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Keywords

leadership attributes, experience, knowledge, qualities, EQ (emotional intelligence)

A Comparison Between African-American Superintendents and School Board Members on Leadership Attributes That Contribute to Superintendent Longevity

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore whether the ratings of leadership attributes by African-American superintendents and their respective school board members are comparable and whether the superintendents' self-ratings are related to their longevity as superintendents. The rating instrument was designed to address several important leadership qualities gleaned from the literature on leadership styles and a range of other theories and studies on effective leadership. These qualities were then consolidated into four attribute categories (skills, qualities, knowledge, and emotional intelligence/EQ) that capture the essential contextual work of school district superintendents. The results of this conceptual study provide valuable information to current and future school superintendents on the leadership attributes rated by their colleagues and school board members to be essential for superintendents' success and longevity.

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Introduction and Background

Public school systems across the United States continue to experience unprecedented problems and challenges including escalating accountability standards (Waters & Marzano, 2006), diminishing financial resources, and shrinking public confidence (Williams & Hatch, 2012). School superintendents will need to deliver high quality leadership (Kowalski & Cangemi, 2011), build relationships with their communities (Southern Regional Education Board [SREB], 2010), and develop cooperative, purposeful, professional working relationships with their boards to address downward trends in the education of students (Goodman & Zimmerman, 2000). Superintendents are responsible for regulating the overall capacity of the school system (Hoyle, Bjork, Collier, & Glass, 2005) and effective superintendents have been recognized as vital to the success of a district's improvement efforts (Forsyth, 2004). Yet, faced with the critical challenges and problems, today's superintendents find limited time, security, and adequate resources to make the sustainable improvements needed (Cooper, Fusarelli, & Carella, 2000). According to Fullan (2007), sustainable reform and improvement only happens through effective leadership and time. In the most

recent and comprehensive study of school superintendents, the American Association of School Administrators (AASA, 2010) found the average tenure for school superintendents is 3.64 years. There is limited availability of research that identifies the specific factors contributing to tenure and turnover for school superintendents (Hoyle et al., 2005).

The continuation of a revolving door in the superintendency is counterproductive to student success (Hoyle et al., 2005), and there is no chance to establish reforms or create programs that make a difference in district achievement (Waters & Marzano, 2006). Even a three-year period of time is inadequate. School systems must consider the actions and steps needed to address and advance their thinking around how to identify strong superintendents while extending their longevity in order to address the systemic problems they face (SREB, 2010). They must provide the time for both the superintendent and the district to imbed salient practices before starting over and over again (Kowalski & Cangemi, 2011).

Superintendents must guide challenging, dynamic education systems while responding appropriately to their boards and escalating social and political pressures (Rohland, 2002). Local school board members are the sole evaluators of the superintendent's performance

and determine whether a contract should be renewed (Connecticut Association of Boards of Education, 2013). A quality working relationship with members directly influences the tenure of the superintendent.

The high standards and people-intensive nature of public school districts are the primary reason the job is so demanding (Rohland, 2002). Success for superintendents is the result of gaining wisdom from criticism (Harvey, 2003) and increasing personal mastery skills that lead the organization toward goal achievement (Williams & Hatch, 2012). The core of producing tangible and measurable results that lead to longevity rests in the ability to hone the *leadership attributes* needed to bring about sustainable change to the school system (Siccone, 2011).

An important note is the limited number of African-American school superintendents across the country (AASA, 2011), which represents approximately 371 (about 3%) of all superintendents nationally (Rural Policy Matters, 2010). National demographic shifts will impact the ethnic composition of school aged children, parents, and stakeholders in the United States (U.S. Census Report, 2000) and require leaders who more closely mirror this change.

The low number of African-American superintendents does not represent the demographic reality of the 21st century school system and is a result of a lack of needed attention to the matter (Pascopella, 2011). Researchers have found that African-American superintendents are overrepresented in systems that have a myriad of systemic problems and have low academic performance (Simmons, 2013). African-American superintendents serve in disproportionate numbers in very large and very small districts (Rural Policy Matters, 2010).

