Superintendents' and School Board Members' Perceptions of Empowerment

Marilyn Grady

University of Nebraska–Lincoln, mgrady1@unl.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cehsedadfacpub

Grady, Marilyn, 'Superintendents' and School Board Members' Perceptions of Empowerment" (1995). Faculty Publications in Educational Administration. 53.
http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cehsedadfacpub/53
Superintendents' and School Board Members' Perceptions of Empowerment

MARILYN L. GRADY

INTRODUCTION

This chapter focuses on superintendents' and school board members' perceptions of empowerment. The literature is rife with descriptions of empowerment from the perspectives of principals and teachers. Little has been written about empowerment from the perspectives of superintendents and school board members. This chapter is based on interviews conducted with school board members and superintendents from four midwestern states, as well as available literature. The school board members and superintendents who were interviewed represent districts that have had experience with empowering their staff members. Using this information, the sections include administrators' roles, school board members' roles, impact on administrative roles, definitions of empowerment, and recommendations.

ADMINISTRATORS' ROLES

In examining administrators' roles and empowerment, it appears that the roles most affected by empowering staff members are those of the central office staff. In school districts that traditionally have had
many central office staff members, empowerment may lead to a reduction in staff.

CENTRAL OFFICE ROLE

In order for empowerment to occur, the central office staff may need to shed some of its legitimate authority and become facilitators, not dictators (Lindelow and Heynderickx, 1989). As authority is stripped from the central office staff, considerable power is also lost. Power is lost because functions change from that of control to that of service. Obviously, the central office staff may not be happy about the loss of authority and power (Lindelow, 1981).

In addition to losing authority and power, the central office staff frequently becomes smaller. A dramatic reduction in the number of central office staff members is typical. Although this downsizing may simply represent the reassignment of individuals to different roles in a district, the concomitant anxiety about job change can be stressful and even frightening for individuals.

The central office continues to oversee a number of district functions. Personnel is one of these areas. Personnel functions include recruiting employees, maintaining personnel records, and providing technical assistance to school sites. The central office staff may also retain responsibility for centralized preservice teacher training (Lindelow and Heynderickx, 1989).

Developing student and staff performance standards; offering technical assistance to schools; determining how much funding each school should receive; and carrying out systemwide planning, monitoring, and evaluation are other central office staff functions (Lindelow and Heynderickx, 1989). Districtwide, the central office monitors the district's effectiveness in meeting its goals, through both visitations and standardized tests.

In these new roles as district facilitators, the central office staff must learn to adjust to new and often ambiguous expectations. It is sometimes difficult to decide when to play the role of initiator (the transformed "director" role) and when to play the role of responder (more commonly known as the "facilitator"). Although both roles—responder and initiator—are important, it can be difficult for central administrators to find the appropriate balance between them (Declehan, 1990, p. 18).

SUPERINTENDENT'S ROLE

The superintendent, however, is in a unique position. The superinten-
Superintendents' and School Board Members' Perceptions of Empowerment

The superintendent may be the initiator and facilitator of empowerment within a district, or the superintendent may be a blocker. Whatever course a school district follows, the superintendent has considerable influence in creating the superintendent's role.

Efforts to empower staff members in a school district are destined to fail without the support and encouragement of the superintendent. Empowerment demands decentralization. If a superintendent does not advocate decentralization, then there can be no significant empowerment of staff members.

The superintendent must demonstrate a willingness to delegate responsibility and a willingness to share authority. That willingness is quite rare. However, there is an increasing number of superintendents who recognize that empowering others truly empowers them. These superintendents share not only authority but information, which is often called the currency of power. Accountability is also shared, as is the credit for jobs well done (Marburger, 1985).

The superintendent, as the chief administrator of the school district, will be the one person responsible to the school board for administrative decisions. The superintendent is responsible for administering the entire system—business matters, personnel, school property, budgets, maintenance, and overall curriculum (Marburger, 1985). Superintendents continue to be responsible for setting and achieving district goals, communicating their vision and shared values, and building district support for the schools in each of the communities within their jurisdiction (Lawson, 1989).

According to Lindelow (1981), for the superintendent the most important job functions are selecting site managers, making as much money for the district as possible, developing standards of service for school programs, district planning, and continuing evaluation of these functions. Superintendents note that the most important task is the selection of principals.

Superintendents become increasingly dedicated to decentralized management once they realize how it can help them meet the responsibilities of their office in a more effective and efficient manner. As the entire system becomes more accountable and responsive to client needs, the job at the top becomes easier and easier (Lindelow and Heynderickx, 1989).

