Who are the new-to-site superintendents in Kansas and what does the future hold for them?

The New-to Site Superintendent in Kansas: A Five Year Perspective

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Are superintendents prepared to meet the challenges when they arrive on their new turf? What are their challenges? These questions coupled with concerns about increasing turnover in the superintendency (Anderson and Lavid, 1986; 1987; 1988; 1989) gave impetus to a five year study to determine which job-related issues might be most impacting on school superintendents during their first year in a new district. This article addresses several matters that have proved especially troublesome to new administrators, especially budgetary concerns and board of education practices. The article also considers two areas that did not concern new superintendents but whose absence may qualify as serious sins of omission: namely perceptions of local educational adequacy that deviate from perceptions of the community at large, and an unfocused strategy for attaining improved classroom instruction.

General Observations About New Kansas Superintendents

Superintendent turnover in Kansas has been creeping upward over the last five years. In 1984, 14 percent of superintendents were new, and that total had risen to 20 percent by 1988. A factor precipitating that increase was undoubtedly a change in the state retirement program which encouraged many older superintendents to retire, followed by the domino effect of larger districts hiring superintendents with prior experiences, creating vacancies in smaller districts.

National studies are more speculative about the nature of turnover in chief school officer ranks. The *American School Superintendency 1982: A Full Report* (Cunningham and Hentges, 1982) indicated that almost 30 percent of all superintendents had held their positions three years or less. Over 50 percent had held more than one superintendency, and 13 percent surveyed in 1982 indicated they had left their previous superintendency within the last year. These data would tentatively support a conclusion that the superintendency is becoming a revolving door job. Yet the interpreters of the data emanating from the 1982 study felt the results were insufficient to support the image of an increasingly mobile superintendency. The average number of superintendencies held was 1.7 (mdn 1.3) and the average length of tenure was 5.6 years, down just slightly from the prior ten year period.

Feistritzer's more recent study (1988) reported superintendents nationally had been in their positions 6.7 years. Four out of ten respondents in her survey had held superintendencies elsewhere for an average of 8.2 years. When asked what they planned to do in the next five years, 24 percent said they planned to retire. Another 44 percent said they planned to leave their current positions in the next five years. Thirty-six percent indicated they would seek a superintendency elsewhere with the remainder looking for a position in higher education, a job outside education, or seeking some other type of administrative assignment in public schools. The Feistritzer study showed slightly longer current service in the superintendency than the Cunningham and Hentges study (1982) but projected turnover rates that generally replicate the patterns observed in Kansas.

Table 1 shows that the median age of the new-to-site superintendent remained in the 41-50 years of age range over the five years of the study. Feistritzer reported a median age of 49.1 years for public school superintendents nationally as opposed to a median age of 48.7 in the Cunningham and Hentges study. Most newly appointed superintendents in Kansas were new to the superintendency or in a second placement, reflecting relative job inexperience. Superintendents moving from other districts had only four years experience on the average. The pattern observed in Kansas differed little from national statistics (Feistritzer, 1988) that reported 60 percent of all superintendents in their first position with the remainder coming to the job with 8.2 years prior experience. The Cunningham and Hentges (1982) study similarly showed 59.2 percent of all superintendents in their first position and 31.6 percent with one or two prior superintendencies.

A common expectation is that the superintendent has extensive experience at all levels of public education. In Kansas not all new-to-site superintendents had experience at the central office level and not all had previously been building principals. In other words, no particular rite of passage was evident among Kansas superintendents. A partial explanation may rest on the fact that the overwhelming majority of schools in Kansas serve rural or small communities. Fifty percent of districts examined over the five years of the study had 550 or fewer students and these districts frequently employed persons who had not experienced *all* of the career lattices characteristic of superintendency candidates in larger districts. Crowson's report (1987) on the superintendency nationally suggests that the prevailing career pattern of superintendents is a rather attenuated catch-as-catch-can process of *anticipatory* and *on the job* socialization. A progressively upward career direction could not be claimed when the median number of superintendencies held is only 1.3 nationally. These individuals could not have learned their job skills by progressive moves to school districts of increasing size and complexity.