Pascopella (2011) stated people are finally realizing there is a real crisis in urban education. There is a lack of valuable and relevant research on essential *leadership attributes* regarding superintendent tenure related to African-American superintendents in particular (Hollingworth, 2008). Understanding African-American school superintendents' leadership attributes and longevity has implications for understanding and connecting tenure to school improvement in urban and rural districts. Ultimately, school districts are only as stable and grounded as the superintendent (Williams & Hatch, 2012).

Review of the Literature

A strong, positive relationship between school board members and superintendents is essential to the extended tenure of the superintendent (Southwest Educational

Development Laboratory, 2014). The focus on African-American superintendents is important because they represent less than 3% with a total number of less than 400 nationally (Rural Policy Matters, 2010). In a study of superintendent longevity, the population of African-American superintendents was found to be at greater risk as they represented 42% of the superintendents who were members of the Council of Great City Schools, which serves urban systems of 25,000 or greater. There is, however, consistency in reporting that the average tenure for urban superintendents is 3.64 years, which is shorter than the tenure of other school superintendents (AASA, 2010).

African-American superintendents are overrepresented in systems that are plagued with systemic problems and have low academic achievement (Simmons, 2013). This reality of overrepresentation in districts with the greatest problems and small representation in general should be alarming in light of the national demographic shifts. While African-American superintendents do not have exclusivity to districts of similar make up, historically school boards, recruiters, and the superintendents themselves found it logical to match administrator ethnicity to that of the student population (Jackson & Shakeshaft, 2003). According to Jackson and Shakeshaft (2003), multiple superintendency opportunities for African-American leaders are less available than those for their white counterparts. One study revealed that 28% of African-American superintendents reported holding more than one superintendent position, whereas 40% of white superintendents held at least two (Lomotey, 1996). Increasing the academic knowledge and understanding of successful *leadership attributes* associated with long standing superintendents may lead to greater success for this pool of school leaders.

Instructional Leadership. In a survey conducted by Belden, Russonello, and Stewart (2005), superintendents were asked to describe their participation in the area of instructional leadership. Superintendents overwhelmingly responded they should have a major role in directing instruction in their district. The survey commissioned by *Education Week* found that superintendents believe effective leadership at the district level can positively impact student achievement (Belden et al., 2005). They cited common curriculum, frequent benchmarking, improvement planning based on performance data, teacher induction programs, and the use of the same math and reading programs as decisions they participated in more frequently than not (Belden et al., 2005). And, superintendents resoundingly believed the accountability measures found in the *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB) caused them to become more

participative in curricular and instruction initiatives at the district level (Waters & Marzano, 2006).

Instructional leaders are school leaders who are intimately involved in the instructional program, delivery, assessment, and improvement of classroom instruction across the total district or school (SREB, 2010). They participate in key discussions and decisions among curricular and program experts, and often understand and recognize the existence of gaps that occur around the lack of instructional excellence in the organization.

Today, leaders are actively involved in student and teacher learning and remain abreast of the latest research on proven strategies that increase student achievement (Waters & Marzano, 2006). In *Classrooms that Work*, the authors stated that students can be successful without regard to home support and conditions if they receive consistently high-quality classroom instruction (Cunningham & Allington, 2007); a fundamental belief held by successful superintendents.

Leadership Styles. In a review of the various leadership styles identified by the researchers, those most closely associated with superintendents and school district leadership were explored. According to Bradberry and Greaves (2012), *Adaptive Leadership* is a unique combination of 22 core leadership skills, perspectives and guided processes of strategies and actions that promote excellent potential outcomes. Adaptive leaders are poised to adjust to the current environment and move forward towards the achievement of their goals. Adaptive leaders work to improve their individual skill level to achieve true excellence.

