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THE SUPER- INTENDENCY IN THE NINETIES

**WHAT
SUPERINTENDENTS
AND
BOARD MEMBERS
NEED
TO KNOW**

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The Superintendency in the Nineties

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FOREWORD

America has been busily reforming its public schools—toward teacher professionalism, school-site management, parental involvement, and effective principaling. Mysteriously lost in much of the improve-the-schools discussion has been a consideration of the impact of local education's chief executive officer: the school district superintendent. This, despite predictions that upwards of three-quarters of all U.S. superintendents will be eligible to retire by 1994.

M. William Konnert and John Augenstein provide herein a timely, down-to-earth, and eminently useful treatment of the local superintendency. By no means is this a how-to-do-it book. It has much substance—with a solid theoretical and/or historical examination of superintendents' leadership, school board/superintendent relations, and the array of duties/demands upon the superintendency. Nevertheless, the authors are also refreshingly practical. The *do's-and-don'ts* of effective school board relations, use of outside consultants, and the superintendent's participation in collective bargaining and legislative lobbying are among the topics liberally sprinkled with *tips* for the practicing administrator. The authors also include some seldom-addressed suggestions for preparing for, obtaining, and remaining healthy in this stress-filled profession. Furthermore, the book is much strengthened through the authors' collaboration with an array of practicing school administrators in the initial preparation of nearly every substantive chapter.

Two developments are likely to shape mightily the course of the superintendency in the 1990s. Konnert and Augenstein give thorough attention to both. The first is a continued politicization of the role of local education's chief executive officer, with an accompanying demand for exceptional skills in communication, negotiation, and

conflict resolution. Learning to take criticism and simultaneously a willingness to take risks are just two of many *political* qualities of modern-day administration that have not been easily acquired attributes of local superintendents. Similarly, as a second development of the 1990s, any remaining images of the superintendent as a take-charge, from-the-top-down, near-autocratic leader of local education will have long disappeared. The authors correctly picture the local superintendent working hard to shape organizational values rather than issuing directives and empowering others rather than prescribing roles and procedures. This, as advertised, is a book for the 1990s in school administration, and a book which should appeal to both *old hand* and *rookie* alike.

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INTRODUCTION

This book addresses the unique position in the school systems of the United States known as the superintendency, and the individual, known as the superintendent, who occupies this position. This individual is the chief executive officer (CEO) of the school system. As such, the superintendent has no peers within the school system and is *the* leader of the system. The occupant of this position must possess a sense of vision of what the system can be and have a view of the system that is broad in its perspective and thus, different than anyone else's. The superintendency is more than knowing *how to do*, it is knowing *how to think* and *how to feel*.

The traditionally accepted definition of the superintendent as the implementer of policy established by the board of education is far too simplistic. The reality of the situation is that a dynamic and ever changing relationship exists between the superintendent and a host of people and agencies including such publics as parents, community groups, students, school personnel, and state and federal agencies. The superintendent at different times and in different situations is a leader, coach, manager, follower, motivator, philosopher, missionary, policy maker, politician, sales person, evaluator, and distributor of scarce resources. The degree to which this individual is able to establish a value system and mission for the school district and persuade others to share these commitments and be motivated to work toward their attainment, determines superintendency success.

The basic purposes of this book are to provide information that will help individuals prepare for, obtain, and be successful in their first superintendency and to help practicing superintendents improve their CEO skills. The size, demographics, or geographic location of the school system do little to alter the primary responsibilities of the position.

The book is divided into four parts. An overview of each part follows.

PART ONE (The Milieu of the Superintendent)

We feel that an overall perspective and understanding of the setting in which the superintendent functions is a prerequisite to studying and understanding the superintendency. Part one begins with a brief history of the superintendency. This is important, for organizational research indicates that the history of an organization has a meaningful influence on the current state of affairs within the organization.

Following the historical perspective, the contemporary setting for the superintendency is explored from a *macro* or *big picture* perspective. This exploration is followed by a discussion of organizational dynamics at play within a school system. The contemporary scene concludes with a view of the school system as a political system.

Part one then moves to a discussion of the role of the superintendent in the nineties, because important changes are on the horizon. There is evidence that the superintendent is emerging as more of a mentor and coach than an order giver. There is a shift away from a hierarchical authoritarian organization to a more horizontal organization where people experience more ownership, both literal and psychological, and where they can experience personal growth. Individuals are becoming more concerned with how their work relates to the rest of their lives, and this attitude represents an increased emphasis on individual concern for the quality of life, including work life.

One other important change that presently is occurring and, in all likelihood, will continue throughout the nineties is a focus on women in educational administration. With respect to the superintendency, female superintendents currently are few in number. However, with each passing year, their numbers continue to increase. There is every reason to believe that this trend will gain in momentum during the next decade. One finds an increasing number of articles in the literature related to this topic. Charol Shakeshaft of Hofstra University published a book entitled *Women in Educational Administration* that has become a basic research source, and Colleen Bell and Susan Chase at the University of Tulsa have been pursuing research on female superintendents. These are but two examples of a growing number of individuals who have a major professional interest in the study of female administrators.

