What Counts as Knowledge in the Small School District:
Superintendents’ Thoughts about Decision-making

Rhonda L. McClellan, EdD
Associate Professor
Trimble Hall 103F
Educational Leadership and Policy Studies
University of Texas at Arlington
Arlington, Texas 76019-0118
817.272.0462 (office)
817-272-2127 (fax)
rmcclellan@uta.edu

Adrienne E. Hyle, PhD
Professor and Chair
Educational Leadership and Policy Studies
University of Texas at Arlington
ahyle@uta.edu

Gary Ivory, EdD
Associate Professor and Department Head of
Educational Management and Development
New Mexico State University
givory@nmsu.edu

Please consider this manuscript as a research Best Practice.

Keywords: superintendent, small school districts, and decision making
Biographies
RHONDA L. McCLELLAN explores issues relevant to public school and higher education leadership. The goal of her research overall is to understand how adults in professional transition develop careers in K-20 education leadership and to help those who prepare them better understand what enhances their development.

ADRIENNE E. HYLE is Professor and Chair of the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies in the college of Education and Health Professions at the University of Texas at Arlington. In addition to her research interests in school and higher education administration, she focuses on faculty, gender issues and organizational change.

GARY IVORY has taught in grades five through eight and at the community college level. He has been a central-office administrator and a university department head. He is co-editor of the book, Successful school board leadership: Lessons from superintendents.

Abstract
Based upon the words of small school-district superintendents, this article explores how superintendents might lead in these complex contexts. In national focus groups, thirty-five participants described their decision-making processes as resting upon “doing what’s best for students,” acknowledging the unique challenges of small school district leadership, and negotiating priorities that are in constant flux. The article offers that being reflective may be the best way to lead in such complexity. Additionally, it provides eight means to honing reflection: time to pause, continuous development, small practical steps for leading, and self-regulation being a few.
What Counts as Knowledge in the Small School District: Superintendents’ Thoughts about Decision-making

Some researchers suggested that a systematic study of administration has yielded formula-like advice that administrators can apply in situations to produce predictable results. Scholars argue that this knowledge could “be used with confidence to guide leadership practice, policy, and research” (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003, p. 2), and they claim generalizations are possible because “some leadership practices are valuable in almost all contexts” (Leithwood & Riehl, 2005, p. 19).

Skeptical about this systematic approach to leadership, scholars, such as English (2006, 2007, 2008), have claimed that school administration is context-dependent, that it is not helpful to search for generalizations that apply in all situations, and that leadership development programs, therefore, should not attempt to enshrine good practices “as the ultimate ends” (2008, p. 5). Greenfield (1993) argued that searching for scientific knowledge about administration indulged “at best in a premature hope and at worst in a delusion” (p. 5). In his view, to become a good administrator, one should strive to know oneself and to understand the human condition. Similar beliefs seem to have led to Littrell and Foster’s (1995) claim that “administrators accomplish . . . feats not because of their scientific training and their judicious use of principles of management, but because of their personal and moral presence (p. 33).

Purpose

Because researchers have yet to pinpoint what practicing superintendents perceive as knowledge that really counts and how they use this knowledge in decision-making, we explored how small school-district superintendents described their decision-making as a continuous act of weighing and balancing various factors. We conclude with
recommendations for learning to lead in such complex contexts and situations as the small-district superintendency.

Method

As part of the University Council of Educational Administration’s (UCEA) Voices phenomenological research project that collected focus group data nationally from 93 principals and 81 superintendents, this study focuses on 35 superintendents of small school districts, having fewer than 1,000 students (see Table 1). Each focus group interview lasted approximately two hours and followed an interview protocol based on the works of Krueger (1998) and Krueger and Casey (2000).

Table 1

Focus Group Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year of focus group</th>
<th>Student enrollment of districts</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Number of Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>278 to 955</td>
<td>Midwest</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>400 to 905</td>
<td>Midwest</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>Ten districts with 95 to 774</td>
<td>Southwest and west</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>students. One with 2,500</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>260-800</td>
<td>Midwest</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>Six districts with 230 to 379</td>
<td>Midwest</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>students. One with 1300 students</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>300 to 900</td>
<td>Southeast</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Note. Focus groups contained a total of 37 superintendents. We did not analyze words of the two superintendents from districts with more than 1,000 students. Hence, only 35 superintendents are represented here.

The authors have written articles and papers from these six focus groups, have discussed them in depth and at length, and share here our interpretations based on that experience. Our findings derive from “multiple coders so that the researcher[s] could see whether the constructs being investigated were shared and whether multiple coders could reliably apply the same codes” (Ryan & Bernard, 2003, p. 283). Using N5 text analysis software, we coded all of the transcripts, looking for descriptions of decision making and responses to No Child Left Behind, yielding a number of textual units (Creswell, 2007).

