

Research Prospectus

Understanding How British Columbia Superintendents Spend Their Time

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The goal of the project is to understand how British Columbia school superintendents spend their time and allocate time to various tasks. There is research to indicate that district leadership is incredibly important, and research to show the role and the duties can be done in a variety of different ways (Leithwood, Seashore Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). There is also a lot of attention on the strength of the British Columbia school system and its high levels of achievements (Alphonso, 2019). So, just what occupies the time of British Columbia superintendents.

Rationale and Purpose

Understanding the work of school superintendents could assist with recruiting new superintendents and offering professional support for existing superintendents. This work could also assist boards of education and ministry of education staff in the work they do to hire, support and evaluate superintendents.

School superintendents often have a difficult time describing their position. It is a job that crosses the spheres of administration and governance of a school district and they are forced to balance a varied list of tasks and responsibilities within a finite time. I have been in the role for close to ten years, and I still have difficulty clearly articulating what I do for a living. I often say the job is what you make it. There are times that are immersed in budget or curriculum, other times that international education or human resources that overwhelm other tasks. It is a job in which no two days are the same or no two people do the job the same.

Whenever I speak with peers there seems to be very different experiences in how they do their jobs. Some superintendents seem to spend the vast majority of their time engaged with

their Board and the governance of the organization. Others seem to very community focused, spending time connecting with local business, other community leaders and organizations like rotary or the chamber of commerce. While yet other superintendents have a focus on the learning process and spend a lot of time working with principals and individual teachers. What also comes through in these conversations is that they do not contemplate how they spend their time nor look to make adjustments in how they spend their time. They do what they have always done, often what like the person before them.

The superintendency is a job with a very varied job description or list of duties. Some days are spent in the urgent of school operations issues and parent concerns. Others are built around the long-term strategic planning and support school administrators. At times I feel the ongoing tension between the various aspects of the role. Each one important and competing for time. Every minute I spend with the Board, is one less minute I have available to support the system. And conversely, spending too much time look inwards and not working with the Board can have long term consequences for our system. And all the time, I am held accountable for the success of our students, and responsible for the actions of the thousands of employees and students within the school district.

Recently in Canada, there has been discussion about the value of school boards. In Canada we have very little federal involvement in education, and a co-governance relationship between provinces and local boards. There has also been a move to remove school boards in several provinces which changes the role of superintendent from working for the local board to the provincial government. This is a trend that could potentially come to British Columbia. Quebec Education Minister Jean-François Roberge was quoted in October (Shingler, 2019, para.

7), "too much bureaucracy, too much petty politics at the expense of our kids and too much money taken from the schools."

Regardless of the reporting structure for superintendents, there is an incredible lack of understanding from potential superintendents as to what the job entails. I will often hear from new superintendents about things they had "no idea" would be part of the job. The superintendency is a lonely position within a school district (Polka & Litchka, 2008). There is only one person who holds the position within a school district and it is a position which involves a lot of confidentiality and also is a job that I often see as trying to shield others from many of the tasks and issues so they can carry-on with the work in their portfolios.

It is with this understanding of the range of ways in which the job is carried out which has led me to this problem: How do British Columbia school superintendents spend their time?

There must be some things that are common. And while from my informal conversations over the last decade it seems as though I spend my days and nights very differently than my colleagues this study will take a close look at how British Columbia school superintendents spend their time. By first surveying all 59 other superintendents across the province, and then following up with interviews, issues like size of district, superintendent gender, and experience in the role will also be explored.

There are numerous reasons why a study of how British Columbia superintendents spend their time is important. British Columbia, particularly in recent years, has gained notoriety globally for its high levels of student success (Alphonso, 2019). Coughlan (2017), says "As Canada marks its 150th anniversary, it can claim the status of an education superpower" (para. 37). He argues that a strong sense of fairness and equal access has contributed to this success. There is clearly some unique characteristics in Canada, a country without a national education

system and little federal involvement in education that is leading to success across the country. British Columbia in particular has been highlighted because of its high results on the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) exams (Alphonso, 2019).

