

Superintendents' Perceptions of the North Carolina Aspiring Superintendent Program

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Abstract

With the challenges of educational reforms, personnel management issues, budget approvals and maintaining working relationships with the school board, many superintendents do not have the skills and knowledge to lead a school district effectively (Hanover Research, 2014). The content, coursework, and structure of superintendent preparation programs should be aligned to effective leadership research (Pitkoff, 2010). Although national commissions and individual states have established the necessary academic degrees and professional career experiences, many superintendents are not well trained to handle the complexities of the job. The imperative need is to equip superintendents with continual learning methods and hands-on experiences, which would contribute to the continual knowledge that superintendents should reference to resolve various issues relating to students, staff and the community. The purpose of this research study will be to determine if the North Carolina Aspiring Superintendent Program (NCASP) effectively prepares North Carolina educators to successfully transition into the superintendent's role. North Carolina does not have any other superintendent preparation programs that would be offered through colleges, universities, professional or educational agencies. This research is based on the perceptions of the attendees of the program which began in 2016. The study will reveal how well business strategies, professional career development and leadership skills were explored and delivered in the curriculum design of the program.

- 1: In what ways do NC school superintendents believe the NCASP prepared them for the superintendent's role?
- 2: What aspects offered emphasized one or more of the of the seven NC Standards for Superintendents?
- 3: What aspects from the NCASP emphasized ongoing professional development?
- 4: What aspects or courses from the NCASP have attributed to the superintendent's professional relationships?

Keywords: Superintendent, Personnel, School

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Introduction

The superintendent is the leader of a local school district or local educational agency (LEA) that drives the educational leadership of curriculum and instruction, budgeting and expenditures, and teacher reform and development. The superintendent's role in the school district is to serve the educational needs of the students, provide professional development opportunities for teachers and principals, and maintain curriculum and instruction goals for student achievement (Martens, 2012).

The superintendent does sit with the district's school board making recommendations about the daily operations of the district. However, the superintendent does not have any voting privileges of the school board. The superintendent must implement any new mandates that are approved by the school board (Meador, 2019).

The superintendent implements new programs for higher academic achievement for students, develops strategies to reduce the student dropout rate, and oversees school construction projects. Superintendents must strategically make decisions, and; modify increasing district expenses against decreasing budgets for school supplies, materials, security equipment, teacher salaries, and the maintenance and repairs to aging buildings (Kowalski, 2013).

According to Waters and Marzano (2006), superintendents do not always succeed in being the "Wonder Woman" or "Superman" that the school board expected when the contract was signed. Many educators aspire to achieve the superintendent's role within a public school district. However, many are not well prepared for the management and administrative leadership responsibilities that are essential elements to fulfilling the demands of the position. Maranto et al. (2017) reported that superintendent contracts hardly ever mention the academic duties and goals of the superintendent, with the focus on management duties, formal job duties, degrees, and work hours.

Maranto et al. (2017) conducted an investigation into the 115 school district superintendents' contracts of North Carolina "which should offer the school systems accountability and market-oriented incentives for academic improvement" (p. 3). These findings indicated that only nine of the superintendents' contracts addressed academic goals, such as academic goal setting or academic student performance. According to North Carolina General Statute § 115C-271(b), "Each local board of education shall elect a superintendent under a written contract of employment for a term of no more than four years, ending on June 30 of the final months of the contract". Each local board must file a contract with the North Carolina Department of Education before the individual is eligible for this office.

The investigation also studied superintendent contract templates of 20 other states, across the nation, from state school board associations that were posted online. The findings reported "that half of the sample contracts contained language holding the superintendent responsible for the 'education program,' 'instruction,' 'educational mission of the district,' 'pupil and instructional staff,' "and 'educational function.'" (Maranto et al., 2017, p. 18).

