Barriers to District Level Educational Reform: A Statewide Study of Minnesota School Superintendents*

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Abstract

"This study attempts to identify and describe Minnesota superintendents' perceptions of barriers to district level reform as well as compare superintendents' perceptions of district reform related characteristics. This research also strives to identify factors preventing Minnesota's district-level leadership from implementing national reform efforts. All acting superintendents in the state of Minnesota were surveyed using a quantitative descriptive approach. The study revealed two major findings: Superintendents who claimed their districts had leadership skills to enact school change and knowledge of successful strategies regarding school reform were unrelated to the identification of barriers to district-level reform; and superintendents who claimed that their districts had passive resistance to change and ingrained patterns of behavior to resist change were related to the identification of barriers to districtlevel reform.

1 NCPEA Publications

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2 Sumario en español

Este estudio procura identificar y describir las percepciones de supervisores de Minnesota de barreras al distrito reforma plana así como compara las percepciones de supervisores de reforma de distrito relacionaron características. Esta investigación también se esfuerza por identificar los factores que previenen liderazgo del distrito-nivel de Minnesota de aplicar los esfuerzos nacionales de reforma. Todos los supervisores interinos en el estado de Minnesota fueron inspeccionados utilizando un enfoque descriptivo cuantitativo. El estudio reveló dos conclusiones mayores: Los supervisores que reclamaron sus distritos tuvieron habilidades de liderazgo para decretar que cambio de escuela y conocimiento de estrategias exitosas con respecto a reforma de escuela fueron no relacionados a la identificación de barreras a la reforma del distrito-nivel; y los supervisores que reclamaron que sus distritos resistencia pasiva tenida para cambiar e inculcó pautas de conducta para resistir cambio fue relacionado a la identificación de barreras al distrito reforma plana.

NOTE: Esta es una traducción por computadora de la página web original. Se suministra como información general y no debe considerarse completa ni exacta.

3 Introduction

Currently, reform efforts across the nation focus on improving teaching methods in learning with the goal of increasing student achievement (Leithwood, Seashore-Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstom, 2004). Reform efforts are also taking a critical look at the impact of school leadership and its link to improved student learning (Seashore-Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom & Anderson, 2010).

At the national level, No Child Left Behind (NCLB) is driving reform. At state and local levels, reform efforts are focused on redesigning teacher and principal evaluation, reforming principal preparation programs, and extending learning opportunities for students. Yet, nationally, we have an increasing number of schools labeled as "failing" and in Minnesota the achievement gap remains exceptionally large, particularly in racial and low-income subgroups (Minncan, 2011). This study explores the barriers in Minnesota impacting successful school reform and the relationships between district characteristics related to reform.

This study strives to understand what barriers prevent Minnesota superintendents from enacting legislative reforms intended to ensure increased student achievement for all students, and it focuses on what Minnesota superintendents identified as barriers and challenges to educational reform efforts and the relationships between district characteristics related to reform.

The research questions that guided this study are as follows:

1. What barriers do Minnesota superintendents identify as the most significant to implementing reform efforts at a district/system level?
2. What district reform characteristics; such as skills, knowledge, behaviors, and structures regarding school reform; do superintendents perceive in their districts?
3. Is there a relationship between district reform related characteristics and superintendents' perceived barriers to reform?

[1] http://www.ncpeapublications.org/latest-issue-ijelp.html

4 Theoretical Framework

In situating this work, a review of research and literature focusing on educational change and federal leadership and the impact policies and leadership has on student achievement was conducted. The Public Educational Leadership Project (PELP) Coherence Framework (Childress et al., 2007) was used as the lens and foundational framework for the study.

A major focus of this study is to understand how the larger systemic educational reform efforts, intended to generate district-level system change, impact the perceived barriers by superintendents who were selected based on their potential to enact policy designed to affect student achievement.

5 Review of Literature

Historically, federal influence over education has been limited but since the 1983 release of *A Nation at Risk* and the more recent implementation of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), federal influence on K-12 education policy has increased. This review of literature explores federal leadership and the impact policies and leadership have on student achievement. Furthermore, it examines how external factors influence states, state education agencies, and the implementation of district reform resulting in increased student achievement. This review also examines educational leadership practices and how they are linked to student achievement.