As I have spoken with colleagues there is incredible interest in this research. My fellow superintendent colleagues share some of my questions over how their work compares to their colleagues. Several I have spoken with wonder specifically if they spend more or less time with their Board than their colleagues. This work is also of interest to those who aspire to the superintendency. This will help better describe the work in the British Columbia context. The study may also be of interest to boards of education. In the British Columbia context, the superintendent is their sole employee. And the challenge that boards have is that they often have no education experience so lack all the tools to properly hire for the position. Finally, for the Ministry of Education who see superintendents as their conduit from the provincial government to the school system in the 60 districts this study will provide them a better understanding of what occupies the time of their key administrators in school districts.

There is an excellent opportunity for professional development coming out of this project for superintendents and others in the system. There is also the opportunity that other this study could be replicated in other jurisdictions in Canada to give a look at the role across the country. Depending on the results, this study could be an eye-opener for various individuals and groups in the British Columbia education system.

While true in many professions, the pressure on time in the school superintendent role is crucial. There are numerous competing interests that require them to use a range of skills and prioritize needs for their time. This study will add to the research base in British Columbia with information on how school superintendents spend their time in a series of categories, and also

look at the roles that gender, size of district, urban vs. rural and experience play in how school superintendents spend their time.

This research hypothesis assumes that there will be very different tasks carried out by superintendents in different circumstances but that there will be common experiences that can be generalized and that there is some commonality between British Columbia superintendents in how they spend their time.

Context for the Study

Callahan (1966) claims “I think that anyone who is familiar with the American public schools will agree that at the present time the superintendent of schools is the most crucial person in any school system” (p. 1). More than fifty years after this paper by Callahan that tracks the history of the superintendency to the mid-1800’s, the position is still highly regarded for its importance in the education system. It is a position that is shifting. It is moving from being very focused on power and control to being more collaborative (Brunner, Grogan, & Björk, 2005). Brunner, Grogan and Björk write in their article, “This is a shift that has come easy for some by not others. It is a stretch for certain superintendents to give up some of the power and control that the traditional discourse affords them. Appreciating dissent and living with contradictions are very difficult for superintendents who believe that they must steer the ship unaided” (p. 214). This sense of shifting responsibilities is also highlighted by Björk, Kowalski, and Browne-Ferrigno (2014, p.17), “roles and responsibilities are defined by emerging social, economic and political conditions, which in turn establish performance expectations for schools and students that are aligned with perceived national needs and transformational efforts.”

There have been very different eras for the school superintendent. There is a lot of reference to previous times of high level of command and control to more recent times of strong collaboration. Of course, this is not an either-or proposition. So, there would be still examples of both and many in-between on a continuum. It is important to note that the research is American, and while we have a similar model of education in British Columbia to the school board and superintendent model in the United States, different community values could be also impacting the role of superintendent.

There is regular discussion in the literature on the relationship between the superintendent and the board of school trustees. Campbell and Fullan (2019) argue for the importance of school trustees and superintendents working together in the name of good governance. They say it is essential that superintendents work with their boards to be strategic and focus on effective governance. This relationship and tension between superintendent and trustees are well documented and cited for high turnover in American superintendent positions (Grissom & Andersen, 2012). McCloud and McKenzie (1994) say, “The tension has been highlighted during periods of education reform. In today's reform-minded environment, citizens and educational leaders point with concern to the high rate of turnover among urban superintendents and to the large number of vacancies in city superintendencies that attract few candidates. They point to inefficiencies of local boards of education and superintendents as a major part of the problem, but they all seem to ignore the fact that this problem is mired in the history of local school governance” (para. 3)

Particularly in the American context there is a lot of discussion about superintendent turnover. While it is an issue in Canada, it does not seem as pronounced as it is in the United States. In America, (Grissom & Andersen, 2012, p. 384) “the story of school superintendent

turnover is a well-known one: energetic new leader assumes position with plans for revitalization, only to clash with a dysfunctional school board or impatient community and move on to greener pastures before the plans can be fully carried out, leaving the district once again searching for the next great leader bearing the requisite comprehensive reform plans.”

Superintendents are often hired to raise results, and even if they have some short-term success, if these results are not sustained, they move on – either at their choice or at the choice of their board. If superintendents are often changing and if they do not have long term job security this could definitely affect the tasks that they take on, looking for short-term success without taking a long-term view. Johnson (1996) affirms this view saying that “the relationship between superintendents and their constituents is a collaborative one, not one of command and compliance. Such collaborative leadership exercised in concert by teachers and administrators throughout a district develops over time, not overnight” (para. 8)

In looking specifically at the tasks of the superintendent, Meador (2019) lists the following high-level responsibilities for superintendents: board of education liaison, educational leader, manager of finance, daily operations, and lobbyist for the school district. These broad categories seem consistent with my own experiences and may be a good starting place for areas to pursue with those in the study as to which aspects consume the majority of their time.