Another major misconception to be addressed with facts is that the school superintendent will typically hold the doctorate degree. In reality only about one-third of Kansas superintendents do, and this percentage actually decreased over the five year period. This finding supports a conclusion reached by the authors several years ago that one need not hold the doctorate to become a superintendent in Kansas (or anywhere else). Feistritzer's national study (1988) of school administrators showed only 34 percent of

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Table 1
Frequency and Percentage Distribution: Demographic Profile of New-To-Site Superintendents

	1984–85	1985–86	1986–87	1987–88	1988–89
Number of Respondents	40 of 42 (95.2)	39 of 39 (100.0)	43 of 43 (100.0)	29 of 30 (96.7)	60 of 61 (98.4)
Turnover Percentage (304 Districts)	14.0%	13.0%	14.0%	10.0%	20.0%
Variables					
Age					
Less than 30	—	—	—	—	—
30–40	11 (27.5)	15 (38.5)	11 (25.6)	7 (24.1)	8 (13.3)
41–50	15 (37.5)	18 (46.2)	21 (48.8)	13 (44.8)	36 (60.0)
51–60	13 (32.5)	5 (12.8)	9 (20.9)	9 (31.0)	15 (25.0)
61 +	1 (2.5)	1 (2.6)	2 (4.7)	0 (0.0)	1 (1.7)
Prior Supt. Placements					
1st placement	18 (45.0)	24 (61.5)	22 (51.2)	22 (75.9)	31 (51.7)
2nd placement	13 (32.5)	5 (12.8)	11 (25.6)	2 (6.9)	19 (31.7)
3rd placement	6 (15.0)	8 (20.5)	3 (6.9)	0 (0.0)	4 (6.7)
4th placement	3 (7.5)	1 (2.6)	3 (6.9)	0 (0.0)	4 (6.7)
5th placement	0 (0.0)	1 (2.6)	0 (0.0)	1 (3.4)	0 (0.0)
			no response = 4 (9.3)	no response = 2 (6.9)	
Years of Supt. Exp.					
1st year	17 (42.5)	23 (58.9)	23 (53.5)	22 (75.9)	31 (51.7)
2–3 yrs.	1 (2.5)	2 (5.1)	3 (6.9)	2 (6.9)	3 (5.0)
4–7 yrs.	8 (20.0)	7 (17.9)	4 (9.3)	3 (10.3)	11 (18.3)
8–10 yrs.	1 (2.5)	3 (7.7)	7 (16.3)	1 (3.4)	3 (5.0)
11–15 yrs.	6 (15.0)	3 (7.7)	3 (6.9)	1 (3.4)	6 (10.0)
16–25 yrs.	7 (17.5)	1 (2.6)	3 (6.0)	0 (0.0)	6 (10.0)
26 + yrs.	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)
District Enrollment					
less than 200	8 (20.0)	7 (17.9)	7 (16.3)	6 (20.7)	9 (15.0)
200–300	7 (17.5)	4 (10.3)	5 (11.6)	5 (17.2)	8 (13.3)
301–400	4 (10.0)	6 (15.4)	9 (20.9)	3 (10.3)	5 (8.3)
401–550	3 (0.75)	4 (10.3)	6 (13.6)	2 (6.9)	8 (13.3)
551–1,999	—	—	—	11 (37.9)	—
2,000–9,999	—	—	—	1 (3.4)	—
10,000 +	2 (0.50)	1 (2.6)	2 (4.7)	1 (3.4)	1 (1.7)
551–1,000	4 (10.0)	6 (15.4)	5 (11.6)	0 (0.0)	11 (18.3)
1,001–3,500	9 (22.5)	10 (25.6)	7 (16.3)	0 (0.0)	18 (30.0)
3,501–10,000	3 (7.5)	1 (2.6)	2 (4.7)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)
Prior Job Experience					
Central Office	23 (57.5)	18 (46.2)	25 (58.1)	14 (48.3)	6 (10.0)
Superintendent	—	3 (7.7)	8 (18.6)	2 (6.9)	29 (48.3)
Asst. Supt.	—	8 (20.5)	6 (13.9)	9 (31.0)	6 (10.0)
Building Administrator	38 (95.0)	37 (94.9)	38 (88.4)	23 (79.3)	56 (93.3)
Formal Education					
Doctorate	14 (35.0)	13 (33.3)	15 (34.9)	8 (27.6)	18 (30.0)
Specialist	9 (22.5)	7 (17.9)	17 (39.5)	5 (17.2)	27 (45.0)
Gender					
Male	39 (97.5)	37 (94.9)	42 (97.7)	29 (100.0)	59 (98.3)
Female	1 (2.5)	2 (5.1)	1 (2.3)	0 (0.0)	1 (1.7)

