

2016

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Recommended Citation

Radford, Karon; Roberts, Kerry L.; Sampson, Pauline M.; Vinson, Wesley; and Marshall, Ralph (2016) "Superintendent Transitioning: When is the Right Time to Make a Move?," *School Leadership Review*. Vol. 11 : Iss. 1 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.sfasu.edu/slr/vol11/iss1/6>

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Superintendent Transitioning: When is the Right Time to Make a Move?

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Introduction

Leadership preparation programs prepare superintendents every year to enter the profession. One aspect that needs to be incorporated into this learning is the understanding of when it's the right time to leave as many superintendents leave their current position every year for one reason or another. These reasons can range from being fired to career advancements to leaving the profession. Leaving at the right time is crucial for your career and the district. Lashway (2002) posited that almost a quarter of the superintendents serve less than three years, there are many superintendents leaving positions.

A chair of a department in higher education (2011) told about a professor that needed to leave because his "time was past." He was cantankerous, received very poor student evaluations, and was not a productive member of the faculty. In addition, the professor was of the age he could retire and had health issues. Why didn't s/he understand it was time to leave? Additionally, some superintendents have their contracts non-renewed because they don't understand it's time to leave the district. The superintendent needs to be adept about understanding this, as leadership programs need to be concerned about issues of importance (Hoyle, Collier, & Glass, 2005).

It is often difficult to find the correct number of superintendents because there are often open positions during the school year, and some small school districts share a superintendent. Additionally, it is difficult to know the gender numbers of superintendents since few of the databases have gender specified. However, some studies have examined gender in superintendents. For example, one study in 2006 found that 22% of the superintendents were women, while in 2010 the percentage of women superintendents was 24% (Kowalski, McCord,

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Petersen, Young, & Ellerson, 2010). However, Sampson and Davenport (2010) found that only 16% of the Texas superintendents were women.

Robinson (2013) found differences in gender in the reason for leaving a district superintendent position, with female superintendents leaving due to dissonance in job expectations from lack of involvement in instruction, political complexities of the position, the political influence and volatility of the school board, (particularly female board members), the difficulties presented by the intersectionality of familial and work-life identities, stressors on physical and mental health, financial retirement contingencies, and job setting incongruence. Robinson (2013) indicated that political conflict with the school board, and concern for income were likely role specific more than gender specific. No studies were found that examined the relationship between the gender of superintendents and their tenure. Lashway (2002) determined that many superintendents serve only three years. However, Kowalski et al. (2010) found that the tenure had increased to five years. Another aspect of turnover has been job satisfaction for superintendents; however this has remained at high levels according to Kowalski et al. (2010).

The superintendent's role has changed over the last years because of increased accountability during changing demographics (Lashway, 2002). There is a sense that the superintendent job is becoming more demanding with increasing numbers of requirements (Houston, 2001). Some of the reasons for these increased requirements are: 1) changing demographics, 2) fragmenting culture, 3) deregulations of schooling, and 4) increased accountability with the same authority (Houston, 2001). This changing role of the superintendent has also changed from a highly respected position of authority to a position often criticized for decisions that need to be made during the high expectations present amidst budget constraints and accountability (Kowalski, 2005; Nykl, 2009; Rueter, 2009). Further complicating the situational context for superintendents, "...teacher and principal shortages, inadequate school funding, deteriorating and crowded school facilities, and excessive time demands have created a leadership crisis." (Trevino Jr., Braley, Brown, & Slate, 2008, p. 107) There has been some research on why superintendents leave a district with the majority advancing to a larger district or retirement. However, there is little research on when a good time is to make a transition.

Statement of the Problem

There is research on why superintendents leave, but the research reveals little about understanding when it's time to leave a position or retire. Because of this lack of knowledge, some superintendents will leave a position or retire prematurely or too late.. Not understanding the proper timing could effect district operations and student achievement (Waters & Marzano, 2006).