We grouped these textual units into relationships and themes by identifying further similarities and collapsing them into categories. We cross checked these units and themes by reading and rereading large sections of the physical transcripts (Agar, 1980). The data analysis can be described as a movement of reading sections of transcripts, then interpreting and classifying, then returning to the transcripts for further description, a looping form of analysis (Creswell, 2007). To maintain confidentiality, we have identified superintendents only by number, region of the country, and year in which the focus group took place. Because we worked with a subset of a larger database, the numbers are not consecutive.

**Findings**

From the focus group transcriptions and the coded selections, we individually read and chose sections that all three researchers agreed upon. Our participants described that knowledgeable decisions were based upon the pivotal expression, “doing what’s best
for students”; the specific small school district context; and the balancing act of multiple priorities.

“What’s Best for Students”

When the researchers asked the small school-district superintendents to talk about their experiences of “doing what is best for students,” all of the participants described the expression as a pivotal value. Superintendents described themselves as directing their school leadership toward meeting the needs of students. To do so, the participants detailed how they used the expression as a touchstone to navigate a myriad of negotiations that they encountered, or needed to make. Superintendent 18 said, “That’s always kind of been the thing that I’ve gone with. That’s been my bottom line. If there’s a dilemma as to what to do, I’ll always say, ‘What’s best for my students?’” (Southwest & west, 2005). Superintendent 11 explained:

If we’re going to make a mistake, we’re going to make it on the side of the students. . . . And in trying to make the decision, we sometimes defer the decision to these people who have specific needs and try to meet those needs with the children’s best interest in mind. (Southeast, 2006)

Superintendent 38 told us,

As long as you believe that what you are doing is right, and when you use that same old benchmark of what is good for kids, and really mean it, I think it makes things line up pretty easily about what has to happen. ‘Here is the goal and this is why, and I believe in it.’ And it doesn’t really matter after that. (Midwest, 2004)
“Doing what’s best for students” is more than words for our participants. Taken to heart, superintendents pointed out that keeping students as the focus of their work helps them negotiate the multitude and range of decisions that they face daily.

**Context Matters**

The participants told us how their work in small school districts framed what counts as knowledge. In school leadership, district context is key. These administrators talked in many ways about multiple roles and responsibilities of personnel, funding and district resource allocations, the importance of the superintendent’s role in public relations as well as demands of accountability to their communities, public, and school district boards of education.

*Multiple roles of personnel.* The superintendent of a small district must be cognizant that personnel must have various roles and responsibilities. Unlike their counterparts in large districts who depend often on the traditional hierarchical flowchart of positions and chain of command, superintendents in these districts must encourage all personnel to accept that everything is potentially “their job.” Superintendent 23 noted:

> We only have two administrators for 300 people, so . . . we have to decide who has to do this reporting and who has to do this training. . . . I don’t [think] that any of us districts have a person to whom we just say, “Okay, you’re the NCLB person and everything that comes down (about NCLB) you just take care of that, and we can go about doing our jobs and not have to worry about that.” . . . We don’t have the budgets for that. (Midwest, 2004)
The diverse responsibilities that each person handles makes losing them (perhaps due to low pay in small districts) even more difficult than in a larger system with more administrative personnel.

**Allocation of Resources.** As indicated in the previous examples, the allocation of limited resources makes a huge difference in the small district. Superintendent 25 said, “I’ve been able to—just by how you channel the monies, how you focus some things, it makes a big difference in materials that teachers have to work with, and again getting good teachers” (Midwest, 2004). What counts as knowledge for the small school-district superintendent is that within this context, one has substantial discretion with available resources, but must often do more with less.

**Public Role.** Besides asking others to fulfill a multitude of responsibilities with limited resources, participants claimed that their own roles were more complex and visible than the same roles would be in larger districts. Superintendent 19 noted that the small school-district superintendent is at the center of all responsibilities:

If the biscuits are bad at breakfast, they call you. If a kid is not being successful in class, they call you—the whole gamut, from the time it opens in the morning, ‘til the time it shuts down at night. . . . You have to know what’s goin’ on. You have to know how to handle it. You have to know how to get in contact with people who can handle “it” in that situation. . . . It’s that whole thing of a small school system. (Southwest and west, 2005)

Superintendent 14 noted that in the small school district, superintendents must be aware of their position in the community. The superintendent has a very public role.
I don’t think we operate in a vacuum. We work for our communities and teachers. The priority is to give voice and I think as a superintendent, you really have to know the structure of your community and the real power brokers. . . . It’s all about knowing your community. (Southeast, 2006)

Knowing their context mattered greatly to our small school-district participants. The responsibilities facing personnel, the level of influence staff and resources play, and the visible role they serve in their communities affect leadership in small school districts.