5.1 Federal Leadership and Education

A nation at risk. In the late 1970s the public perceived that something was significantly wrong with U.S. education (A Nation at Risk, 1983), and this concern led the federal government to examine U.S. educational quality resulting in *A Nation at Risk*. "*A Nation at Risk* was a report, not a legal mandate; if leaders in states and school districts wanted to implement its recommendations, they could; but they were also free to ignore the report and its recommendations" (Ravitch, 2011, p. 29). It was the reforming of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) to No Child Left Behind (NCLB) that ultimately resulted in an increase in federal influence over K-12 education.

No child left behind. The role of the federal government grew significantly with the NCLB legislation, enacting measures designed to increase student achievement by holding states and schools more accountable for students' progress (Department of Education, 2001).

Now, over a decade after NCLB, school districts are feeling the results of increased federal influence through mandated national testing, with schools not annually improving their test scores termed as "failing schools". The consequence of mandating an unattainable goal has brought congress to the understanding that there is a need to rewrite the law.

5.2 State Leadership and Education

Seashore-Louis et al. (2010) completed a six-year study funded by the Wallace Foundation: *Learning from leadership: Investigating the links to improved student learning*. This research provides the most recent significant foundation of knowledge pertinent to this study in the area of state leadership and the impact of federal initiatives on state agencies.

State leadership. States, charged with implementing the requirements of NCLB, created significant changes in policies and mandates. Seashore-Louis and associates (2010) identified five key findings concerning state political culture and policy leadership: (1) all states are exercising policy leadership intended to impact student achievement, (2) state policy leadership for improved teaching and learning often predates No Child Left Behind (NCLB) enactment, (3) there is state level demand for increased leadership activity, (4) this demand doesn't translate into similar policies among the states, (5) policy instruments used to improve teaching and learning vary among states and state policy provides agencies and school districts with general directions for improving teaching and learning, but guidance for more specific means of achieving the goals in question is limited.

The findings of the Seashore-Louis and associates study (2010) describe how states exercised policy leadership intending to align their improvements on teaching and learning with the research on federal reform efforts (Mann, 2011; Peters, 2010; Ravitch, 2010), and this alignment of federal and state focus further impacted State Education Agencies (SEAs).

NCLB impact on state education agencies. Starting in 2001 SEAs were charged as the primary agency responsible for translating state and federal policy (NCLB) into workable requirements for districts and schools.Seashore-Louis and associates (2010) note this change caused SEAs to focus away from finance to the improvement of teaching and learning which created more tension, especially in states less experienced with state accountability. NCLB legislation now requires SEAs to act on many provisions that have not been the subject of state level legislative action.

5.3 District Leadership and Student Achievement

Principal leadership and student achievement. Research suggests that schools succeeding against all odds share certain traits. Most notably, these schools are led by strong principals who hold students and teachers to the highest criteria, believing children of all ethnicities and socioeconomic levels can meet high academic standards (Carter, 2000; McGee, 2004; Seashore-Louis et al., 2010).

Successful principals also create a "can do/will do" culture built on communication and collaboration (McGee, 2004). Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2005) stated, "The research of the last 35 years provides strong guidance on specific leadership behaviors for school administrators and that those behaviors have well-documented effects on student achievement" (p. 7). The research clearly points towards implementing policies that support principal development.

District leadership and student achievement. According to Bjork and Gurley (2005) superintendents alone cannot achieve school reform and increase achievement for all students; they must also provide vision of change for stakeholders and serve as political activists. In their working paper, *School District Leadership that Works*, Walters and Marzano (2006) reported that Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL) conducted a meta-analysis of research on the influence on school district leaders on student performance. The meta-analysis included 27 studies "...resulting in what McREL research believe to be the largest-ever quantitative examination of research on superintendents" (p.3). Four major findings emerged from the study: (a) district-level leadership matters; (b) effective superintendents focus their efforts on creating goal-oriented districts; (c) superintendent tenure is positively correlated with student achievement; and (d) they set clear, non-negotiable goals for learning and instruction, yet provide school leadership teams with the responsibility and authority for determining how to meet those goals (Walters & Marzazno, 2006, p. 4). Establishing a clear understanding that district leadership, when focused on the right work, matters and enhances student achievement.