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework that guided this study was based on the understanding of the position of the superintendency and why superintendents leave a position (Pino, 1997; Van Tuyle, 2008; Dykiel, 2003; and Giaquinto, 2010). This study went one step further and focused on cleared understanding of transitions which is part of leadership preparation and accountability.

Review of Literature

According to Spillane and Regnier (1998) the role of a superintendent is that of a conductor and the focus is “three fold.” The superintendent sets standards, establishes measures, and holds people accountable. “The superintendent’s tasks are much like other chiefs in the for-profit and not-for-profit world: set policy, hire smart people, exhort, and get out of the way” (p. 19). Callan and Levinson (2011) identified the role of the superintendent as “providing instructional leadership, promoting student learning, recommending board policy, setting and implement goals, managing district finances, communicating with all constituents, understanding collective bargaining, implementing state and federal laws, and [handling] personnel” (p. 4).

There is a need to understand the reasons for superintendent changing positions. There is a difference of reasons between genders. Women superintendents changed positions because of poor fiscal resources, conflicts with stakeholders, and poor teacher relationships (Pino, 1997). Additional reasons cited by women superintendents for changing were increased personal challenges and opportunities in a larger district. If a woman superintendent was involuntary asked to leave a district, it was because of differences with the school board. Some other reasons for women superintendents leaving their current superintendent position were employment opportunities, family responsibilities, and a lack of peer support (VanTuyle, 2008). Conversely, superintendents remain longer in their positions when there was positive board relations (Patillo, 2008). Other factors in decisions to leave a superintendent position were related to the commute time and relocation decisions (Sperandio & Devdas, 2015).

The relationship with the school board is major reason for superintendent longevity both for women and male superintendents (Dykiel, 2003; Hawley, 1991; Pino, 1997). The relationship with the school board was also more positive with a more stable school board (Tekniepe, 2015). This may be due to the fact that when new school board members join the school board, there is often some unrest, causing decreased school board and superintendent relationships.

Another factor that relates to the superintendent tenure is connected with the school board and their perception of the superintendent’s ability to handle changes while fulfilling their expectations of the job (Giaquinto, 2010). Some other variables that have a relationship with superintendent tenure are the perception of the superintendent’s honesty, diversity of the population, time demands, meeting political and instructional needs, and mandated board training (Atherton, 2008; Patillo, 2008).

Many leaders enjoy the challenges of solving problems that are a part of their job. These leaders find a connection with their work to a personal moral purpose in the position that allows them to enhance the learning of others. The superintendents are committed to their position (Hackett, 2011). Superintendents that have longer tenure have learned to navigate the public climate in communities (Grissom & Andersen, 2012).

There has been some research on business leaders' understanding of when to leave a position that is applicable to superintendents' understanding of when to leave. McKay (2011) identified the following reasons for business leaders understanding of why it's hard to know when you should leave: (a) You don't want to admit that you've stayed too long; (b) You don't usually just "walk away;" (c) You don't have a good enough reason to leave; (d) It's a game to see if you can outlast the board or other people while not knowing that damage is being done; (e) You don't want to admit health complications; and (f) You don't want to admit mental complications. Additionally, Kjerulf (2007) listed four reasons for how you know when it's time to leave:

First, you will never know for sure and it's a judgment call. Second, you probably *do* know and it's called intuition or inner wisdom. Third, you're doing no one a favor if you're staying and not happy at work. Fourth, if your job doesn't make you happy, it's time to get out of Dodge. (p. 1)

Research Question

The overarching research question that guided this study was: How do superintendents know when it is time to leave? The answer to this question helps guide school superintendents to competently navigate this decision. The goal is that the best decision is made for the district and for the superintendent. Additional questions that guided this study were:

1. How did you know when it was time to leave?
2. Have you ever left too soon or too late?
3. If it's time to leave, why would you stay?
4. What would the conditions have to be like to have prevented you from leaving the position (board relations, family or stress on family/self, advancement, financial, job simplification, personal issues, legislative/legal issues, and other)?

