

An Impossible Job? The View From the Urban Superintendent's Chair

Summary

The district superintendent post is revered as a powerful position that can lever school and student improvement. However, new research from the Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) finds that even the best superintendents are finding it near impossible to make the changes necessary to raise school performance because district governance thwarts their ability to implement reform.

Interviews and surveys from superintendents of the nation's 100 largest urban districts reveal that most, including those from non-traditional backgrounds, fall far short of attaining their goal of improving learning for all students and closing the achievement gap. "We found that existing governance structures encourage acrimony and conflict among superintendents, the board, union officials, and central office staff. This environment sooner or later torpedoes the efforts of a leader," commented Dr. Howard Fuller, principal author of the study.

Political pressure and unrealistic job expectations, in addition to challenges to their authority, intensify the demands on the urban superintendent. As a result, the high expectations set for superintendents are unlikely to be met until the following are in place: 1) school boards have clearly defined, and limited, responsibilities; 2) superintendents have the political skills necessary to garner community support; and, 3) superintendents with leadership and public management skills are recruited or provided training to develop these skills.

Challenges to authority

One might assume that superintendents possess significant authority since their job descriptions say they oversee central office staff, school principals, and teachers. In reality, superintendents reveal that they have little authority over district employees who have tenure. Other groups can challenge superintendents and exercise greater influence over schools:

- *School Board:* 61 percent of superintendents described school board micromanagement as a problem, as it causes them to stray from policy oversight and budget development into the "nuts and bolts" of administration.
- *Teacher Unions:* 47 percent of superintendents reported that relationships with unions are a barrier to progress and expressed concern about union rigidity when implementing reforms.
- *Central Office Staff:* While only 1/3 of superintendents labeled central office staff as an obstacle to reform, some interviews revealed concerns about central office infighting and staff reluctance to change.

These individual constituencies can also collaborate to block change. Some superintendents report a virtual "iron triangle" of boards, unions, and the central staff working jointly to block reforms.

Political pressure

External school district players also put pressure on superintendents to which they must try to respond. Both superintendents from traditional, and non-traditional, backgrounds report struggling with the following issues:

- Half of superintendents surveyed report that it is difficult to address public demands, as they often shift. Also, conflicting

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interests make it difficult, superintendents report, to pursue goals focused on improving student learning and craft a coherent district plan.

- Pressure from community groups can be a blessing or a curse according to superintendents. In either case, a superintendent must manage community support and work strategically to gain support for his/her agenda.

Although superintendents wrestle daily with political pressures, they also see political crises as an ally of reform. Threatened takeovers, independent audits, and federal and state mandates may help free leaders to take actions that are unacceptable in the ordinary course of events.

Job preparation and expectations

Traditional training leaves superintendents wholly unprepared for the political realities of the urban superintendency. Superintendents agree that potential candidates are not exposed to the nuances and the difficulties of the role. The public and political dimensions of the job are glossed over and superintendents often are surprised to find the district's role as a large employer overwhelms its educational mission.

Academic training focused on learning theory, professional development, and budgeting is far removed from the on-the-job realities of a superintendent. Although training should be improved, experience matters the most. A combination of professional expertise on schools along with skills in leadership, politics, finance, and management is necessary for success.

And while a combination of skills is necessary, the traditional up-from-the-ranks education background offers no guarantee. Even though both nontraditional and traditional candidates struggle with district bureaucracy, nontraditional candidates reported that they were better equipped to take external pressures in stride and deal with city and state politics.

Recommendations

Superintendents insist they need greater authority and stability in order to become true education CEOs. A constellation of changes is required to empower superintendents. Specifically:

- The duties and responsibilities of school boards must be reshaped so that boards stop micromanaging and focus only on broad policy guidance, overseeing budget development, and selecting and evaluating the superintendent.

- Superintendents must have explicit authority to hire, fire, and reassign central office staff and school principals. Additionally, superintendents must have more authority over district funds and enjoy greater autonomy managing federal, state, and categorical funding.

- Superintendents must have the political wherewithal and skills to build and maintain a network of community supporters.

- Recruitment efforts should focus on finding candidates with high-level political, managerial, and leadership skills, regardless of whether they have

traditional or non-traditional backgrounds.

- Pre- and in-service training should be overhauled to focus on leadership and public management skills in addition to education theory. Individual training programs could provide superintendents with customized mentoring and training.

- Schools boards must be stabilized. Strategies such as appointment, rather than election, of board members and creation of an independent community support organization may ensure that momentum for reform is maintained over time.

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With the sponsorship of The Wallace Foundation's Education Leadership Initiative, “An Impossible Job? A View from the Urban Superintendent's Chair” was authored by Howard L. Fuller with Christine Campbell, Mary Beth Celio, James Harvey, John Immerwahr, and Abigail Winger. The findings and recommendations are solely those of its authors. To download the report please visit www.crpe.org. To learn more about The Wallace Foundation and their work in this and other fields, please visit www.wallacefoundation.org.