Transactional Leaders are guided by two factors: contingent rewards and management by exception. These factors guide the work of these leaders and are based on tangible rewards that lead to the acquisition of the goals and objectives of the organization. The passive management by exception philosophy of the transactional leader does not inspire passion or performance beyond expectations; however, there is a controlled interest in maintaining the carrying out of the duties of the organization and maintaining the status quo. Employees do not receive recognition for their contributions to the organization but are the focal point for errors or problems that arise (Odetunde, 2013).

Participative Leadership seeks to create an environment that is inclusive of the contributions of all employees. They are encouraged to solve problems and lead the organization to the achievement of the established goals and objectives. The relationship of employer-subordinate is not embraced in this organizational culture and is seen as counterproductive (Cangemi, Kowalski, & Claypool, 1985).

Transformational Leadership is identified by the comprehensive nature of the style. The leader develops a vision statement that provides direction to the organization and an accompanying mission statement that energizes the members to obtain the goals and objectives together (Feinberg, Ostroff, & Burke, 2005). The transformational leader is often seen as a charismatic leader who is highly competent and committed to the organization and the people (Sun & Anderson, 2012). The leader is collaborative and creates a shared purpose that is open to the input, suggestions, creativity, and growth of everyone. Transformational leaders are often called to lead organizations that need major change and growth and seek to do it quickly (Osula & Ng, 2014).

Collaborative Leadership is a set of leadership skills that are focused across functional and organizational boundaries (Rubin, 2009). Archer and Cameron (2008) stated the collaborative leader is able to move between the boundaries of different organizations and deliver organizational results. They listed several key lessons for a successful collaborative leader, among them, simplifying the complex, being ready for conflict, knowing when partnership is possible, and having courage, energy, passion, and drive, as well as empathy and patience.

Leadership Instrument

This conceptual study and related instrument were designed to address several important *leadership attributes* gleaned from the literature on leadership styles and a range of other theories and studies on effective leadership (Belden et al., 2005; Bradberry & Greaves, 2012; Cangemi, Kowalski, Miller, & Holloper, 2005; DuFour, 2008; Glaser, 2006; Kowalski & Cangemi, 2011). These attributes were then consolidated into four categories that capture the essential contextual work of school district superintendents. It is understood that these attributes do not occur in isolation, particularly for today's superintendents who are charged with solving complex and far reaching problems in schools and their communities (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004).

The four attribute categories employed in this study are *Leadership Knowledge*, *Leadership Skills*, *Leadership Qualities*, and *Emotional Intelligence (EQ)*. Within each of the four categories, four to five "descriptors" of attributes define each category. *Leadership Knowledge* is based on an understanding of the leader's competence and ability to display consistently knowledge of curriculum and instruction, assessment models, school improvement strategies, and fiscal management (Barnes, Massell, &

Vanover, 2009). *Leadership Skills* include serving as a change agent, understanding the importance of identifying and placing the right people in the right roles, having a laser-like focus on student achievement and results, and providing effective communication practices and skills (Englert, Fries, Martin-Glenn, & Michael, 2005). *Leadership Qualities* include being trustworthy, selling the vision, building teams, and accepting the reality of being a positive and encouraging role model (Siccone, 2011). *Leadership EQ* includes those intrinsic skills that impact all aspects of the leader as well as self-awareness, sensitivity in dealing with people, self-initiative, and self-management (Goleman, 1995).

A 17-item survey instrument (see Appendix I) related to the four attribute categories based on a review of the literature, briefly described earlier, was developed by the researchers. The survey asked respondents to rate (as superintendent) themselves or (as school board members) their superintendent as demonstrating various leadership qualities. Each leadership quality was scored on a 5-point Likert scale (5 = Highly Agree to 1 = Highly Disagree). Item scores for each category were combined to create average ratings in each leadership attribute category. A pilot study using the survey instrument was completed with a group of 10 African-American superintendents, board members, and university professors to determine the clarity of each category and survey items. Additionally, reliability coefficients were calculated based on survey results from the current study's random sample described in more detail below. The overall reliability coefficient for superintendents was .96 for the 17 leadership attribute items and .94 for board members. The superintendent reliability coefficients for the four attribute categories ranged from .89 to .88; board member reliability coefficients ranged from .91 to .69.