Chris Barbic (Farrell, 2013) a relatively new school superintendent in Tennessee estimated he spent half his time meeting with community groups and leaders. There is continual focus on relationships and building trust for superintendents. It seems that particularly early on in one’s tenure as superintendent time is spent building relationships. Just as it is often easier for principals to bring change several years into their time in a school the same holds true for

superintendents who often spend a lot of time, particularly early in their career building relational trust.

There is also evidence of the loneliness of the position (McKenna, 2016). In their article, Kimball and Jazer (2004) describe their interview with North Carolina Superintendent Larry Allen, who says “he watches young rising administrators who don’t have a clue how isolated the superintendency can be for someone who is accustomed to collaboration. They do not see until they are a superintendent how lonely it is” (para. 12) This is a view that I know is shared by many new superintendents in British Columbia. Susan Enfield, superintendent in Shoreline, just outside of Seattle describes this well (McKenna, 2016, para. 17), “being a superintendent can be a lonely job. There’s only one of you in a district, and there is no way you can keep on top of everything.” Former staff who have worked with me in West Vancouver who have moved on to superintendent positions say they had no idea what actually consumed all of their time.

Armbruster (2011) considered how Virginia public school superintendents spend their time. His study is the one most closely aligned to the one that I am planning. This study highlighted the primary function for superintendents as being time they spent with their board. It also noted that small sized school districts had superintendents that were far more involved in operations as they lacked the people to assign tasks to within their organization. Armbruster took a similar approach to what I am considering. He conducted a descriptive survey study with a large survey of superintendents. This was followed by a telephone interview with 8 of those who participated in the survey. He was very specific about the categories he considered, and this may be useful for me to give mine some more clarity to the different areas for focus. For Armbruster, “This descriptive study is designed to determine the level of involvement of

superintendents throughout the state of Virginia in the areas of fiscal management, facility management, personnel, student personnel and special services, support services, instruction and curriculum, and community relations” (Abstract). These categories would likely work for the British Columbia context. As I continue to finalize this proposal, replicating much of his work might be possible with a new context.

Another study that has linkages to mine is one from Jones & Howley (2009) where they surveyed superintendents in four U.S. states and found that superintendents in rural districts spent more time on managerial tasks and those in larger urban districts spent more time on educational and community leadership. Their study of superintendents in Nebraska, New Hampshire, Tennessee and Texas found that context had an effect on the kind of work superintendents completed. This study reinforces the need for my study to be conscious on context in those being surveyed and try to ensure that rural and urban superintendents of different sizes participate in the study.

For the literature review of my project, research will be categorized into the following categories: history of the superintendent role, qualities and characteristics required for superintendents, the importance of school superintendents to school and district success, the context of education in British Columbia and Canada and topics that consume time for superintendents.