In this study the researchers strove to identify the barriers superintendents in the state of Minnesota characterize as the most significant to implementing reform efforts at a district/system level. The review of the literature revealed that leadership does matter and as Seashore-Louis and associates (2010) noted,

5.3.1

Reform in the U.S educational system is both lively and messy but, as educators grapple with emerging demands, we found that leadership matters at all levels. Leaders in education provide direction for, and exercise influence over, policy and practice. Their contributions are crucial, our evidence shows, to initiatives aimed at improving student learning, and of course ultimately to the future in which we all share. (p. 283)

6 Methodology

A quantitative descriptive approach was used to survey all acting superintendents in the State of Minnesota. The State of Minnesota, located in the Northern Midwest United States, was selected as the focus for this study based on homogeneity of demographics, convenience, and its large number of districts. Using a quantitative self-perception survey, superintendents' overall perceptions of the barriers to district-level

educational reforms were compiled. The researchers also surveyed superintendent's overall perceptions of their district's characteristics relating to school-level reform.

6.1 Data Sources

Quantitative and qualitative data were collected from 212 of the 350 (60.5%) acting superintendents in the state of Minnesota. The superintendents were located in rural (78%), suburban (20%), and urban (2%) school districts throughout the state. They were predominantly male (86%) and White (98%); and had varying levels of educational attainment.

The survey instrument consisted of 20 questions: 17 Likert scaled, one "yes" or "no," and two open ended. The first eight Likert scaled questions asked superintendents to express their level of agreement with statements regarding district characteristics related to reform. The remaining nine Likert scaled questions asked superintendents to express their level of agreement with potential barriers (See Appendix A) to district reform, such as tenure and lack of funds. The "yes" or "no" survey question asked superintendents if their districts have a strategic long range plan to be used as a road map for school reform. The remaining two open-ended questions asked superintendents to provide a list of additional barriers to school reform within their district and provide a list of the top three reform efforts their district is currently using in an attempt to bring about reform.

6.2 Survey Analysis

The data were analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 19 and were imported to SPSS from Microsoft Excel by a single individual. Descriptive statistics on superintendent characteristics and questionnaire items were computed, including means, medians, standard deviations and percentage frequency distributions. Spearman Rho nonparametric correlation analyses were used to compare superintendent perceptions of district capacity for reform due to the nature of the ordinal Likert data. An alpha level of 0.05 was considered statistically significant.

7 Preliminary Results

The data collected from the survey provided preliminary results that helped to address the focus of the research. This research is preliminary in that it is the first step in identifying the perceived barriers to reform in school districts. After the barriers are identified, a more in-depth study of the affect barriers have on school district reform practices and what strategies can help in removing barriers can then be addressed. This section attempts to explain the results of the study within the three research questions:

1. What barriers do superintendents in the state of Minnesota identify as the most significant to implementing reform efforts at a district/system level?
2. What district reform characteristics, such as skills, knowledge, behaviors, and structures regarding school reform, do superintendents perceive as present in their districts?
3. Is there a relationship between district reform related characteristics and superintendent's perceived barriers to reform?

7.1 Identified Barriers

Superintendents, when posed with nine different barriers (See Appendix A) to district level reform, had the greatest percentage of agreement (strongly agreed and somewhat agreed were combined for all reported results) with: mandates (92.9%), federal requirements (89.0%), lack of funding (87.2%), and tenure (86.2%). The remaining five barriers also had at least 51% or greater agreement. Just over half of the superintendents (51.2%) also stated they did not have a strategic long range plan to use as a road map for school reform.

Thematic coding of the first open-ended response survey item presented the following nine additional barriers not addressed in the survey questions: resistance from teachers/internal employees, state politics,

school culture, lack of time, teachers unions, teacher/leader preparedness, insufficient compensation, a focus on areas other than reform, and the lack of family stability.

7.2 District Reform Characteristics

Of the superintendents surveyed, 81.0% agreed that their district had leadership with the skills to enact change. Additionally, 78.7% of superintendents surveyed agreed that their districts had knowledge of successful strategies regarding school reform. However, 80.1% of superintendents surveyed agreed that their district had ingrained patterns of behavior resistant to school reform. Similarly, 78.2% of superintendents surveyed agreed that their district had a passive resistance to change.

Responses to the second open-ended response survey question relating to additionally implemented reform efforts were categorized as follows: technology integration (43, 20% of superintendents), professional learning communities (PLCs) (40, 19% of superintendents), and response to intervention (RTI) (36, 17% of superintendents). Other reforms such as flexible scheduling (27, 13% of superintendents) and curriculum changes (23, 11% of superintendents) were also listed.

7.3 Relationships Between Barriers And District Characteristics

Significant correlations (see Table 1) were observed between superintendent's level of agreement for knowledge of successful strategies regarding school reform efforts and level of agreement as to whether their districts had leadership with the skills to enact change (sig. < 0.01). Additionally, significant correlations (sig. < 0.01) were observed between superintendent's level of agreement for knowledge of school reform efforts and the following four district characteristics relating to reform: systematic plan for enacting school reform; sense of urgency regarding school reform; articulated vision that embraces change; and structure to implement strategies regarding school reform.

