

## The superintendency and instructional leadership in rural schools

In rural schools, the superintendent's job ranges from driving school buses to keeping abreast of the latest state mandates (Hooper, Pankake, & Schroth, 1999). Rural school districts are those with an enrolment of fewer than 2,500 students (Arfstrom, 2001). However, there is lack of research that discusses rural schools and superintendents (Bauch, 2001; Lamkin, 2003).

The role of a superintendent can be summarized as:

- developing a shared vision of learning,
- sustaining instructional programs,
- ensuring a safe, effective learning environment,
- collaborating with families and community,
- acting with integrity, and
- developing an understanding of the district context in terms of the culture, politics, legal issues, economic issues and social issues Holloway (2001).

Rural superintendents have a greater task because "Rural school renewal is not the imitation of urban reforms, but the joining together of schools and their local communities in the creation of something new that has meaning and understanding for students in rural settings" (Bauch, 2001, p. 218). Generally superintendents take the lead and are the role models in directing the professional development of teachers and principals (Buck, 1991; Doremus, 1985). However, they find themselves vulnerable because they work so much under pressure and work under school boards that are driven by a strong business orientation (Lutz, 1996). Like any superintendent, the rural superintendent has to work with the community and various interest groups and struggle in the power structure (Hsieh & Shen, 1998).

Superintendents are the important locus of power within the school district (Volp & Willower, 2001). Administrative meetings provide superintendents with an opportunity to teach. Superintendents should show that they care deeply about classroom interaction by meeting with teachers. Sadly principals and superintendents tend to de-emphasize instructional leadership (Hsieh & Shen, 1998).

In fact teachers, principals and superintendents have different perspectives about leadership (Hsieh & Shen, 1998). They are all agreeable to the fact that a good educational leader should have the following skills:

- good communication,
- problem solving,
- collaboration,
- modeling,
- decision making,
- listening,
- interpersonal skills.

According to Buck (1991) superintendents should be strong supporters of academics and champions of educational reform. Pajak and Glickman (1989) noted that superintendents and central office personnel were key in maintaining and improving the quality of instruction. They proposed three approaches to improving instruction. These are:

- (a) instructional dialogue with central office making site visits to schools and providing help to teachers,
- (b) providing an infrastructure of support, and
- (c) providing source of instructional leadership.

There are unique challenges that face rural superintendents (Bauch, 2001; Lamkin, 2003). These are the lack specialized training and preparation, increased demands and a decrease in assistance, and significant differences between urban and rural settings.

These challenges make it difficult for superintendents to execute their duties. Rural superintendents would rather see organized networks, mentors, and ongoing in-service opportunities as solutions to their problems. The other problems are lack of funding and the inability to attract and retain quality teachers and administrators (American Association of School Administrators, 2003). It costs a small school much more to provide those same services provided by big schools. It is interesting to note that most rural superintendents are women (Lamkin, 2003).

In the schools, instructional leadership takes different meanings depending on the context of the school. However, the bottom-line definition is, "it is anything that leaders do to improve the teaching and learning in their schools and districts" (King, 2002, p. 62).

According to the American Association of School Administrators (2003), superintendents of the year are chosen using the following criteria:

- (a) leadership for learning,
- (b) communication skills,
- (c) professionalism, and
- (d) community involvement.

Research done by Borba (2003) on instructional leadership practices and beliefs of superintendents of high performing, high poverty school districts indicated that effective superintendents are those that

- (a) focused the entire district on student achievement,
- (b) expected alignment between district and school goals,
- (c) utilized a variety of ways to communicate their messages to stakeholders
- (d) faced conflict with the school board and teachers as a major part of their job,
- (e) were strong instructional leaders,
- (f) placed high priority on professional development,
- (g) expected schools to depend primarily on categorical and grant funds to provide supplemental services to students, but made staff resources

available to support high student achievement,

- (h) relied heavily on data to inform their decisions, and
- (i) held administrators accountable for student achievement.

This underscores student achievement, communication, withstanding conflict, provision of resources and data driven decision, and accountability as crucial for effective instructional leadership by school superintendents.

Cudeiro-Nelsen (2002) alludes to the fact that there is very little research on superintendents as instructional leaders and yet they play a key instructional role in the in school reform initiatives. It is suggested that several actions superintendents could take to improve instructional improvement in schools. These are:

1. **Supervision control.** This involves superintendents making direct observations on a regular basis of principals in their respective schools. Superintendents would be able to give corrective feedback on site.
2. **Input Control.** Giving principals the liberty to recruit and select their own staff and to develop and manage their own budgets.
3. **Behavior Control.** Monitoring outcomes, results against set standards. Establish clear goals, milestones and processes for school improvement.
4. **Selection-Socialization Control.** Select principals who are already socialized to the norms and values of the administrative role and the district. The superintendent could actively socialize principals and of course hire those with proven instructional leadership.
5. **Environmental Control.** Collaborate with outside agencies such as business organizations, community groups, and parent bodies. These can present a powerful influence to focus on instructional leadership.

6. **Personal Vision.** Superintendents should have personal vision of making the improvement of teaching and learning as the cornerstone of district vision.
7. **Continuous Learning.** Leaders should be encouraged to be continuous and not view themselves as the learned.
8. **Mastery.** Align on-going professional development for principals with the district and school instructional focus.
9. **Modeling.** Model collaborative leadership by setting shared goals.

sums up to is that superintendents should be highly visible leader on all schools campuses.

King (2002) suggested other ways where superintendents can impact instructional leadership. First, they should lead, learning by participating in regular, collaborative, professional learning experiences to improve teaching and learning. Second, they should maintain a focus on teaching and learning by helping teachers improve their instructional practices and by making student achievement their main priority. Third, they should develop instructional leadership capacity by distributing responsibilities. Fourth, they should create conditions for professional learning by encouraging a community of learners among teachers. Fifth, they should use data to inform decisions by developing skills to collect and use the data. Sixth, they should use resources creatively to support instructional improvement.

Amazingly, Schmuck (1992) did not include instructional leadership in the list of what is considered critical competence areas for the superintendency. A critical instructional role that superintendent should provide is supervision and evaluation. However many principals are not supervised and evaluated on a regular basis (Murphy, Hallinger & Peterson, 1985). Superintendents should do a review of the curriculum and check to see if teachers were teaching according to district standards. Other instructional activities involve communication with stakeholders, building instructional teams, perception checking, problem resolution, knowledge building, role modeling and direct supervision (Murphy et al., 1985). What this

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Idaho State University  
College of Education  
Intermountain Center for Education Effectiveness  
Dr. E.E. "Gene" Davis  
Director

Charles R. Zimmerly, MPA, Ed.D.  
Coordinator for the Center for Policy Studies,  
Education Research and Community Development  
College of Education, Idaho State University

Precious Mudiwa  
Graduate Assistant  
Center for Policy Studies, Education Research and  
Community Development  
College of Education, Idaho State University