Methods

This study sought to conceptually identify four categories of leadership attributes and then to determine whether African-American superintendents and their respective board members would have comparable responses to the items in each category. The conceptual relationships proposed by this paper have supporting evidence based on a study by Wilson (2014). Additionally, this study explored whether survey responses were related to longevity for superintendents beyond the national average of 3.64 years (AASA, 2011). A random sample for this study included 100 African-American superintendents and 100 of their school board members from a national list of 371 superintendents (AASA, 2011). The survey

was disseminated electronically to African-American superintendents and their board members across the country using a current database supplied by the National Association of Black School Educators. Of the 100 in the original sample, 86 superintendents and 68 of their respective school board members completed the survey.

Data Analysis and Results

The research study focused on the following four hypotheses:

- **Hypothesis 1:** There is no significant difference in the levels of agreement of superintendents and board members for the Leadership Knowledge category.
- **Hypothesis 2:** There is no significant difference in the levels of agreement of superintendents and board members for the Leadership Skills category.
- **Hypothesis 3:** There is no significant difference in the levels of agreement of superintendents and board members for the Leadership Qualities category.
- **Hypothesis 4:** There is no significant difference in the levels of agreement of superintendents and board members for the Leadership Emotional Intelligence category.

In addition, the following research questions were addressed:

1. What are the average years of experience of superintendents in this research study?
2. Does the superintendent level of agreement regarding their leadership attributes change over years of experience?

Table 1 delineates the demographic data for the superintendents and the board members who completed the survey.

Table 1
Demographics of Superintendents and Board Members

Variables	Superintendents (N = 86)	%	Board Members (N = 68)	%
<i>Gender</i>				
Female	29	33.7	25	36.8
Male	51	59.3	40	58.8
No Response	6	7.0	3	4.4
<i>Yrs. of Experience</i>				
1-3	20	23.2	11	16.2
4-5	31	36.0	17	25.0
6-9	23	26.7	26	38.2
10+	12	14.0	13	19.1

Table 2 delineates the average levels of agreement of superintendents and school board members for the four leadership categories. The test for Hypothesis 1 found no significant difference in the levels of agreement of superintendents and board members on the *Leadership Knowledge* attribute (curriculum and instruction, school improvement, budget management, government policies and mandates), $t(153) = -1.19, p = 0.28$. The test for Hypothesis 2 found there was no significant difference in the levels of agreement of superintendents and board members on the *Leadership Skills* attribute (change agent, identify right people, focus on results, effective communicator), $t(153) = 0.86, p = 0.35$. Similarly, no significant difference was found between superintendents and school board members for *Leadership Qualities* (Hypothesis 3; trustworthy, visionary, team builder, role model), $t(153) = 0.30, p = 0.58$, or for *Leadership Emotional Intelligence/EQ* attribute (Hypothesis 4; self-awareness, sensitivity dealing with people, self-initiative, self-management), $t(153) = 0.42, p = 0.51$. Results suggest that superintendents rate themselves similarly (high) as their school board members on these four leadership categories.

Table 2
Descriptive Statistics of Superintendents and Board Members for Leadership Survey Categories

Attributes	Superintendents		Board Members	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Leadership Knowledge	4.37	.59	4.47	.54
Leadership Skills	4.50	.58	4.42	.40
Leadership Qualities	4.60	.50	4.56	.42
Leadership Emotional Intelligence	4.48	.54	4.53	.44

This study also sought to investigate whether the length of tenure of superintendents is related to their responses on the leadership survey. The results of two additional research questions related to longevity are provided below.