Table 1

Spearman Rho Correlations for District Reform Characteristics

	Structure Implement Strategies	Ingrained Patterns of Behaviors	Passive Resistance to Change	Systematic Plan for Change	Sense of Urgency	Articulated Vision	Leadership with Skills
Knowledge of Strategies							
ρ	.490	-.113	-.091	.382	.273	.435	.407
Sig. (2-tailed)	.000**	.103	.188	.000**	.000**	.000**	.000**
Leadership with Skills							
ρ	.311	.071	.078	.441	.227	.535	1.000
Sig. (2-tailed)	.000**	.305	.263	.000**	.001**	.000**	
Ingrained Patterns of Behavior							
ρ	-.141	1.000	.606	-.054	.012	-.102	.071
Sig. (2-tailed)	.043*		.000**	.435	.865	.143	.305
Passive Resistance							
ρ	-.021	.606	1.000	-.014	.035	.605	.441
Sig. (2-tailed)	.765	.000**		.842	.616	.000**	.000**

Note. *ρ indicates Spearman Rho correlation coefficient.* * *indicates significance at the .05 level.* ** *indicates significance at the .01 level.*

Conversely, superintendent's levels of agreement relating to their district's passive resistance to change were correlated with levels of agreement concerning ingrained patterns of behavior that resist school reform (sig. $< 0.\ 01$). Superintendents' levels of agreement relating to their districts ingrained patterns of behavior that resist school reform and/or passive resistance to change were correlated (sig. <0.05) with levels of agreement concerning the following as barriers to district-level reform: community expectations, insufficient control over school personnel, school calendar, and tenure (see Table 2).

Table 2

Spearman Rho Correlations for District Reform Characteristics and Barriers to District Reform

	Mandates	School Boards	Federal Req	Community Expectation	Budget Control	Control Over Personnel	Lack Funds	School Calendar	Tenure
Knowledge of Strategies									
ρ	.065	-.018	.044	.034	.007	-.032	.072	-.102	-.026
Sig. (2-tailed)	.350	.802	.524	.627	.917	.647	.299	.142	.712
Leadership with Skills									
ρ	.051	.083	-.013	.052	.069	.083	.056	-.008	.103
Sig. (2-tailed)	.463	.234	.849	.456	.325	.234	.423	.913	.137
Ingrained Patterns of Behavior									
ρ	.082	.111	.079	.191	.069	.258	.080	.136	.159
Sig. (2-tailed)	.241	.110	.260	.006**	.321	.000**	.249	.049*	.021*
Passive Resistance									
ρ	.117	.026	.121	.193	.119	.207	.118	.191	.165
Sig. (2-tailed)	.093	.707	.081	.005**	.087	.003**	.089	.006**	.017*

Note. *ρ indicates Spearman Rho correlation coefficient. * indicates significance at the .05 level. ** indicates significance at the .01 level.*

8 Findings

A number of findings emerged from interpretation and analysis of the results. The most revealing findings provided perspectives of how superintendents' not only viewed their district's characteristics in addressing reform, but what was actually perceived as a barrier to school reform.

Superintendents identified the greatest barriers as mandates, federal requirements, lack of funding, and tenure. Although other barriers were evaluated by the superintendents and additional barriers were provided in the open-ended questions, the four most prominent barriers reveal a perspective that the most pressing barriers appear to be outside of the school district's scope of control.

The analysis of relationships among the barriers and district characteristics revealed several interesting trends. First, superintendents who characterized their districts as possessing knowledge of school reform also characterized their districts as having leadership skills to enact change. The analysis of results also revealed the opposite; superintendents who claimed that their district did not possess knowledge of school reform also claimed that their district did not have the leadership skills to enact change.

Of the superintendents surveyed, a majority agreed that their district possessed knowledge of successful strategies regarding school reform as well as leadership with the skills to enact change. Superintendents who claimed that their district had both knowledge of successful strategies regarding school reform and the leadership skills to enact change also claimed that their districts had: structures to implement strategies

regarding school reform; a systematic plan for change; a sense of urgency to change; and an articulate vision that embraces change. However, a majority also agreed that their districts possessed ingrained patterns of behavior that were resistant to school reform as well as passive resistance to change.