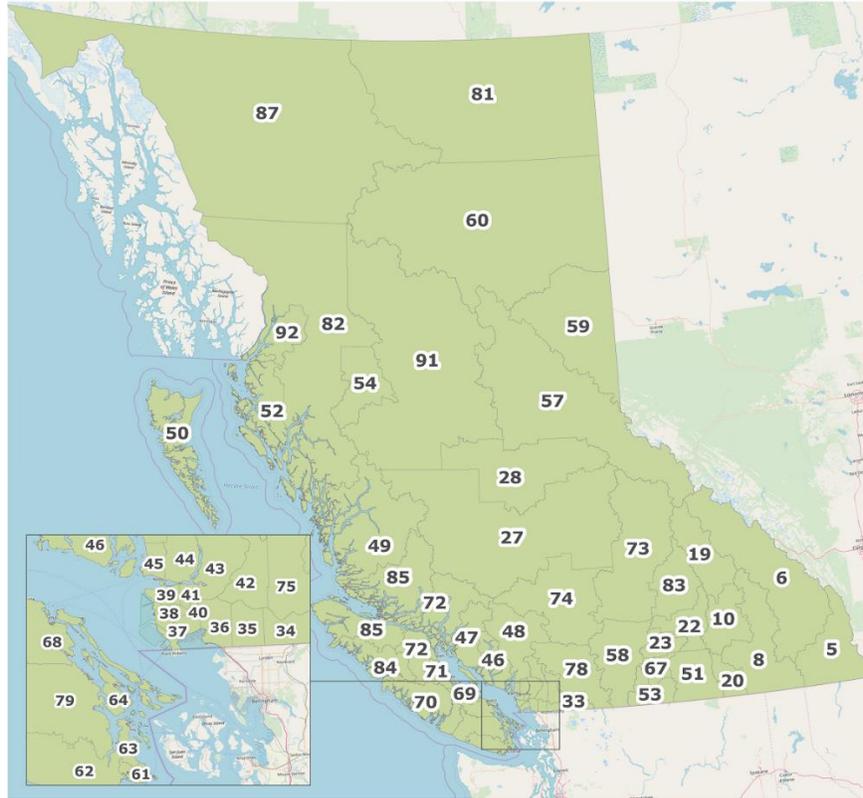
There are a number of limitations to the research that has been considered so far. It is largely American research and while our systems are similar, it will be important to find some Canadian literature for this project. The literature has also focused largely on the role of superintendent and not been specific about how superintendents spend their time. There are numerous studies that focus on superintendent retention and board / superintendent relationships

that are related to the project I am proposing but have different goals. There must be additional existing research in other jurisdictions that is similar to this project and can be used to inform the questions and the project more generally. I want to explore more of the role and description of the superintendent, because this helps to determine how superintendents spend their time. I will also focus on the changing role of the superintendent over time as that also is informative to understanding the role and tasks today.

Research Design

There are 60 school districts in British Columbia, and each has one individual who holds the position of superintendent. This study will survey all 59 other superintendents in British Columbia. This will be followed up by interviews with eight of the participants.

British Columbia is divided geographically into 60 school districts. These range in population from a couple hundred to over seventy thousand students. There is also great range of geographic size to the school districts. With tightly compact districts around Metro Vancouver and widespread areas outside of the urban centers. In Metro Vancouver there are nine of the twenty largest districts by population in British Columbia. Including the Fraser Valley region, and the centers of Victoria and Kelowna, almost all of the twenty largest school districts are in these areas. Conversely, in the eastern and northern part of British Columbia are the majority of smaller districts. For example, the Stikine School District (School District 87) has fewer than 300 students in an area of over 80,000 square kilometers – which is twice the size of Switzerland. This map shows the placement of all 60 British Columbia school districts via the contact map (2019):



There are close to 550,000 students who attend public schools in British Columbia. Surrey and Vancouver are the largest districts accounting for between 20-25% of the total population for the province.

While traditionally a male dominated profession, there has been increased gender diversity in recent times. There are currently 39 male superintendents in BC, and 21 female superintendents (“Superintendents basic information,” 2019). The issue of gender in relation to tasks is something that will be explored in the paper by interviewing both male and female superintendents. The current ratio of male to female superintendents is more balanced than in the United States. Superville (2017) says that “Even though K-12 education is largely a female enterprise, men dominate the chief executive's office in the nation's nearly 14,000 districts, numbers that look especially bleak given that the pool of talent is deep with women. Women make up 76 percent of teachers, 52 percent of principals, and 78 percent of central-office

administrators, according to federal data and the results of a recent national survey. Yet they account for less than a quarter of all superintendents” (para. 21)

So, we start with 59 potential candidates to be surveyed for this project. Superintendents will be invited to participate via an email invitation to the survey. Superintendents who do not respond within a week will receive a follow-up phone call to confirm their level of interest in participating.

I would start with some simple questions, that give a general frame for the study. I would begin with some basic demographic information about the superintendent answering the survey, the size of their district, and their experience. Some of the next set of questions would include:

- Typically, what time do you get to work each day?
- Typically, what time do you leave work each day?
- On average, how many nights a week do you have a work-related commitment that extends after 8 PM?
- How often do you have a work-related commitment on a Saturday or Sunday?
- When you think about the beginning of your days, what are the first work related tasks you do each day?

