

The Principal's Pathway to the Superintendency

After 27 years as a superintendent of schools and now, as the executive director of the American Association of School Administrators, I have no doubt that the superintendent's job is one tough assignment. If it was just about managing a school system, it would be a piece of cake. But the position has become very complex and the turnover rate in large urban school systems, where the average stay of a superintendent is 3.1 years, has reached critical proportions.

the profession attracts individuals who see themselves, or are seen by others, as leaders. A similar rationale applies to why educators become principals. It should not be surprising, then, that being a principal is for many a significant step in the career path to the superintendency.

Many superintendents admit that, as principals, they did not necessarily aspire to a new position. They were happy in their jobs until, often by happenstance, an opportunity came along that took them into either the central office or directly into the superintendency—which is what happened to me.

I must confess that I never aspired to be a superintendent. My experience, however, convinced me that adequate preparation can go a long way to assuring success on the job. Today, many institutions are actively involved in the training of our educational leaders, and



During an economic downturn, superintendents have to make tough decisions in order to balance their budgets. But downsizing staff, eliminating popular programs, cutting back on athletics and co-curricular activities, and rolling back salary increases to staff are all actions guaranteed to make the superintendent a very unpopular individual. When school boards are pressured to reverse these decisions, the superintendent, like the coach of a losing sports team, may be out of a job.

Fortunately, the situation is not quite as bleak in the majority of the 13,251 school districts across America. The median-size school system enrolls 1,200 students, which means that about 6,500 superintendents are running relatively small operations. However, regardless of the size of the district, 60 percent of school system leaders feel the job is highly stressful.

A Leadership Challenge

Why, then, would anyone want to become a superintendent? Those who seek the job do so for the same reason they became educators in the first place—they care about kids and they want to help students achieve. Beyond that,

professional development is a key component of both the National Association of Elementary School Principals and the American Association of School Administrators.

The career path for superintendents tends to differ according to gender and district size. Most school systems are small in size, and in many the superintendent tends to come directly from the principalship and to be the only administrator in the central office. For women, who make up more than 20 percent of superintendents, the path generally runs from the principalship through the central office. And for both sexes, experience in a smaller district usually precedes a move to a large system.

Preparing for the Job

As a principal, you have the advantage of being close enough to teachers and students to best understand their needs and to personally observe the effectiveness of the programs being implemented. That is why, in this day of high expectations, growing accountability, and the need to do more with less, the principalship is the best training ground for the superintendency.

For example, the challenges of making adequate yearly progress and closing the achievement gap are very much focused at the building level. Principals must learn to balance the accountability imposed on them by No Child Left Behind with the demands from staff, parents, and students. In the superintendent's job, you will encounter the same demands, but in greater proportions.

Interestingly, many superintendents do not realize how stressful the position is until they have left it. It's not unlike the old biology class story about how a frog, if dropped into a steaming pan of water, will immediately jump out. But if the same frog is placed in a pot with water at room temperature, and the heat raised gradually, the frog would be cooked alive. Superintendents are like that frog. They don't recognize the rising heat until they are either out of it or cooked by it. This is because superintendents have learned to deal with stress while continuing to be effective.

The Critical Skills

Communication. The superintendent must be an excellent communicator and adept at handling the media. It's no longer sufficient just to plot a course that will adequately meet the needs of your students. You have to definitively convince the school community that your plan is indeed the best one. Because detractors will attack your ideas as ill-conceived, you also will need to put forth your best argument to the media. The people you deal with as principal at a PTA meeting are a very different crowd from the irate taxpayers—many without children in the schools—accusing the superintendent at a school board meeting of frivolously spending their hard-earned dollars. So, if you aspire to be a superintendent, get your communications and media training right now!

Data-driven decision-making. Inundated with data, superintendents must learn to manage it, analyze it, and use it effectively. Just as effective principals use a tremendous amount of data to determine whether an instructional program is working, and the kind of corrections that will result in higher achievement, data-driven decision-making at the district level will lead to efficiencies in operation, better use of resources, and the community support the superintendent needs to get the job done.

Interpersonal relations. Although the job unquestionably requires managerial skill, it's the superintendent's ability to lead people through change that will earn the respect of constituents, faith in his or her decisions, and the willingness to undergo change with some discomfort in the belief that things will improve in the long run.

Interpersonal relations are also critical to the superintendent establishing a good working relationship with the school board. Ninety-three percent of surveyed superintendents report they have a good to very good relationship with their boards because such a relation-

ship is essential to the teamwork and partnership that will result in an efficient school system meeting the goal of providing a quality education.

An advanced degree may also be a factor in moving into the superintendent's job. Slightly more than half of superintendents hold a doctoral degree, mostly in the field of educational administration. While only 28 percent of superintendents in districts with fewer than 1,000 students have a doctorate, the number is 97 percent in districts with 5,000 to 25,000 students.

In most school systems with fewer than 1,200 students, the superintendent comes directly from the principal ranks, while in larger districts the pathway leads through a central-office position. The principal's job is great preparation for the superintendency in that they are both prominent roles where the individual can demonstrate the leadership skills that can result in improved student achievement—a critical factor in today's accountability-dominated education world.

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Pros and Cons of the Superintendency

A recent nationwide survey of superintendents by the American Association of School Administrators revealed the following:

- The top three incentives for considering the superintendency as a career were: being able to make a difference for public education (74 percent); leading learning (52 percent); and compensation (41 percent).
- The top three disincentives for considering the superintendency as a career were: the funding level for public education (54 percent); personal family sacrifices (46 percent); and school board relations and challenges (50 percent).
- When open-ended responses to the question dealing with incentives were analyzed, three prevailing themes emerged: leading learning/school improvement; leading change; and making a difference in the community.
- When open-ended responses to the question dealing with disincentives were analyzed, stress and pressure were identified, along with diminished local control and support, some resulting from No Child Left Behind legislation.