Empowerment benefits superintendents by allowing them to concentrate on long-range planning and the need to communicate vision to everyone outside of the schools who can help make it a reality. Empowerment focuses accountability on decisions, making it clear which individual has ultimate responsibility for any decision. Empowerment increases the quality and quantity of communications among faculty,
parents, principals, and superintendents as formal, top-down memos and telephone calls are replaced by more information and face-to-face discussions. Face-to-face communications in a school and district are more likely to cause successful programs to be shared between teachers and principals and principals and superintendents (Lawson, 1989). In the final analysis, greater trust is created for all members.

The message for the superintendent is clear: the aim of the wise is to empower others to use power to help themselves. It is through the diffusion of power that one becomes influential and effective (Marburger, 1985).

PRINCIPAL’S ROLE

The principal’s role is most often described in the literature concerning empowerment. Descriptions of the principal’s role by superintendents and school board members suggest that the expectations for the principal “to make empowerment work” are high.

Superintendents describe the principal’s role in empowerment as being the facilitator or the one who allows others to act. The principal is the creator of a climate conducive to empowerment, a communicator, and a leader.

Facilitator

The principal’s facilitator role is multifaceted. The principal’s role is as a mentor and resource person, one who pulls together all staff members and asks the question: “What can I do to help you be successful in the classroom?”

The principal is the instructional leader who facilitates and works with staff. An important task for principals is to nurture people as individuals. A principal who is successful at empowering others is one who has developed rapport and stimulates collaborative efforts. The principal is the catalyst who gets faculty to expand their horizons and move in new directions.

To empower others, principals must fully share information with all who need to receive it. The principal must offer opportunities for staff training so that staff feel competent to fully participate. The principal must be willing to work with groups and must be able to build consensus within the staff.

Allowing Others to Act

The principal allows staff to become a part of the decision process.
The principal must be able to receive input in a positive way and then be able to implement that input so that individuals do not perceive the decision process as simply an exercise.

Teachers need flexibility in the classroom role within district guidelines. Principals who empower teachers must trust teachers and their judgment.

The principal's role is to allow staff to think for themselves and come to their own conclusions about how to affect the climate in which they work. Creating a climate for learning is an important task.

In creating a climate for learning, the principal must establish an environment in which teachers know that their ideas will be solicited, given serious consideration, and then utilized as part of the consensus process that best serves students. The principal has to set the climate, develop trust, and spend the time required to achieve success in the schools.

Clear communication is imperative. All staff need to have information for decision making. The principal's role is to keep staff and students informed and at the forefront of decisions. Informed people are empowered people.

Leadership

The principal is a significant member of a team rather than someone who has to "pull people." The principal should be able to say, "I hope to convince and involve you, rather than make you do it."

The principal's role is to be a colleague, rather than a supervisor, one who is supportive of staff. The principal is a leader who facilitates the work of others. This leadership includes developing staff relations and trust. The principal points out problems, generates alternatives and solutions, and then helps to reach consensus.

Being a cheerleader, applauding what the staff is doing, being interested, and reinforcing involvement are parts of the role. The principal needs to study, model, and utilize the concepts of empowerment for the staff as well as provide ownership and a sense of professional worth for everyone.

SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS' ROLES

Empowerment does not change the role of the school board. The board continues to have sole responsibility for setting the education policy for a district. The board then delegates responsibility for implementing that policy (Marburger, 1985). For instance, in districts where
empowerment exists, the school board gives responsibility to principals to hire and fire nearly all employees, develop the budget, and decide on necessary support services (Lausberg, 1990).

The board's primary duties, according to Lindelow (1981), are to provide general direction for the district by establishing goals and policy statements, keeping informed about the district's progress toward goals, and acting as a decision maker of last resort.

The school board has responsibility for the quality of education of all students in the district. The members have responsibility for monitoring their administrators and holding them accountable for the implementation of the policies that set forth the means of accomplishing the desired quality. They cannot delegate that responsibility. They are also fiscally responsible to the taxpayers of their district and to the state. They cannot delegate fiscal responsibility. They can, however, delegate some budgetary discretion to the local school (Marburger, 1985).

The school board is a powerful influence on initiating or blocking efforts to empower staff members. For empowerment to truly exist in a school district, the board must do more than merely “go along” with a superintendent’s proposal. The board must support the concept of empowerment through its policy-making and fiscal decision-making acts, as well as through the selection and support of a superintendent who is committed to empowerment.

IMPACT ON ROLES

STAFF

Responses to questions about the impact of empowerment on school districts indicated that the area of greatest impact was on the teaching staff, in areas such as their morale, involvement, and effectiveness. Respondents noted that the teaching staff was more viable now because they make decisions and implement them. There is shared responsibility, and all are working harder to achieve goals. The talents of all teachers are utilized as well as the talents of noncertified staff. All benefit from the combined perspectives and opinions of the total staff.