all superintendents holding the doctorate. These figures generally reflect certification standards, which in Kansas requires only a minimum of a master's degree plus some additional coursework in education administration.

Kansas lags behind national data for females holding superintendency positions. Adding one or two females per year brought the Kansas total to only two for 1987–88 (.7%) Nationwide, females hold four percent of the public school superintendencies (Feistritzer, 1988).

Challenges Facing New-to-Site Superintendents

Throughout the five year period of the Kansas survey, the topic of *budget* was the paramount concern confronting new superintendents. Concerns about taming this time-consuming and politically sensitive task parallel the findings of other nationwide studies, including those conducted every decade by the American Association of School Administrators (AASA). The frustrations with budgetary matters reported by new superintendents in Kansas can be attributed in part to simple logistics. Because these new superintendents arrive on site usually in July or August, they are placed in the position of promoting and defending a budget they had no part in constructing and which must be voted upon by the school board in August.

There is usually strong disagreement between what superintendents perceive as priority concerns and what the public senses as issues needing attention in the schools. Although some important trends were not consistently probed by the authors over the five years, the data was deemed sufficient to support this assertion. As Table 2 illustrates, the major problems facing public schools as perceived by the public are *substantially different* from those of school professionals. The Gallup polls conducted from 1985–89 showed drug/alcohol abuse and lack of discipline as major school problems. When contrasting these two significant sources of information, one must draw the conclusion that new-to-site superintendents in Kansas perceive their problems from a totally different perspective than the public at large.

Even though the Gallup poll is a national study, drug and alcohol abuse knows no boundaries and small-town Kansas is not immune to these problems. Yet over the past five years, new-to-site superintendents in Kansas did not once choose drug or alcohol abuse as an issue, even though the American public perceived that to be the most critical problem over the same time frame. Keeping in mind that Table 2 reflects what was important to superintendents and that Table 3 reflects important issues to the public at large, the perceptions reported in the two tables are totally incongruent.

This finding lends credence to the research by Alvey (1986) who concluded that superintendents (as well as principals and school boards) are frequently insensitive to the sources of discontent within their own communities. It is understandable that most rural and small town superintendents in Kansas would not perceive urban problems like integration and overcrowding as relevant concerns. Even if we exclude these issues as demographically irrelevant, the chief school officer in Kansas, not unlike counterparts elsewhere in the nation, tends to become emotionally and intellectually absorbed in the internal realities of maintaining basic school district services, keeping abreast of state legal and financial requirements, hiring and evaluating personnel, and responding whenever possible to reform pressures to improve teaching and learning.

Nevertheless, a clear pattern of disagreement between school patrons and local professionals and boards of education suggests a dramatic need to increase the volume of

Table 2

Major Problems Confronting the Schools (1985–89): New-to-Site Superintendents vs. Public-at-Large Perceptions

Major Problems*	Supt.'s, '85	Gallup, '85	Supt.'s, '86	Gallup, '86	Supt.'s, '87	Gallup, '87	Supt.'s, '88	Gallup, '88
Lack of discipline	—	1st	—	2nd	—	2nd	—	2nd
Use of Drugs	—	2nd	—	1st	—	1st	—	1st
Poor curriculum standards	—	3rd	—	4th	—	5th	—	5th
difficulty recruiting good teachers	—	4th	—	5th	—	4th	—	4th
lack of proper financial support	2nd	5th	1st	3rd	—	3rd	1st	3rd
Pupil's lack of interest/ truancy	—	6th	—	15th	—	9th	—	9th
large schools/ overcrowding	—	7th	—	8th	—	6th	—	8th
integration/busing	—	8th	—	13th	—	14th	—	12th
Teachers' lack of interest	—	9th	—	9th	—	11th	—	13th
Drinking/alcoholism	—	10th	—	7th	—	8th	—	10th
Moral standards/ dress code	—	16th	—	6th	—	7th	—	7th
Lack of respect for teachers and other students	—	12th	—	10th	—	13th	—	16th
low teacher pay	13th	14th	15th	12th	—	12th	—	11th