Background of the Problem

Many states have implemented requirements in which an individual can pursue, and earn, a public school superintendent position (Kowalski et al., 2011). Certain states require classroom teaching experience in elementary and secondary classrooms, experience as a

building administrator or principal, even a central office administration position to qualify as a candidate for a public-school superintendent. Many states and national education commissions require superintendents to have earned a doctoral degree in educational policy, academic leadership, school leadership administration or another professional field, giving qualified individuals the combination of practical experiences and theoretical comprehension for making decisions and advancing the school district (Pitkoff, 2010).

Although national commissions and individual states have established the necessary academic degrees and professional career experiences, many superintendents are not well trained to handle the complexities of the job. The imperative need is to equip superintendents with continual learning methods and hands-on experiences, which would contribute to the continual knowledge that superintendents should reference to resolve various issues relating to students, staff and the community.

Due to the increased pressures related to the role of the superintendent, universities, colleges, and educational agencies have begun offering superintendent preparation programs across the United States for educators to enroll to receive relevant and continuous training. There is not much research available on the value of superintendent preparation programs in assisting superintendents to succeed in their roles.

According to Pitkoff (2010), all superintendent preparation programs should be honed in 21st century skills and should offer real world experiences, such as internships and the opportunity to be mentored by colleague superintendents. Developing a leadership role should not be isolated but having superintendent colleagues will be valuable resources for the new superintendent. According to Finnan et al. (2015), 89.8% of the respondents stated they had the mentorship of another superintendent.

In the 1980s and 1990s, states began to establish standards and assessment systems to measure educational programs, progress and standard-based reforms (U. S. Department of Education, 2003). States shifted their focus from educational inputs, such as per-student expenditures on instructional materials, to educational outcomes, such as the percentage of students attaining a score of "proficient" on a statewide assessment. State governments passed legislation, adopted new procedures and standards, and pursued policies in several areas that reflected a new emphasis on outcomes over inputs (U. S. Department of Education, 2003).

The reforms focused on student learning, school operations and the whole "schooling" process requiring "more inclusive discourse and more democratic decision-making processes in schools" (Hoyle et al., 2005, p. 3). Reform initiatives include curriculum standards, achievement benchmarks, the application of technology to learning and teaching, "and new program requirements. Policies and mandates are changing the landscape of school and district leadership and influencing how leadership roles must be defined" (Hoyle et al., 2005, p. 4).

The assessments for education reforms disclosed the necessity for changes to leadership and management attributes with the need for educational administration programs of school leaders to meet new demands. "At a time when the nation is deeply concerned about the performance of its schools and near-to-obsessed with the credentials and career of those who teach in them, scant attention has been paid to the preparation and qualifications of those who lead them" (Peterson & Finn, 1985, p. 42).

Establishing schools, developing curriculum and setting high school graduation requirements are the responsibilities of each state and local education agencies. As education evolves and new state and federal mandates were introduced, the superintendent's role has changed considerably. The school superintendency has emerged into a profession that requires qualified professionals with political awareness to be influential and share the educational views for the school district and building coalitions within the school district, city, and local officials (Pitkoff, 2010).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research study will be to determine if the North Carolina Aspiring Superintendent Program effectively prepares North Carolina educators to successfully transition into the superintendent's role. North Carolina does not have any other superintendent preparation programs that would be offered through colleges, universities, professional or educational agencies. This research is based on the perceptions of the attendees of the program which began in 2016. The study will reveal how well business strategies and professional career development and leadership skills were explored and delivered in the curriculum design of the program.

Theoretical Framework

"Theoretical framework is the foundation in which all knowledge is constructed (metaphorically and literally) for a research study" (Grant & Osanloo, 2014, p. 12). According to Lederman and Lederman (2015), the theoretical framework can be understood by answering two basic questions: 1) What is the problem or question and, 2) Why is your approach to solving the problem or answering the question feasible? The data findings leading to these theories may support the success of North Carolina superintendents in handling challenges and successfully moving their school districts forward.

Theories of educational leadership and management have three major characteristics (Bush, 2006).

