

Chapter 1

Defining Practice

KEY FACETS OF THE CHAPTER

- Levels of public education governance
- Historical perspectives of the district superintendent
- Contemporary perspectives of the district superintendent
- Requirements for being a superintendent

CASE STUDY

THE BOARD DOES NOT WANT A RECOMMENDATION

Debra Jackson is not afraid to be a ground-breaker. She was the first person in her family to complete college; she was the first teacher of color to be employed in a small but highly affluent suburban school district; she was the first female high school principal elected to be president of her state's athletic association; she was

the first female to be appointed superintendent of the Habar School District.

Habar is technically a suburb, but definitely not an affluent one. Bordering the state capital, it was developed in the early 1950s, and most of the residents were employed in local factories. The district's student population peaked in 1975; since

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that year, it steadily declined from 13,500 to 4,700. During this same period, the general population declined by 37%, and the percentage of students eligible for free and reduced price lunches increased from 8% to 68%.

Habar's five-member, elected school board voted unanimously to employ Dr. Jackson. She replaced Dr. Samuel Ivory who retired after serving the district for 28 years, the last 11 as superintendent. Two factors prompted the board members to select her: They agreed with her espoused philosophy and they concluded that she more so than the other applicants could elevate student achievement test scores. The latter conclusion was based on Dr. Jackson's two previous administrative positions. As a principal and later as an assistant superintendent, she was widely praised for her ability as an instructional leader.

Dr. Jackson knew that the board expected her to be actively involved in curriculum and instruction. She also was aware that her predecessor had focused almost entirely on managerial responsibilities. Accordingly, she realized that she needed to realign responsibilities of the three assistant superintendents. Two of them (business and personnel) were assigned more responsibility and the third (instruction) was notified that she would work closely with Superintendent Jackson.

After assuming her new position on July 1, Dr. Jackson had to prepare for the school board meeting scheduled for 2 weeks later. The purchase of three buses was one of the items on that meeting's agenda. In accordance with state law, such purchases had to be based on sealed bids; however, the school board could consider both cost and product quality. Five vendors had

submitted bids. In the past, Superintendent Ivory had presided over bid openings and basically decided which bid would be recommended to the school board as the best. With the realignment of authority, however, that responsibility now belonged to the assistant superintendent for business services. After he presided over the bid opening, he summarized pertinent data and sent it to Superintendent Jackson. The report did not include a recommendation. Noting that this essential element was missing, she talked with her assistant and reminded him that he was supposed to include a specific recommendation and a rationale for it. His response surprised her.

"I realize that you want me to make a recommendation but the school board does not want recommendations on certain matters. One of them is the purchase of school buses. They only want to see the figures and they will make the decision collectively."

During her preemployment interviews and subsequent discussions with school board members, the issue of superintendent recommendations for board action items had never been discussed. Dr. Jackson assumed that board members recognized that superintendents had a professional responsibility to make recommendations on all matters requiring board approval. She reflected for a moment and then responded to her assistant.

"Starting now, every major purchase will be presented to the board with my recommendation. You are my expert for buses. Reconsider the bids, evaluate them, and tell me which one I should recommend. The next day, she received a revised report that included both analysis and a recommendation. Finding no reason to

disagree, she presented

School 3 days prior to the board meeting. He asked, "How do you build understanding in the district?" Dr. Jackson pointed out her responsibility

Dr. Jackson pointed out her responsibility

The November 1988 school board meeting, which was the first time a superintendent had sought a radical proposal more relevant to the district's needs, expressing the need for more resources.

This was the first time a school superintendent had presented a proposal to the board. First, four board members, including three (state and local) administrators, required the superintendent to present three top

disagree, she accepted the recommendation and presented it to the board.

School board materials were distributed 3 days prior to the meeting. Within hours after they were delivered, Debra received a call from the board president. He informed her that two board members already had contacted him about the recommendation for bus purchases. He asked, "Dr. Jackson, why are you spending time with bus bids? Financial matters, buses, and buildings are topics the board members understand. Therefore, we prefer to make decisions in these areas without a recommendation from the superintendent."

Dr. Jackson respectfully disagreed. She pointed out that superintendents had an ethical responsibility to make a recommendation for all

action items and board members had an ethical responsibility to evaluate the recommendation and decide whether it should be supported or rejected. The board president had a different opinion.

"We hired you to improve teaching and test scores. Most and maybe all the board members prefer to make financial decisions without being limited by a recommendation. When it comes to buses and buildings, we feel we can decide how tax dollars get spent. I would expect that you would be pleased that the board is willing to assume more direct responsibility for financial management. This gives you more time to be an instructional leader. We need to discuss the whole issue of recommendations in our next executive session."

INTRODUCTION

The November 1907 cover of the *School Board Journal* featured a cartoon in which a vacancy notice for a superintendent of schools had been posted on the front door of a board of education office. The solicitation noted that the board was seeking an individual who could please everybody, from ultraconservatives to radical progressives. The message conveyed by this evocative cover is arguably more relevant now than it was then. Today, stakeholders across the nation's approximately 14,000 school districts are divided into special interest groups expressing dissimilar preferences and competing with each other for limited resources (Björk & Keedy, 2001).

This chapter provides foundational information about the position of school superintendent and the organizational structures in which it functions. First, four tiers of public education governance are examined. Although superintendents are not present in the first tier (federal), they are in the remaining three (state, intermediate district, and local district). Next, the evolution of this administrative position is described in the context of five separate roles. Then, requirements for the position are identified and analyzed. Collectively, the three topics provide a broad perspective of contemporary practice.

5. Some citizens view superintendents as political appointees; some view superintendents as professionals. What factors contribute to these divergent views? Which view is accurate?
6. What is the difference between management and leadership?
7. Today, the teacher-scholar role conceptualization has become highly relevant. Why?
8. What is the difference between relational communication and role-based communication?
9. Why have states historically licensed school superintendents?
10. Nine states no longer issue or no longer require a superintendent's license. Why do you support or oppose license deregulation?

Case Study Discussion Questions

The Board Does Not Want a Recommendation

1. Do you support Dr. Jackson's position regarding making recommendations for all board action items? Why or why not?
2. In the case study, the board members prefer to make certain decisions without the superintendent's recommendation. What are their possible motives for this preference?
3. Based on what you read in Chapter 1, do you agree that Dr. Jackson can be effective by focusing primarily on curriculum and instruction and by granting greater responsibility to the assistant superintendents for business services and personnel? Why or why not?
4. If the school board insists that Dr. Jackson should not provide recommendations for major purchases, what should she do?
5. In the school district in which you work or reside, does the superintendent present the board with recommendations for all action items? If no, what types of action items does the board address without a superintendent's recommendation?
6. Why is the case study relevant to the five role conceptualizations discussed in this chapter?

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