*The major problems listed above are derived from the Annual Gallup Poll of Public Attitudes Toward the Public Schools.

superintendent-board dialogue with the diverse publics served by schools. The revolt of the client phenomena (Wirt and Kirst, 1988) now characteristic of most professional/client relationships requires that the local superintendent's traditional communication platforms be redesigned to better address parent and citizen apprehensions. Lutz and Iannaccone's (1967) warning that public schools were never apolitical insular institutions takes on special meaning as parents and the greater society become increasingly apprehensive about the welfare of children. Increasingly, local public education is embroiled in a web of conflicting demands that must be responded to in a balanced fashion. The superintendent, as resident professional expert, needs to sharpen listening skills and be prepared to counter any and all perceptions in a reassuring fashion. Doing so in no way suggests the superintendent must be all things to all people. It does suggest, however, the need for skills as a coalition builder, harmonizer, and facilitator. Superintendents cannot fulfill any of those roles if they are not on the same wave length with constituents.

The Superintendent's Evaluation

Accountability has been on everybody's priority list for education for almost twenty years, and it appropriately reflects an increasing concern for putting in place teacher and administrator evaluation practices that can better assure quality control. The authors have consistently asked new-to-site superintendents in Kansas about accountability practices that focused on their own performance.

Over four years of inquiry, Table 3 observes that regular evaluation of the superintendent has been addressed with increasing frequency by local school boards. Superintendent self-evaluation of performance as a regular part of the evaluation process and the board's willingness to accept it, however, decreased in use over the same time period. As board of education members have acquired more training in evaluation, reliance on formal evaluation has increased exponentially. Superintendents in Kansas reported an increasing use of formal instruments, usually checklists, to assess their effectiveness. These instruments, locally de-

Table 3

Frequency and Percentage Count: Superintendents' Perceptions of Their Own Performance Evaluations*

	1985–86 N = 39	1986–87 N-43	1987–88 N = 29	1988–89** N = 60
Evaluation Discussed In Initial Employment Interview				
no mention	19 (48.7)	13 (30.2)	8 (27.6)	21 (35.0)
briefly mentioned	18 (46.2)	22 (51.2)	16 (55.2)	31 (51.7)
broadly stated	0 (0.0)	2 (4.7)	3 (10.3)	4 (6.7)
specifically defined	2 (2.6)	4 (9.3)	1 (3.4)	4 (6.7)
Self-evaluation				
established instrument	8 (20.5)	5 (11.6)	7 (24.1)	7 (11.7)
self-generated	15 (38.5)	12 (27.9)	10 (34.5)	3 (5.0)
no self-evaluation	16 (41.0)	23 (53.5)	12 (41.4)	52 (86.7)
required by contract	1 (2.6)	1 (2.3)	0 (0.0)	—
Board of Education Evaluation				
established instrument	11 (28.2)	15 (34.9)	7 (24.1)	30 (50.0)
self-generated	18 (46.2)	22 (51.2)	14 (48.3)	29 (48.3)
Evaluative Evidence				
specific performance	8 (20.5)	14 (32.6)	14 (48.3)	12 (20.0)
criteria input from faculty/students	3 (7.7)	4 (9.3)	4 (13.8)	3 (5.0)
Evaluation Procedures				
open-ended responses	12 (30.8)	5 (11.6)	3 (10.3)	—
checklist	28 (71.8)	32 (74.4)	21 (72.4)	—
performance objectives	9 (23.1)	11 (25.6)	8 (27.6)	—
combination of above	8 (20.5)	8 (18.6)	5 (17.2)	—
Value to Superintendent				
meaningful	31 (79.5)	28 (65.1)	19 (65.5)	51 (85.0)
meaningless	6 (15.4)	7 (16.3)	6 (20.7)	8 (13.3)
specific direction from board	7 (17.9)	5 (11.6)	4 (13.8)	25 (41.7)
resulted in leaving job	0 (0.0)	1 (2.3)	0 (0.0)	6 (10.0)

*Percentages total more than 100 because of multiple responses, or less because not all items on the survey are reflected in the data represented here.