This book has been written in an effort to provide useful insights for any superintendency aspirant or incumbent, regardless of gender. In an effort to convey this message, the authors have used inclusive or nonsexist language throughout the text and have included female superintendents as contributors.

PART TWO (The Superintendent as a Leader)

As the most extensive part of the book, this section discusses the superintendent as *the leader* of the school system. For the sake of clarity, it is presented in four subsections.

The Broader Leadership Perspective

In order to establish a common understanding of *leadership*, this subsection presents a brief history of leadership that is followed by a discussion of the differences between providing leadership from the superintendent's chair and from other positions within the system. The superintendent must constantly be thinking about the *big issues*, and how they will be addressed without violating personal philosophical commitments. For example, the United States has entered into an information age, and the time is rapidly approaching, if not already here, when the touch of a couple of keys on a computer keyboard can *pull up* any information or facts one desires. In fact, computers can continuously and simultaneously monitor a number of information providing networks and compile a bank of relevant information in very short order. This development has tremendous implications for the mission of education for most of what is taught in the schools is factual in nature. If one can obtain facts at will by mechanical means, then what facts are still worthy of being taught in the schools?

Personal Philosophy and Leadership

This subsection addresses the important role one's personal philosophy plays in providing leadership to the school system. Before the superintendent can select an orientation and mission for the school system, a well-established personal value system must first be in place. Further, it is necessary to know how one's personal value system applies to the education of individuals from birth through

early adulthood. In short, the superintendent must have a consistent, comprehensive, and workable personal philosophy, must know how this personal philosophy influences education, and must clearly communicate these beliefs to all publics. The concept of transformational leadership and the importance of system culture and values are also explored.

Superintendent Leadership Competencies: Personal

This subsection identifies desirable personal leadership competencies. These competencies are necessary but not sufficient attributes for general leadership success. In and of themselves they do not guarantee leadership success; however, success will be difficult to obtain without them. The superintendent is viewed as a divergent thinker, motivator, assessor and modifier of risk-taking propensity, and empowerer.

Superintendent Leadership Competencies: Professional

This final leadership subsection identifies and discusses some important professional competencies a successful superintendent must possess. These competencies are addressed specifically from the perspective of the superintendency. The superintendent as the board's chief executive officer is the first topic addressed. This may be the most important topic with respect to the survival of the superintendent. Second, is the superintendent as negotiator. Probably nothing has a greater impact on the day-to-day working life of the superintendent than the negotiated contract and the process which led to the contract. Third, is the superintendent as communicator. Both internal and external publics are addressed. Some special areas such as communicating with the community, parents, media, special interest groups, and the *crazies* are touched upon. The section concludes with chapters on the superintendent as business manager, lobbyist, and consulter of specialists.

A Final Leadership Comment

Conspicuously missing from the leadership subdivision is any mention of effective instructional leadership. The reason for this omission is quite simply that the entire leadership part, indeed the entire book, is about effective instructional leadership.

In a research report published by the U.S. Office of Education (1986), evidence is presented which indicates that schools with high student achievement have instructional leaders that exhibit attributes of clear and consistent decision making, fairness, and concern for a safe orderly environment. One could make a case that these are attributes that would be important in any organizational setting.

Quality instructional leadership is the effective application of leadership to an educational setting. This is the essence of the book. To be an effective leader in a school system is to be an effective instructional leader. The two cannot be separated.

The study of leadership is exciting in part because it is so elusive. Long (1988, p. 21) expresses this elusiveness well when he states:

Analyzing leadership . . . is like studying the Abominable Snowman: you see footprints, but never the thing itself. Leadership is like electricity. You can't see it, but you certainly can't miss its effect. And yet, this elusive, intangible thing we call leadership might very well be the most essential ingredient in personal and business success.

PART THREE (Preparing for, Obtaining, and Departing a Superintendency)

This part discusses the processes of preparing for, obtaining, and departing a superintendency. The socialization process that occurs as one is preparing for the superintendency is discussed and is followed by specific suggestions relative to obtaining a superintendency. The part concludes with a discussion of post-superintendency opportunities. A superintendency does not have to be the final step in one's career.

PART FOUR (Health, Happiness, and the Superintendency)

If one is to provide committed and enthusiastic leadership for the duration of a professional career, it is necessary to achieve an integrated lifestyle with which one is comfortable. Therefore, this last part considers what is necessary for maintaining one's health, happiness, and yes, even sanity while serving as a superintendent. Life in the fishbowl and the unique problems encountered by single superintendents are explored. These are followed by ideas for controlling personal stress.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

The book concludes with a potpourri of comments on the superintendency. It does more than summarize. It talks about the synergism and excitement that await the superintendent of the nineties.

This book is written to blend theory and practice in a forward-looking mode. The information included has been obtained through research, interviews with hundreds of successful superintendents, and contributions from selected superintendents with special knowledge, experiences, and/or expertise.

There is no *how-to-do-it* list that will guarantee a successful tenure as a superintendent. If something can be *done by the book*, then by definition, it is not leadership. Each individual must take the information contained in this book, with other relevant information, and integrate and apply it to one's individual likes, strengths, and beliefs in order to be a leader. There is no substitute for the arduous process of thinking.

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