Although the relationship between district characteristics relating to knowledge, leadership, passive resistance, and behaviors appear superficially intuitive, when compared with superintendent's perception of barriers, a much richer description emerged.

Superintendents who claimed that their district had knowledge of school reform strategies and the leadership skills to enact change did not relate to superintendents who identified any single barrier to reform. These superintendents did not perceive barriers as greatly when they agreed that their district had both the skills and knowledge regarding reform. Barriers such as mandates and federal regulations may not appear as challenging when the district has knowledge of successful school reform strategies and leadership skills to enact change.

An alternative trend was evident for superintendents who claimed that their districts had passive resistance to change and ingrained patterns of behavior that resist school reform. This group showed no statistically significant relationship with any systematic measure intended to promote school reform. Further, superintendents who claimed that their districts had passive resistance to change and ingrained patterns of behavior to resist change also claimed all of the following as barriers to school reform: community expectations, insufficient control over personnel, the school calendar, and tenure.

These additional relationships reveal a deeper possible explanation as to why district superintendents perceive barriers when faced with the pressure to reform their schools. From the results it can be inferred that those districts with knowledge and skills of reform do not perceive barriers in the same manner as those districts that have ingrained patterns and passive resistance to change.

9 Conclusions

In this study the researchers endeavored to identify the barriers superintendents in the state of Minnesota identified as the most significant to implementing reform efforts at a district/system level. The researchers compared these perceptions of barriers with the superintendents' view of their district reform characteristics in hope of revealing what may be impeding change throughout the state's school systems. Leadership does matter, and specifically at the district level, superintendents can have influence over policy and practice (Seashore-Louis, 2010). Although this study is preliminary in that it described and compared the current view of superintendents in a mid-western state regarding barriers to reform, additional studies will follow, in which the researchers will attempt to understand the impact the perceived barriers have on practices within the district, it also revealed a number of interesting conclusions.

Although over half of the superintendents viewed all the barriers presented to them in the survey as influential in bringing about change regarding student achievement in their schools, the four greatest barriers were mandates, federal requirements, lack of funding, and tenure. This reveals that the greatest perceived barriers are mainly external in nature and come from outside of the district's control. The irony in this result is that those national requirements that were introduced to bring about reform are really perceived by the superintendents as the barriers to bringing about the reform needed for student achievement.

An additional finding that emerged from the data showed that when superintendents viewed their districts as having knowledge of successful reform strategies with the leadership skills to enact change, there was no significant relationship with the superintendent's agreement with barriers to district reform. School districts that emphasize knowledge of successful reform strategies, such as professional learning communities or response to interventions, while simultaneously emphasizing leadership skills to bring about change, may not perceive barriers as threatening.

Another possible conclusion from this study revealed that superintendents who saw their districts as possessing ingrained behaviors that are resistant to reform while having passive resistance to change also had a relationship to agreement with barriers. The relationship among the negative district characteristics while also a higher agreement with barriers is meaningful for districts as they attempt to implement reform initiatives to resolve and address the current behaviors and cultures that exist in schools that may be

detrimental to successful school change.

As a result of these findings the following recommendations have been made for district level leadership interested in improving response to barriers to school level reform:

1. District leadership can increase their ability to respond to reform efforts through professional development sessions aimed at increasing knowledge of successful strategies regarding school reform efforts. Professional development focused on school wide strategies, such as PLCs or RTI, can provide resources for implementation that can begin to bring about reform in schools.
2. District leadership can increase their ability to respond to reform efforts through professional development sessions aimed at advocating for leadership with the skills to enact substantial change in the operations of how schools are addressing student learning.

As with many research efforts, it is the aim of the researchers to reduce the number of possible limitations. Despite such efforts, within this study a number of limitations remained. The greatest limitation to this study is that data collected are based on self-perception, and the view the superintendents have of their own districts. These views may be skewed based on the ability to interact and truly gauge the reality of how their schools are enacting and viewing school change. These perceptions are also limited in the assumption that each superintendent closely knows their leaders and district characteristics related to reform first hand. It is also limited in the assumption that these superintendents have knowledge of what strategies and reform efforts are successful and how to implement them. A final limitation in measuring the perceptions of organizational leaders is the risk of bias by those surveyed in presenting a more favorable reality of their district than what actually occurs.

There is a need for more research in this area, especially in understanding what superintendents and building level leaders see as oppositional to bringing about reform in schools. Another influential group in impacting change in our school systems is the role of the school board. Research is needed to gauge what level of influence the board has in bringing about school reform.

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