- Theories tend to be normative in that they reflect beliefs about the nature of educational institutions and the behavior of individuals in them (p. 27).
- Theories tend to be selective or partial in that they emphasize certain aspects of the institution at the expense of other elements (p. 28).
- Theories of educational management are often based on, or supported by, observation of practice in educational institutions (p. 28).

"Theory serves to provide a rationale for decision-making. Managerial activity is enhanced by an explicit awareness of the theoretical framework underpinning practice in educational institutions" (Bush, 2006, p. 26).

For this study, the three theories that were utilized to guide this study are: Transformational Leadership, Interpersonal Leadership and Experiential Learning.

Transformational Leadership

Transformational Leadership theory is a leadership theory that studies the changes of individuals and systems defined based on another's leadership, principles, practices, and dynamics. This theory studies how a person interacts with others and is able to create a solid

relationship that results in a high percentage of trust. It produces an increase of motivation, both intrinsic and extrinsic, for the leader and the followers (Cherry, 2019).

Transformational leaders have a sense of self-worth and self-determination; not in a self-serving way, but in a manner that allows them to make tough and unpopular decisions. They exhibit a strong sense of inner purpose and direction viewed by others in the organization by creating a positive change (Burkus, 2010), exhibiting great strength of their leadership (Bass & Riggio, 2006) and inspiring followers to change expectations, perceptions, and motivations to work towards common goals.

Interpersonal Leadership

Interpersonal Leadership expresses the importance of collaboration and team-effort in decision-making. Interpersonal is referred to as the principle of how groups, organizations, and individuals interact and collaborate from diverse backgrounds, disciplines, and professions. Interpersonal leadership finds the commonalities, the new ideas, and existing practices and other similarities within the diverse groups and individuals building cooperative relationships (Khatree, 2014).

According to past research methods, behavioral skills have been categorized into groups and classification systems. Lamm et al. (2016) conducted an analysis of interpersonal research and literature and identified and coded 14 themes associated with interpersonal leadership: 1) Personal attributes, 2) Communication competence, 3) Supporting others, 4) Fostering and maintaining good relations, 5) Managing conflict, 6) Delegating and empowering, 7) Fostering happiness, 8) Promoting collective decision making, 9) Personal attributes, 10) Developing others, 11) Recognizing others, 12) Motivating others, 13) Encouraging innovative thinking, and 14) Supporting others.

Experiential Learning

Experiential Learning theory (ELT) is a holistic theory of the process of learning from experience and a multi-dimensional model of adult development (Kolb & Kolb, 2017). ELT was created to provide an intellectual foundation for the practice of experiences guiding educational innovation. "The principle that development of experience comes about through interaction means that education is essentially a social process" (Dewey, 1938, p. 58).

According to Jayaraman (2014), experiential learning can produce participants that can provide higher quality work, accept supervision with increased understanding, demonstrate superior time management, increase collaboration and engagement, produce high levels of retention, and produce mindset changes. Additional research addressing ways in which experiential learning can more effectively build transferable and management skills is necessary (Mitchell et al., 2010).

Participants in the Study

The original survey was submitted to the 96 participants that were enrolled and completed the North Carolina Aspiring Superintendent Program since its inception, beginning with 34 participants for the first cohort in 2016 (Granados, 2017). For a participant to be able to enroll in the superintendent development program, the individual must currently be serving in a central administration position within North Carolina public schools.

The respondents addressed the usefulness of the program and how it benefited them, or not benefited them, to be an effective leader as a superintendent of a public school district. The participants' voluntary participation should reflect the variances, differences, and similarities of how the preparation program prepared the individuals to work and manage their school districts as superintendents for the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction.

Of the current research for the North Carolina Aspiring Superintendent Program, 46% of the superintendents interviewed by phone were female and 54% were male. Female representation of superintendents were 30.76% White and 7.69% Black. Black male superintendents accounted for 23.07% and 38.46% were identified as White males. Without adequate research reporting on female superintendents and superintendents of color, those voices and groups will continue to lack accessible role models, mentors and standard preparation to perform in their roles for their school districts (Kowalski & Brunner, 2011).