*How Superintendents Negotiate Decisions*

The small school-district context provides a foundation of what counts as knowledge for superintendents. Awareness of roles and responsibilities is essential. But, that foundation is only part of understanding how superintendents in small school district do their work and what counts as knowledge for them. Participants discussed their decision-making processes. They described a series of intertwined processes founded on negotiation and balance. Their decisions, therefore, became not based on one clear answer but on an answer that represented a thoughtful response that entertained and weighed the outcome for a number of items and people who are essential to the district.

Superintendent 24 commented about the uncertainty:

Unfortunately in our job, it’s not that this is the perfect answer and this is a totally wrong answer. Often we are faced with minimizing the negatives in order to arrive at a solution that is the best possible one there is. It’s like—I think if you’re a military commander and you have a mission, you’re going to have some casualties, and you’re derelict in your duties [if] all of your soldiers are killed or wounded. But on the other hand, you can’t expect to accomplish a challenging
goal, an obstacle, without having some things go wrong. What we do is not that extreme, but it’s similar. (Midwest, 2004)

In a UCEA Voices study conducted prior to this one, a superintendent said she felt like the man on the Ed Sullivan show spinning plates, trying to keep a number of plates all spinning, running from one to the other, and “The one that drops is the one that makes or breaks you” (cited in Restine, Hyle, & McClellan, 2007). Knowing that in a small school district, decisions can have an immediate and important effect, superintendents have the responsibility of weighing what was important in a situation and recognizing that even though it was important in this situation, its worth may be compromised in the next situation.

**Conclusions and Implications**

We learned that what counts for superintendents appeared to be in constant and fluid negotiation and still bound by doing what is right for students within their school context. We learned from these superintendents that their work was a series of problems without “right” answers. Day, Harrison, and Halpin (2009) reminded readers of “the original observation of John Dewey, who proposed that when it becomes known that some problems cannot be solved with certainty, what is needed is reflective thinking” (2009, p. 90).

We offer here eight means to enable small-district superintendents to hone their reflective thinking:

Step1: All involved in the enterprise need to realize that when a superintendent is not sure of what to do next, s/he is probably reading the situation correctly. This is not being inept or indecisive, but reflective.
Step 2: Superintendents and those working with them must realize that no matter how long superintendents have been working in the field, they can still get better. Day, Harrison and Halpin (2009) noted that three core aspects of individuals develop well into adulthood, identity, moral reasoning, and epistemic cognition (one’s understanding of one’s own understanding or metacognition). All three aspects can contribute to effective small-district superintending.

Step 3: Accept that the small-district superintendency, like many leadership roles, will, on occasion, bring one face to face with one’s own limitations or the limitations of colleagues and clients. A superintendent can allow this to discourage him/her or can step off from this point into new learning experiences.

Step 4: Sometimes, to improve, superintendents need to learn small practical skills, not sweeping insights. It is fine to realize that one is bad at conflict resolution, or out of touch with current instructional practice, or that colleagues are lazy or inept, but that realization does not immediately make for better superintendent leadership. Such an insight is at the personal level, not the “performance” level (Day et al., 2009, p. 188). Sometimes that realization must be tied to a practical plan to improve in discrete areas.

Step 5: A trusted coach can help improvement in a discrete area. The coach does not help by making sweeping indictments or validation. Rather, the coach leads the superintendent to recognize his or her areas of strength and areas that require more learning. This recognition helps the superintendent develop understanding of one’s own skill. Policy makers at state and national levels can help by realizing small-district superintendents may have the least access to coaches and that government personnel can benefit the profession by providing opportunities for coaching.
Step 6: Learning superintendents will reflect about everyday experiences that have the potential to hone one’s understanding or skill. They must realize that no matter how awkward a new behavior feels at first, it will seem more natural with practice.

Step 7: Learning superintendents must self-regulate. This is where the learner keeps an “eye on the prize” and focuses on doing the things needed to get the prize.

Step 8: Everyone involved in helping small-district superintendents grow must realize that leadership development is not a smooth process; rather it “may be discontinuous, nonlinear, and cyclical” (Day et al., p. 186).

Most of the school districts in the United States are small. Countless children have been educated in such districts. Leading them is no easy task. The small-district superintendents in this study are engaged in a worthy effort. They and others must be supported in it. These are ways to provide that support.
References