Data Sources and Methods

This study utilized a qualitative method conducting interviews with a select group of superintendents who either just retired or had changed positions. Qualitative research was used because it is "done for the purpose of understanding social phenomena" (p. 13). The researchers interviewed 38 superintendents in east Texas. Questions the superintendents responded to were developed by the researchers and required short answer responses. Follow-up, in-depth interviews were then completed by 10 superintendents. Creswell (2012) posited that follow-up in-depth interviews provide deeper understanding. The data were thematically transcribed from interview using open coding and axial coding (Merriam, 2009).

Data Analysis and Findings

Findings of this qualitative study revealed eight themes which determined when the superintendents knew it was time to leave or quit. These themes were: 1) assume a new challenge, 2) board politics, 3) salary, 4) family, 5) community politics, 6) health and/or stress, 7) media, and 8) had an inner "gut" feeling.

When the superintendents were asked a corollary question of, “how did you know it was time to leave?”, themes were: a) loss of enthusiasm, b) easier to leave going up than going down, c) harm to the district is you stay, d) board relationships and e) health. Further analysis of the data revealed that the superintendents tended to link board relationships and community relationships together, as they felt the board represented the community. When the superintendents quit, they said they had an inner peace and a “release in their spirit” from their current position. They felt they had done their best, whether they were going up or coming down. All of these superintendents said they were in education for student learning.

Another corollary question that was asked of the superintendents was “have you ever left too soon or too late?” A majority of the superintendents, forty-seven percent, said they had left at the right time, while thirty-one percent said they had left a district too late, and twenty-two percent said they had left too soon. Another corollary question, tied into the above question, asked the superintendents, “if it was time for you, to leave why would you stay?” Themes revealed by the analysis of the superintendent responses are superintendents felt they could “ride out the storm”, “make things better in the district”, “ego/not a failure”, “family”, or “purchased a home/tired of moving”.

In regards to the conditions that would have prevented superintendents from leaving their current position, the number one reason discussed was board relations, the second was opportunity for advancement, and the third was family/stress on family or self (Table 1).

Table 1

Conditions that would prevent you from leaving

Condition	Percentage	Number
Board related	100%	33
Advancement	82	27
Family/stress on family/self	76	25
Financial	51	17
Job simplification	30	10
Personal issues	21	7
Legislative or legal issues	12	4
Other		n/a

Conclusion

The overwhelming theme of this study, *when it's the right time to leave*, implies that there are eight reasons. This information is critical for superintendent certification programs as, not only do we need to prepare future superintendents to be successful, we also need to prepare them to be alert and aware of their situation. If a superintendent ignores his/her situation, it could be very detrimental to his/her career.

Understanding when it's the right time to leave requires that leaders read the signs correctly and know their inner self. For example, if leaders have no more of a challenge and they get bored, then it's time to move on so they don't harm the district. Future superintendents also need to be able to gauge the climate of their school board and community. New boards members can

change how the board is viewed and views the superintendent. A superintendent that might have been on the right path may not be considered as competent by new board members. Navigating the social climate of the school community is also an area to keep abreast. A community's perception can change with one minor faux pas. For instance, a bond for a new football field instead of fixing a district's aging school buildings can be a concern for the community.

Board members need to have some voice on this topic. As one superintendent told me, "I'd like to see what board members think and see if we're looking at the topic the same way. It would be very beneficial to us." The board is one of the most important factors in knowing when it is the right time to leave. Being able to work well with the board is most important because when this relationship fails, it is not only detrimental to the superintendent, but also to the entire district.

Finally, this type of information should be presented in superintendent programs, regional superintendent meetings, and state organization conferences as professional development. This study illuminated voices of superintendents concerning tenure discussions and found understanding in issues of preparation and practice.

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