For question 1, the average years of experience of superintendents in this study, the superintendents who participated in this study reported an average of 5.5 years ($SD = 2.80$) of experience as a superintendent. As Table 1 delineates, nearly 60% of the superintendents reported 1-5 years of experience; just over 40% reported 6 or more years of experience as a superintendent.

For question 2, does the level of agreement regarding their leadership attributes change over years of experience,

Table 3 delineates the average overall leadership quality self-ratings of superintendents based on their self-reported years of experience.

Table 3
Average Overall Superintendent Leadership Quality Self-Ratings by Years of Experience

Years of Experience	Superintendent <i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
1	6	4.40	.51
2	7	3.87	1.02
3	7	4.36	.43
4	15	4.53	.39
5	16	4.24	.39
6	3	4.51	.12
7	7	4.28	.43
8	7	4.83	.17
9	6	4.93	.12
10+	12	4.79	.24

The trends from these descriptive data suggest that superintendents who report they are in the second year in that role rate themselves lower than those in any other year and with much variation in ratings across the seven individuals, as indicated by the larger standard deviation. Additionally, those reporting 8 or more years of experience tend to rate themselves higher (and consistently so) than those reporting 7 years or less. It appears, as years of experience increased, superintendents were more likely to agree that they demonstrate essential *leadership attributes* as identified in the survey, especially after five or more years of experience.

Additional Findings and Discussion

Further analyses of survey results provided some other interesting findings. Nearly all (99-95%) superintendents highly agree/agree that they demonstrate the *Leadership Qualities* items, e.g., being *trustworthy* (honest, credible, consistent, fair). The percentages of highly agree/agree for other leadership attributes were also high but with some variability across items. For example, highly agree/agree percentages for *Leadership Knowledge* items ranged from 93% to 88% (budget management); *Leadership Skills* items ranged from 97% to 90% (identifying the right person for the job); *Leadership EQ* items ranged from 98% to 90% (sensitivity).

Board member survey results showed similarly high percentages of highly agree/agree responses, suggesting that most board members considered their superintendents to demonstrate the essential leadership qualities described on the survey. It should be noted that no board members chose any category below “uncertain” to rate their superintendent’s performance.

Interestingly, the leadership quality of being *trustworthy* (honest, credible, consistent, fair) received the highest average percentage rating by superintendents (99%) and board members (100%). Superintendents (98%) and board members (99%) named *focus on results* (place academic achievement first, mission-oriented) as the second highest *leadership attribute* demonstrated by superintendents. In addition, superintendents (99%) and board members (100%) highly agreed/agreed that self-awareness was a leadership quality demonstrated by superintendents.

The study results revealed substantial agreements of school district superintendents and school board members on the four *leadership attributes* categories (Leadership Knowledge, Skills, Qualities, and Emotional Intelligence) included in the survey. The study found 97% of board members and 94% of superintendents highly agree/agree that they (or their superintendents) demonstrate *leadership attributes* presented in this study that are considered essential to be successful school district superintendents who can meet the critical challenges facing schools today and promote progress in achieving the mission of the school district.

Conclusions

Based on the data results, the perceptions of superintendents and school board members are closely aligned on the four leadership attributes categories: *Leadership Knowledge, Leadership Skills, Leadership Qualities, and Emotional Intelligence/EQ*. As the literature review suggests, superintendents who demonstrate knowledge about and practice these leadership attributes are likely to be more successful in executing their responsibilities to achieve their district’s goals and demonstrate and practice effective leadership.

According to an extensive review of the literature, the leaders of our nation’s schools and districts are faced with numerous critical challenges (Williams & Hatch, 2011). The complexity of the challenges and universal nature of the issues, faced with stringent accountability standards, diminishing financial resources, political pressures, lagging student achievement and shrinking

public confidence, create overwhelming pressures to district leaders (Myers, 2011; Trevino, Braley, Brown, & Slate, 2008). The job of the public school superintendent is described by Goodman and Zimmerman (2000) as formidable and complex; and is subject to criticism by a far reaching constituency (Jazzar & Kimball, 2004; Orr, 2002). Therefore, this study underscores the critical need for greater and deeper understanding, as well as broader and deeper knowledge, of leadership skills and qualities superintendents should demonstrate and practice to ensure success for their school districts.