One area of great impact is morale. The outcome of empowerment is higher morale. Individuals are very positive about the work they are doing. They feel important and good about what they are doing for kids. Individuals realize that they can make a difference and that they can share ideas. They are opening up, listening, and becoming comfortable with the process. There is more initiative on the part of teachers and
staff to grow professionally and impact change for the benefit of children. Employees feel better about their jobs and themselves because they are participating more and making greater use of the skills they have. The staff are more thorough about what they do, and surveys show that staff feel good about their input. There is more initiative on the part of teachers and staff to grow professionally and impact change for the benefit of children.

Overall empowerment leads to a greater sense of ownership and buy-in to school efforts. There is a greater willingness to risk and try new things. There is a shared accountability for changes that will benefit kids. With empowerment, more people feel responsibility for what's going on. Empowerment addresses the whole issue of ownership. Individuals have more ownership of decisions that impact their environment and they are involved with the implementation of those decisions. With high staff morale and greater involvement of individuals, the net effect is greater effectiveness in achieving organizational goals.

SUPERINTENDENT

Empowerment’s impact on the superintendent is in the areas of awareness, time, and developing new skills or behaviors. Superintendents described their increased awareness. They spoke of the need to constantly remember that they must frequently consult with individuals concerning decisions. They repeatedly spoke of the need to talk to everyone involved in a decision or a task.

Empowerment opened communication lines with administration, staff, students, and the public. This open communication provides multiple perspectives on issues, as well as opportunities for the superintendent’s point of view to be known. Although the ideal is consensus, even when this is not possible, all benefit from hearing multiple perspectives and from being heard.

Another impact of empowerment on the superintendent’s work is the increased time needed to reach decisions. On the issue of time demands, there was universal agreement that acting unilaterally is quicker but does not result in better decisions. The superintendents note that it would be easier and take less time to make decisions unilaterally, but the result would not be the same. Empowerment is less efficient, but the outcomes are much more effective.

The superintendents spend more time waiting to get input from various groups in the district before decisions are made. This requires patience and trust in the process. It may be easier to be authoritarian and more difficult to be collegial.
Empowering staff members requires coordination and organizational skills. From the superintendent's perspective, empowering staff results in more work and more time. There are more meetings, more reports, more communication. Increased communication is time-consuming and labor intensive. The result, however, is that superintendents have more and better information and feel that the decisions being made are better because of this.

In order to empower others, superintendents may need new skills and behaviors. The superintendents interviewed described their need to develop coaching or helping skills as a means of empowering others. They reported being more motivational, rather than "directional." The superintendents often remarked that, in the past, they had been "take charge" or "go ahead and do it" people. Now they find themselves deferring action to others.

Comments reflected the "new me" administrator. The superintendents described themselves as being more democratic. They spend more time and effort gathering input and being involved in committee work. In spite of increased time and effort, they report being happier with their jobs as superintendents. They say that, even though they are working harder now than ever, they are more satisfied with the results of their efforts.

The superintendents note their improved interpersonal and communication skills. They describe the rapport they have established with personnel in the district. Communication is more open and honest. More power is delegated to individuals and groups.

Superintendents become more hands off, allowing staff to try their ideas. Superintendents also report that they struggle to identify which issues should be referred to which individual or group. Using the expertise and time of all individuals appropriately and effectively is a goal of the superintendents.

Superintendents said they are changing their style of administration. Learning to wait is a challenge. Rather than being action people, superintendents must be patient as they allow time for the process of empowering others to succeed.

The impact on the superintendent's role is that the position demands that one be a facilitator, someone who is supportive of change and of others. The superintendent's role changes from being one of a top-down, line authority to one of collegiality. Some trepidation accompanies these changes since district responsibility still rests with the superintendent. Trust is a critical factor for superintendents who perceive their position to be vulnerable and unprotected. Empowering others may appear to be a risk.
PRINCIPAL

When the superintendents and board members were asked to describe the impact of empowerment on the principal's role, they said that there had been no impact because the principals had always empowered their staffs. The principals have shared decisions and allowed decisions to be made at the level most appropriate to the decision. They indicated that communication had improved because of empowerment, and, once again, they stated that empowerment takes time. Continuous conversation and much committee work are required by empowerment. Both an investment of time and good communication skills are essential.

There is a perception that principals are more responsive than they have ever been. Communication between staff members and the principal is constantly improving. There is more control, ownership, and responsibility for programs. Individuals are more willing to take risks and try new things. Figure 9.1 represents the impact of empowerment.

