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Marilyn Grady

University of Nebraska–Lincoln, mgrady1@unl.edu

Jack McKay

University of Nebraska at Omaha

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EARLY LEAVER SUPERINTENDENTS

by
Marilyn L. Grady
Jack McKay

In studies of the critical incidents that cause superintendent turnover (Grady and Bryant, 1991a; Grady and Bryant, 1991b; Grady and Bryant, 1991c), we became aware of the "early leaver" phenomenon in the profession. This phenomenon has caused us to question early leavers about their incentives for staying in or leaving the superintendency.

The discussion of when and if education will ever be a "true" profession is intertwined with the departure of individuals from the superintendency at the prime of their careers. How often do we learn of physicians who leave the medical profession at 45 or 50?

Our study was informed by the literature concerning the superintendency. The works of Schmuck and Schmuck (1992), Blumberg and Blumberg (1985), and Callahan (1962), address the controversy that accompanies the superintendent's role. The descriptions of the critical incidents that precipitate superintendent turnover are documented by Grady and Bryant (1991a, 1991b, 1991c).

Eaton (1990) defined the forces that undermine the superintendent's effectiveness. These include board decisions and pressure by teacher organizations and citizen groups. Superintendents, too, are continuously placed in the unsavory situation of implementing and enforcing decisions and policies that may conflict with the superintendent's point of view. Callahan's (1962) vulnerability thesis states that the nature of the superintendency makes the incumbent vulnerable, vulnerability is cumulative, and vulnerability leads to turnover.

Waller (1932) described the superintendency as a situation in which, over time, a superintendent makes more enemies than friends. By virtue of the role, the superintendent is in a position of having many opportunities to become unpopular yet few opportunities for gaining friends. It takes only two or three years for this erosive situation to take its

toll on the superintendent. In a study of California superintendents, Giles and Giles (1990) reported that 80% of the individuals who left superintendencies did not assume a new superintendency within the next two years.

The purpose for conducting our study was to determine what factors caused individuals to become early leavers. By early leavers we mean individuals who did not seek new superintendencies after voluntarily or involuntarily leaving a superintendency before reaching retirement.

Procedures

In order to complete the study, a survey instrument was developed based on the literature concerning the superintendency. The survey instrument was pilot tested by four individuals who are recent early leavers. Based on their responses and suggestions, the survey was revised.

Identifying the population for the study was a challenge. However, because of our earlier efforts to interview superintendents and board members concerning turnover and critical incidents, the challenge was familiar. We realize that individuals and school districts strive to make superintendent turnover appear voluntary. This is done to protect individuals and school districts from unwelcome scrutiny as well as to allow individuals to preserve career opportunities and to enable districts to be able to employ new superintendents.

To begin our study, we contacted the executive directors of the state administrator organizations in the United States. We asked the directors to provide the names, former school districts, and telephone numbers of individuals whom they knew were early leavers. Through this procedure, we were given the names of 83 early leavers by the 40 executive directors who responded to our requests. We were able to find addresses for 72 former

superintendents. A letter explaining the study, a survey, and a self-addressed envelope were mailed to these individuals. Forty-nine individuals (68%) were willing to participate in the study and returned completed surveys. The findings from the survey are presented in the following section.

Findings

Forty-nine individuals responded to the survey. The length of time the respondents had been superintendents ranged from 1 year to 20 years.

The respondents were Caucasian (45/92.9%) or Hispanic (4/7.1%). The number of women in the study was unusually large (6/11.6%) given the national representation of women in superintendencies. The age at departure from the superintendency ranged from 28 to 57 years old. The range of ages is presented in Table 1.

Of the respondents, 27 (54%) have doctoral degrees, 15 (31%) have specialist certificates, and 7 (15%) have masters degrees.

The early leavers were asked to indicate to what extent 20 factors were perceived to be incentives to stay in or leave the superintendency. The responses were arrayed on a Likert-type scale with one being a strong incentive to leave and five being a strong incentive to stay. The means for these incentives are presented as Table 2.

Gender

Early leaver superintendents rated "relationships with other superintendents" as the strongest incentive to stay in the profession. Further analysis indicates that there were no differences between male and female superintendents about the incentives to stay in the profession (see Table 3).

Female early leaver superintendents (N = 6) rated the school board's micro-management of administrative activities as the primary incentive to leave the profession. Male early leavers (N = 43) indicated that relations with the school board was the primary reason to leave the superintendency. Other incentives to leave were internal board conflict that inhibited school improvement, conflict with the school board over educational priorities, and the lack of personal privacy (see Table 4).

Highest Degree

Early leavers with masters degrees (N = 7) believed that relationships with building principals were the strongest incentive to stay in the profession. Former superintendents with the educational specialist

Table 1
Age of Departure

Age Range	Number	%
20-29	02	(4.8)
30-39	28	(57.1)
40-49	17	(33.3)
50+	02	(4.8)
Total	49	(100.0)

Table 2
Incentives

(1 - strong incentive to leave; 5 - strong incentive to stay)

Incentives	Mean Rating
School board's micro-management of administrative activities	2.11
Internal school board conflict that inhibited school improvement	2.15
Personal privacy	2.23
Conflict with school board over educational priorities	2.32
Relationships with the school board	2.35
Problems inherent in the superintendency	2.53
Family concerns about the position	2.55
District funding or budget problems	2.67
Special interest groups that block desired curriculum improvement	2.73
Conflict with community over educational priorities	2.89
Professional autonomy	2.95
Personal health	3.10
Elimination of superintendent's position due to consolidation	3.11
Salary and benefit package	3.22
Status of the position of superintendency	3.23
Relationships with teachers' association/union	3.31
Relationships with citizens	3.85
Relationships with the principals	3.97
Goals accomplished as superintendent	4.10

Table 3
Incentives to Stay in the Superintendency —
by Gender

(1 - strong incentive to leave; 5 - strong incentive to stay)

Incentive to Stay	Female N = 43	Male N = 6	Total N = 49
Relationships with other superintendents	3.83	4.26	4.22
Goals accomplished as superintendent	3.80	4.12	4.14
Relationships with principals	3.50	4.09	4.02
Relationships with citizens	3.50	3.95	3.90

certificate (N = 15) indicated that relationships with fellow superintendents were the primary incentive to stay in the profession while early leavers with doctoral degrees (N = 27) believed that accomplishment of goals was the primary motive for staying (see Table 5).