I would then move into questions that go deeper into the details of the type of work that they complete:

- If you had to divide your work into two categories, governance and administration – what % of time would you give to each? What tasks would be ones that would be under governance? What tasks would be ones that would be under administration?
- In the area of governance, what are the specific tasks you do that take the most time?
- In the area of administration, what are the specific tasks you do that take the most time?

- When you are asked what a superintendent does, how do you respond?
- Is the job what you thought it would be when you were initially hired?
- How do you think your job is different from other superintendents in BC?

All the participants will be promised confidentiality. This is crucial to try to get the most honest answers possible. It is also why I need to be thoughtful with how the participants are selected so there are enough participants to mask the ability for them to be identified in the project.

Following the survey, I would follow with phone interviews with eight of the participants. With my plan to gather information about all of my colleagues, and go deeper with a select number of participants, I am very conscious of the need for trust. These are my colleagues. I am hopeful that my reputation helps me as I enter into this study. Related, is the need to listen without judgment during the interviews. I hold the same job as those I will be studying. This might be a great positive, as it gives me some clear insight in advance, but I need to make a conscious effort to suspend judgment as I go through the process. I am worried around consistency.

Limitations

The study is specific to school superintendents within the province of British Columbia so it may not be generalizable outside of British Columbia. British Columbia also have about 16% of its schools that are independent or private schools, and this study does not consider leadership associated with this schools.

When one has voluntary participation, there is always the chance that getting an appropriate sample will be a problem. I am hopefully that at least 75% of the BC superintendents participate but this cannot be guaranteed. There is also always the concern of

bias. It is something that I have thought about for this study as all of the people I will be interviewing will be colleagues. I know all of them well enough to recognize them by name, and many I know very well. I worry that they may answer the survey the way that they think I want them to, or in a way that they might think is the right answer to look as strong and successful in the role as possible. I think well planned survey questions and a follow-up interview can overcome the potential for them confirming what they think I might want to hear. It is helpful that there is no power relationship within the group. I am an equal to the other 59 potential interviewees.

I am already thinking about what the next study might be depending on what comes through this project. Initially I had considered trying to make some statement around what superintendents do and its relationship to student success. The incredible difficulty in defining student success in any meaningful way has led to abandoning this. That said, I think there is a potential future study where some of these findings from this project could be used to look at how they relate to other factors including student success. I am trying to not do too much. I think just finding out how BC school superintendents spend their time will be incredibly valuable and of interest to many in the system.

Conclusions

This project starts with a very simple premise asking what it is that occupies the time of British Columbia school superintendents. British Columbia is a world-leader in education, and superintendents are widely seen as crucial to the work in school districts. Gaining a better understanding what is common and different among British Columbia school superintendents could be incredibly important for those in the role, and those who work closely with superintendents. This project also will likely open additional lines of research that could be

followed-up on based on the findings. It may also signal specific executive professional development for superintendents for other key individuals or groups in the system.

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Research Literacy for Administrators in Higher Education**Rubric: Final Project****WRITTEN REPORT (_____/30 pts)****Content** (_____/20 points)

- Rationale and purpose of the study (1-5 pts) _____
 - Introduces the purpose of the study and research questions to be asked
 - Describes the context or workplace environment, including both practical and political considerations in which the study will take place
 - Identifies the potential benefits of conducting the research – the “importance of the study”
- Contextualization for the study (1-5 pts)
 - Situates the study in some contemporary research literature (minimum of 10 sources)
 - Explains how prior literature or theory informs the study
 - Identifies the “buckets” of literature that will inform the study
- Research Design (1-5 pts) _____
 - Provides an overview of the type of study to be conducted (the method)
 - Describes the population and sample
 - Describes the data that will be used to answer the research questions
 - If quantitative – explain operationalization of key DV and IV’s
 - If qualitative – provides some sample interview questions to be used
 - Describes and justifies the data analysis to be used
- Limitations/Critique of the study (1-5 pts) _____
 - Identifies the limitations or concerns you have about the proposed study
 - Elaborates on some of the potential unintended consequences of the study

Clarity (1-5 points) _____

- Thoughtful, well-expressed paper that is clearly organized and includes a map and introduction
- Evidence of careful proofreading/editing throughout

Sources (1-5 points) _____

- Uses correct APA citation format in text and in reference list
- Includes at least 10 sources (8 of which need to be research studies)