DEFINITIONS OF EMPOWERMENT

Superintendents and school board members provided the following definitions of empowerment.

INVOLVEMENT

Empowerment is the increased involvement of teachers in the decision-making process. It is shared decision making through a solicitation of ideas and a sharing of decisions.

Empowerment is making decisions at the level where they have impact. For instance, custodians are involved in solving custodial problems, teachers in solving classroom problems, principals in solving buildingwide problems, and superintendents in making districtwide decisions (AASA, NAESP, NASSP, 1988). Empowerment is “getting input at all levels.”

Empowerment is how much authority teachers have in districtwide decisions. It is the responsibility you give people and hold them accountable for. The superintendents, however, were quick to insert the caveat that time constraints often led to situations in which this ideal of decision making at the level of impact could not, in fact, be implemented.
Figure 9.1. The impact of empowerment.
An extension of this definition is that empowerment is providing opportunities for professional development for staff members. Empowerment is allowing individuals the opportunity to do their own jobs. The superintendents said that implicit in allowing people to do their own jobs is not “second guessing” them. For the superintendents this meant imparting a sense of efficacy to professional employees.

“Empowerment is people being given a job to do and then being left alone to do it,” was a frequently offered definition. Empowerment is involving front line people in setting direction for a school.

Opportunities for greater involvement are in areas such as purchasing equipment, deciding curricular issues, or involvement in student affairs. Empowerment is people having a sense of their voice and having control of what's occurring around them in the classroom and in the district.

Empowerment is also a process. Empowerment is the process by which there is an exchange of information and ideas. The exchange may be weekly, monthly, or daily. The exchanges occur between faculty, staff, and administrators. This is full-channel communication. The real key, according to the superintendents, is getting ideas generated.

Authority is broadly distributed (Malen et al., 1990). Individuals are given opportunities to take risks and to compete without repercussions of failure (Lagana, 1989).

Empowerment is a focused process that includes detailed communication and training. It is a process of providing people with the opportunity and resources to enable them to believe and feel that they understand their world and have the power to change it. Individuals have greater autonomy and independence in decision making (Lagana, 1989).

One of the major tasks for administrators is getting staff attuned to being involved in the decision-making process. Staff need to have ownership of what is happening in the district, in the schools, and with the children. Staff members should have ownership over those things that they are responsible for. They should have control and ownership and a part in decision making. Empowerment is giving ownership of deci-
CREATING A CLIMATE FOR EMPOWERMENT

EMPOWERMENT IS

Ownership
Involvement

Process
Opportunities

Figure 9.2.

Empowerment is creating ownership for teachers, staff, and the community. It requires collegiality and listening.

It is a cooperative effort between all staff and administration regarding school concerns. It is cooperative teamwork between and among administration and faculty members.

There are two avenues of empowerment. The first is a management issue. This means the involvement of people most affected daily in the decision process. Ownership is important. When people have ownership in decisions, there simply are fewer problems. The second avenue is that the long-range strategic planning process includes staff, both certified and noncertified, in committees. All staff members are involved in setting objectives that are related to their daily work. Figure 9.2 is a representation of these definitions of empowerment.

RECOMMENDATIONS

There are several key factors that serve as reminders of good practice that superintendents and school board members should keep in mind. First of all, implementing change of any kind takes time. It takes time to implement new procedures, define new roles, and balance these.

Implementing change requires the ability to realistically plan for a
future. Planning may be an especially critical issue for educators who have a nine-month perspective on the future. Those who perceive education as simply an August/September to May/June enterprise may suffer from a lack of future orientation. Implementing significant change requires a multiyear plan with clear expectations for each year in the change cycle.

A second factor is concerned with clarity. Roles, responsibilities, goals, and authority need to be clearly defined. Without a clear specification of expectations, chaos and confusion reign. Only when there is clarity can individuals and groups be held accountable for the achievement of goals.

A third factor is the skills needed by individuals who are responsible for empowering others. These skills include group techniques such as conflict resolution, consensus building, brainstorming, nominal group technique, listening, and communicating. Individuals also need planning skills. They must be able to encourage and reinforce others and generally be able to assist with the professional development of a staff. School board members and superintendents may also need to refine the skills that enable them to work together efficiently and effectively.

A fourth factor is that empowerment demands that sufficient resources be invested in preparing staff members for empowerment. This means that resources must be provided for staff development activities. Funding, personnel, time, facilities, and equipment are some of the necessary resources.

A fifth factor is that those who want to empower others must be patient, have faith in the process, and be able to trust others. Empowerment demands a stand-by, stand-back, and stand-off capacity.

REFERENCES