**1988–89 respondents were not asked to respond to some items covered in prior years.

veloped for the most part, are now used more consistently but lack reliability and validity. Items or scales utilized on many of the extant instruments are frequently gathered in questionable ways; for example, adopting in whole or in part evaluation instruments used by some other board of education. The quality of a borrowed instrument is always questionable, especially when it makes little reference to performance criteria that respond to local needs and realities. Without any reference to mutually agreed-upon performance expectations, board members are not in a position to make accurate judgments about the most efficient use of the superintendent's time, adequacy of basic management practices and efficiency in addressing local educational priorities. Studies have emphasized the need for administrator evaluation processes driven by clear performance expectations where as specificity increases, ability to reach those criteria increases (Redfern, 1974; Shaefer and Read, 1982).

Additionally, little use was made by Kansas school boards to receive evaluative input from faculty and students—the populations who interrelate most frequently and who are most affected by the superintendent in smaller rural districts. The absence of this data means that boards are deprived of observations from a pool of observers whose observations in the aggregate tend to reduce the individual biases that go unchecked by an exclusive reliance on individual board members' evaluations. The omission of such data led several new Kansas superintendents to conclude that board evaluation of their performance was a totally meaningless exercise.

Of special concern was the sizeable number of new superintendents who felt their boards did not give enough specific direction in the evaluation process. Since all superintendents in the study were new to site and relatively unfamiliar with board and community expectations, they would have welcomed direction toward meeting those needs. In short, superintendents felt their boards did not give them enough guidance. Yet very few anticipated making a job change because of disaffection with evaluation procedures. One must conclude that the inadequacies associated with existing performance assessment procedures are not contributors to higher superintendent turnover rates in Kansas; the reasons must lie elsewhere.

Clinical or Formative Supervision

As the press for school improvement emerged in the early eighties, clinical approaches to supervision were viewed as performance monitoring options with tremendous potential. Clinical supervision in the context of this survey was viewed as up-close supervisory work conducted with teachers in a developmentally focused nonadversarial context (Goldhammer, 1969). That is, the administrator is a coach or helper who actively assists the teacher in becoming a better classroom decision maker. A variety of instructional improvement strategies could be utilized, but all require frequent supervisory contact between teacher and administrator. As seen in Table 4, for two years new-to-site superintendents were asked about the significance they attach to clinical supervision as a vehicle for improved instructional practice. They identified this particular supervisory option as being *important*, possibly reflecting the influence of current university and inservice training as well as a perceived need to be full partners with their teachers in the instructional improvement process. However, clinical approaches to supervision were not identified as a priority need in their own districts, and few had actually implemented such approaches in schools. This disparity between approving of a new approach and then prioritizing it downward in one's own district is highly problematic if one believes that academically effective districts have superintendents that require teachers to teach to a preferred teach-

Table 4

Frequency and Percentage Distribution: New-to-Site Superintendent Perceptions About Clinical Supervision

Related Issues	1987–88 N = 29	1988–89 N = 60
Clinical Supervision Important to Your District?		
Yes	15 (51.7)	48 (80.0)
No	14 (48.3)	11 (18.3)
No Response	—	1 (1.7)
Clinical Supervision Important to Superintendent?		
Yes	23 (79.3)	53 (88.3)
No	6 (20.7)	5 (8.3)
No Response	—	2 (3.3)
District Has Short-term Plans For Implementation?		
Yes	14 (48.3)	35 (58.3)
No	14 (48.3)	24 (40.0)
No Response	1 (3.4)	1 (1.7)
District Has Long-term Plans For Implementation?		
Yes	15 (51.7)	29 (48.3)
No	13 (44.8)	29 (48.3)
No Response	1 (3.4)	2 (3.3)
Principals' Evaluation will include Use of Clinical Supervision?		
Yes	17 (58.6)	41 (68.3)
No	11 (37.9)	16 (26.7)
No Response	1 (3.4)	3 (5.0)