The respondents have served in the K-12 education profession ranging from 17 years to 30 years. Those serving 15 to 20 years were 15%, 21 to 25 years were 31%, and 26 to 30 years were 54%. Thirty-one percent of the respondents were in a school district with up to 1,999 student enrollments, 31% were in a district with 2,000 to 3,499 student enrollments, 1% were in a school district with 3,500-5,499 student enrollments, 1% with 7,500-9,999 student enrollments, 23% with student enrollment over 20,000 students. The statistics were based on the North Carolina School Report Cards 2018-2019 District Profile.

Data Collection

The data received from the survey was collected from those people that had enrolled and completed the North Carolina Aspiring Superintendent Program, which began in 2016. The data collected for this qualitative study was triangulated into themes and codes based on the participants' responses that had attend the program.

The findings of the research will speak to the diverse challenges of the superintendent's role and how participation in the superintendent program has impacted their leadership style, managing budgets, developing curriculum standards, building partnerships and relationships for student academic success to make better decisions.

In discussion with the Program Director, 17 participants had completed the preparation program and had been promoted into a superintendent's role within North Carolina which the researcher felt would be the better audience to gather the research data. These individuals were notified by invitation to their email address to volunteer to complete the 30 - 45-minute phone interview. The phone interviews were completed within 10 calendar days.

After each phone interview, the researcher asked each superintendent if he or she would volunteer for a virtual focus group. The researcher asked each participant for three times during the following week to schedule the virtual focus group. The researcher received information from 14 of the 17 superintendents to schedule the individual phone interview. The researcher scheduled the 14 phone interviews for each participant and sent a calendar reminder to each superintendent. Some interviews were scheduled and coordinated with the assistance of the superintendent's assistant. One of the participants declined the scheduled phone interview and was not able to reschedule the phone interview, therefore; the phone interviews were scheduled with the 13 current North Carolina superintendents that had completed the program.

Conclusion

The research revealed that educators who had worked as principals, assistant principals, curriculum instruction specialists, career technical directors and exceptional children program administrators, were those who remained pursuant of the superintendent role. Educators and school administrators who had completed SBE testing requirements that worked as a school social worker, school psychologist, school speech-language pathologist, school audiologist, or school nurse had not attended the North Carolina Aspiring Superintendent Program. These positions do require the individual to complete specialized testing and qualifying credentials to serve in these roles, as well as earning the Professional Educators License, a requirement of the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction.

Many of the participants of the research had served in a curriculum and instructional role as a supervisor, or director, with specific responsibilities as instructional leaders who consult with and advise teachers, administrators' and other professional personnel. With national and state expectations requiring students to achieve proficiency levels of curriculum objectives, local school districts focus on implementing those requirements the best of their ability.

The research of the North Carolina Aspiring Superintendent Program does reveal that this program is beneficial for North Carolina educators that are wanting to aspire into a superintendent role. The 6-day session program does offer the participants the necessary information that would be needed to pursue a superintendent role. However, the research does reveal that any participant in attendance for this program, would and should have served as a principal and/or a senior-level administrator's role within the public education system.

With the level of information that is shared within the program, an individual who has not served as principal and/or senior-level administrator within the public education school system would not have developed the platform to transition the individual directly into a superintendent's role. The research does not reveal that certain educational or learning theories are discussed within the program that would make a difference in the knowledge that is shared and discussed in the program.

However, the researcher has observed through the research that it would be beneficial to the participant of the program to have developed a career in curriculum and instruction, being responsible for million-dollar budgets for particular programs within the school district, as well as having developed a mentor relationship with a superintendent. The program does address strategies, research-based models for implementing academic success for students, developing professional development skills for teachers, principals and central administration staff.

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