Early leaver superintendents with doctoral degrees (N = 27) believed that the strongest incentive to leave the profession was the school board's micro-management of administrative activities. Early-leaver superintendents with master's degrees (N = 7) believed that internal school board conflict

Table 4
Incentives to Leave the Superintendency —
by Gender

(1 - strong incentive to leave; 5 - strong incentive to stay)

Incentives to Leave	Female N=6	Male N=43	Total N=49
School board's micro-management of administrative activities	1.83	2.14	2.10
Internal school board conflict that inhibited school improvement	2.00	2.20	2.19
Conflict with school board over educational priorities	2.33	2.29	2.29
Personal privacy	2.17	2.32	2.30
Relations with school board	1.67	2.39	2.30

Table 5
Incentives to Stay in the Superintendency —
by Highest Degree

(1 - strong incentive to leave; 5 - strong incentive to stay)

Incentive to Stay	M.S. N=7	Ed.S. N=15	Ed.D. N=27	Total N=49
Relationships with other superintendents	4.14	4.40	4.11	4.22
Goals accomplished as superintendent	4.00	4.00	4.35	4.18
Relationships with principals	4.29	4.07	4.00	4.06
Relationships with citizens	3.57	3.80	4.04	3.88

was the primary incentive to leave the profession (see Table 6).

Years of Experience

When considering the years of experience as a superintendent as a variable, early leavers with more than five years of experience indicated that relationships with peers was the primary incentive to stay

Table 6
Incentives to Leave the Superintendency —
by Highest Degree

(1 - strong incentive to leave; 5 - strong incentive to stay)

Incentives to Leave	M.S. N=7	Ed.S. N=15	Ed.D. N=27	Total N=49
School board's micro-management of administrative activities	2.28	2.27	1.96	2.10
Internal school board conflict that inhibited school improvement	1.67	2.53	2.20	2.21
Conflict with school board over educational priorities	2.57	2.26	2.22	2.30
Personal privacy	2.71	2.33	2.11	2.29
Relations with school board	2.71	2.27	2.23	2.31

Table 7
Incentives to Stay in the Superintendency —
by Years of Experience

(1 - strong incentive to leave; 5 - strong incentive to stay)

Incentives to Stay	Years of Experience			
	< 5 N=16 (32%)	6-15 N=31 (64%)	> 15 N=2 (4%)	Total N=49 (100%)
Relationships with other superintendents	3.58	4.63	4.80	4.24
Goals accomplished as superintendent	4.18	4.36	4.20	4.16
Relationships with principals	3.92	3.82	4.80	4.06
Relationships with citizens	3.75	3.81	4.40	3.92

in the profession. Early leavers with five or fewer years of experience indicated that accomplishing goals was the main incentive to stay in the profession (see Table 7).

The school board's micro-management, no matter how many years of experience, was the primary incentive for individuals to leave the superintendency. Early leavers with less than five years of experience indicated that relations with the school board was the second major incentive for leaving the profession (See Table 8).

Implications

Based on the findings of this study, early leavers are the result of conflicts with school board members. These superintendent/board conflicts continue to pervade studies of superintendents. How to resolve these issues should be a priority for the profession. Underlying these conflicts are school boards that may be an anachronism as we approach the next century. The concept of local control of schools personified in school board members may be out of sync with the realities of contemporary society. Representative democracy in New England towns or the pioneering rural areas of the Great Plains is a very different form of government than may be possible in today's pluralistic society. In earlier times, before the waves of school consolidations in the U.S., schools were reflective of the mono-cultures prevalent in towns and rural areas. Consolidations and population growth have led to increasing complexity and differing points of view.

These differing points of view are evident in the large number of critical incidents superintendents experience that arise from individual board members who have an ax to grind. Students, teachers, and communities deserve stability for their schools. Frequent turnover of superintendents does not lead to stability.

Superintendents and the colleges or universities they attend invest significant resources in preparing for the role of superintendent. When superintendents leave the profession early, there is a great loss to the profession, the preparation programs, and the individuals involved. Certainly there are exceptions but nevertheless, by the time an individual assumes a superintendency, his or her career path should be set.

This study is based on a survey of 49 early leaver superintendents. Further studies with larger sample sizes would be helpful in understanding this egress behavior. However, it is clear from this study that the relationships with board members must be addressed in preparation programs and by the professional associations. Programs that prepare individuals to resolve conflicts and mediate differences are essential for superintendents and board members.

Table 8
Incentives to Leave in the Superintendency —
by Years of Experience

(1 - strong incentive to leave; 5 - strong incentive to stay)

Incentives to Leave	Years of Experience			
	< 5 N=16	6-15 N=31	> 15 N=2	Total N=49
School board's micro-management of administrative activities	1.75	2.22	2.20	2.08
Internal school board conflict that inhibited school improvement	2.00	2.36	2.50	2.21
Conflict with school board over educational priorities	2.00	2.58	2.60	2.28
Personal privacy	2.58	2.25	2.32	2.29
Relations with school board	1.92	2.39	2.80	2.32

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