ing model, follow a tightly structured process of teacher and principal evaluation, and frequently (verbally) emphasize achievement of district goals and objectives (Murphy, Hallinger, and Peterson, 1987). LaRocque and Coleman (1986) similarly reported a strong district presence in higher performing school districts with district administrators setting achievement expectations, monitoring school performance data closely, and making school accountability a salient issue in the district.

Since most of the new superintendents categorized their inherited building principal(s) as *basic system maintainers*, it may have been difficult to recast these persons into roles as instructional leaders within the time span of only one year. One can only hope that these Kansas superintendents will be able to upgrade the supervisory skills of present principals or hire new ones with an educational improvement agenda that parallels their own. Follow-up studies over the next several years should shed more light on the issue.

Summary

Superintendency turnover has increased in Kansas over the last five years, but not at a rate that differs dramatically from the average for the nation. New-to-site superintendents in Kansas did not reflect a demographic profile that departed appreciably from their peers elsewhere in the nation. Age, level of education and job experience characteristics paralleled national medians. Kansas did depart rather dramatically from national statistics when gender was the basis of comparison.

Another noteworthy difference was the lack of central office and principalship experience held by many new superintendents serving in the smaller districts that abound in Kansas. Clearly, board expectations for these superintendents assume the central office and principalship functions are totally subsumed by the superintendency. School business management, transportation, curriculum development, instructional supervision, discipline, and parent conferencing are indeed major components in the rural superintendency.

The budget and its defense coupled with board of education evaluation practices were identified as major job irritants by new-to-site superintendents. Concerns about budget would understandably be a source of frustration for any new superintendent since limited opportunity to understand and influence budget development is typically characteristic. Board evaluation practices were frustrating because they frequently did not provide these superintendents with enough direction. Little evidence was provided to support the board's use of commonly agreed-upon performance criteria when assessing superintendent effectiveness. Additionally, little use was made of supplemental information that might reflect student and faculty perceptions of superintendent adequacy.

One emergent pattern observed over the five years of the study was the sharply different perceptions of school problems held by superintendents and citizens. This phenomenon might be attributable to the tendency of superintendents to view their conflicts as internal and bureaucratic rather than external and public (Zeigler, Jennings, and Peak, 1985). The superintendent's attention is directed more narrowly inward to the operations of the district and to the professional relationships with teachers, staff, and other administrators that constitute its working core. There is conflict, to be sure, but it is perceived as being of the professional rather than public variety. The dangers associated with internal focus have been considered by Lutz and Iannaccone (1978) who concluded in a discussion of dissatisfaction theory of local school governance that the seemingly placid, controlled, and superintendent-managed politics of education can episodically become highly conflictual if educational policies run into a strong community value and thus generate a good deal of political heat. Such a circumstance is more likely to emerge when the superintendent makes little effort to understand the range and depth of community feeling about the schools.

The new-to-site superintendents indicated generally positive perceptions about supervisory options that would address instructional improvement from a more clinical developmental perspective. Unfortunately, clinical approaches were not viewed as a priority concern for their districts. One might conclude that the "backburner status" assigned to clinical supervision reflected the press to address more important things during the first year in a new district. In a study of superintendent control over principals, Peterson (1984) suggests that the major mechanism for control is the selective recruitment and socialization of subordinates according to shared norms and values coupled with common perceptions among principals that they are indirectly being held accountable by the superintendent for results. It could well be that the new-to-site superintendents represented in this study simply did not view themselves as having personnel in place that could run with the demands of a clinically-focused supervisory program. It takes time to develop a sense of mission, to establish a positive climate, and oversee the implementation of that mission (e.g., placing like-minded people in principalships). The authors conclude that this is the scenario for Kansas superintendents. Clinical supervision in its various forms may prove over the long term to be more than a popular fad that failed for lack of commitment—time will tell.

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