School superintendents work in an educational environment and are charged with delivering leadership that drives instructional programs in a dynamic system (Bjork, 2009; Waters & Marzano, 2006), while communicating effectively and responding appropriately to the social and political pressures of a diverse group of stakeholders (Rohland, 2002). Superintendents are faced and work to solve a variety of unprecedented problems (Kowalski & Cangemi, 2011), and frequently do so in a climate where conflicts are endless (Parker, 1996). The findings of this study provide insights that should enhance deeper and broader understanding between superintendents and school board members, and diminish frequent conflicts that impact the positive operation of the district.

In summary, based on the findings in the study, after a slight dip in self-reported performance in the second year, superintendents who report more years of experience tend to rate themselves higher on qualities that literature suggests are essential for successful leadership. Further research should include additional, and perhaps longitudinal, data collection to understand whether apparent changes in self-reported leadership qualities are indeed tied to individual superintendents as they transition from year to year and gain experience. If the drop in self-reported leadership performance could be confirmed as more than an artifact of this particular study, support systems for superintendents in the early years on the job would be recommended.

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Appendix I. Leadership Attributes Survey – Superintendents and Board Members

Dear Superintendent/School Board Member,

Thank you for your participation in this survey of the leadership attributes of African-American school district superintendents. Please rate (check/circle) each category listed below under the 4 leadership categories from Highly Agree (5) to Highly Disagree (1); based on your personal perception of the *leadership attributes* demonstrated by (as superintendent or board member).

Male	Female										Male	Female									
Years as a superintendent?											Years as a board member?										
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	10+	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	10+

Rating Scale: 5 = Highly Agree, 4 = Agree, 3 = Uncertain, 2 = Disagree, 1 = Highly Disagree

Leadership Knowledge														
1. Curriculum and Instruction (depth & breadth of understanding)										5	4	3	2	1
2. Assessments (data disaggregation from multiple sources, tie data to decisions and actions)										5	4	3	2	1
3. School Improvement (reform minded, creative, understands improvement models, current, strong knowledge base)										5	4	3	2	1
4. Budget Management (works with available resources, seeks outside resources, monitors spending, begins each year with “0” based process, experienced planner)										5	4	3	2	1
5. Government Policies and Mandates (remains current of laws and policies – local, state, federal, relative to finance, personnel, testing)										5	4	3	2	1
Leadership Skills														
6. Change Agent (driver of change; encourages, courageous in face of barriers)										5	4	3	2	1
7. Identify the Right People (seek, place high quality individuals in positions)										5	4	3	2	1
8. Focus on Results (place academic achievement first, mission oriented)										5	4	3	2	1
9. Effective Communicator (written, verbal and body language)										5	4	3	2	1
Leadership Qualities														
10. Trustworthy (honest, credible, consistent, fair)										5	4	3	2	1
11. Visionary (shared vision, catalyst for longer aims & goals)										5	4	3	2	1
12. Team Builder (consensus builder, teamwork, transparent, shares recognition for success, enjoys working with others)										5	4	3	2	1
13. Role Model (walks the talk, practices what he/she preaches)										5	4	3	2	1
Leadership EQ (Emotional Intelligence)														
14. Self-Awareness (cognizant of personal traits, conscious of actions & behaviors)										5	4	3	2	1
15. Sensitivity (sensitivity in dealing with people)										5	4	3	2	1
16. Self-Initiative (self-starter, resourceful, intuitive, studious to issues or industry)										5	4	3	2	1
17. Self-Management (practiced decision maker, maintains control, tactful)										5	4	3	2	1