections: 1) demographic information, 2) preparation for the superintendency, 3) current superintendency prior to entry by new superintendent, 4) current superintendency entry or transition plan, 5) current superintendency entry or transition strategies, and 6) opinions on superintendent's current leadership. There were 289 respondents.

The study employed the use of a focus group with a non-probability sample of superintendents ($n = 8$) who served in urban, suburban, and rural school districts to collect the qualitative data. The following areas were addressed: 1) preparation, 2) importance of entry period, 3) transition plan, and 4) strategies during transition plan.

Summary of Quantitative Results

Due to page limitations, a brief summary of the results is presented. The quantitative results indicated that the respondents felt an entry plan was important. Nearly 33% had been in their current position for one or two years. The respondents had an average of 7.4 years of superintendent experience. Over half of the respondents felt that their professional development had prepared them for the superintendency. Most felt that studying the district's budget and student achievement levels were most important in analyzing the district's situation prior to entering the new position. In working with groups during the entry period, most indicated that interacting with colleagues, board members, and the district leadership team was important. Of the respondents to the survey, over 75% had an entry plan.

Summary of Quantitative Results

Three overall themes emerged from analyzing the qualitative data. The first theme was community. Within this theme, the participants discussed relations with the board of trustees, listening to members of the school community, and developing trust and relationships with the school community. The second theme was learning through on-the-job experiences. Although the participants said they did not receive any formal training on the entry period through their college or other courses, the majority said that the most important guidance or training they had received on the first 90 days was through a mentor of some type that they had or learning on the job through experience. The third theme was setting goals and expectations, not only for themselves, but for the district. This involved finding out what goals and expectations board members had of the new superintendent and the school district, as well as the superintendent setting goals for him or herself.

Significance of the Study

Results revealed that superintendents in Texas did believe that the entry period to a new superintendency is critical, that a plan is important, and that there are certain critical factors to that plan. The study revealed important information related to the entry period of a new superintendent, and in particular the type of entry plans, and their implementation for a superintendent. The study also revealed the need for emphasis in both professional development and education in the preparation for aspiring superintendents.

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