

Research and Policy Project:

Linking the Work of the Superintendent to Special Education

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Background on my Research Project

The goal of my research 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 in the success of school districts, and research to show there are varied ways to excel as a district leader. There has also been a lot of positive attention on the strength and high levels of achievement in the British Columbia school system. So, just what occupies the time of British Columbia superintendents.

The superintendency is a position with varied job descriptions and lists 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 of the district and support of school-based administrators. 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 look at the roles that gender, size of district, urban vs. rural and experience play in how school superintendents spend their time.

The 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 within the group of British Columbia superintendents and how they spend their time.

Linking to Special Education

This research project is about how superintendents spend their time, and one of the key areas that may occupy superintendents is special education. While most school districts have teams of teachers and administrators responsible for students with unique learning needs, special education is one of the “buckets” that occupies the time of a superintendent and superintendents have ultimate responsibility for special education decisions. Some ways in which the superintendent position connects with special education include: around the development and implementation of policy with the Board, the time spent with concerned parents looking for different or additional services, the coordination of budgeting for special education services and the management of media issues which can often involve the programming of special education students. So, connecting my research with special education, just what does the research say about superintendents and special education. It is worth considering the research that exists that link the role of the superintendent to the work of special education.

A Look at the Research

When it comes to school and district administrators and their interactions with special education much of the discussion focuses on legal requirements and ensuring that laws are being followed by schools and districts. As Valesky & Hirth (1992) recognize:

It is evident that regular education administrators must command a knowledge of special education and special education law. This knowledge is required for two main reasons: to ensure an appropriate education for all students with disabilities, as

required by P.L. 94-142, and to minimize losing potential lawsuits resulting from inappropriate implementation of special education legal requirements.

School and district administrators are the ones held accountable for the actions of the schools and districts. While this is often oversight, it is crucially important. In their conclusions Valesky & Hirth (1992) argue, "all educational administrators should be special education administrators through training in special education competencies." In British Columbia all teachers are required to take a single course in special education as part of their teaching training program, but no other training is required later as they move through the system into a position as an administrator. While we are hiring a number of school administrators with a background in special education, there is definitely not a sense in the system that all administrators are special education administrators, and that the expertise in the field is left largely to a small number of experts.

Outka (2010) argues that while knowledge of special education is important to their work, "many superintendents do not possess the knowledge and skills necessary to successfully direct a district's special education program." Outka's study of superintendents in South Dakota indicates that they are most familiar with issues around funding and collaboration between special education and general education staff and have the least knowledge of programs for special education students. Her concern with this is that while superintendents may delegate tasks and authority, they are the executives responsible for the success or failure of the programs. In the British Columbia context there have been a number of highly publicized recent court decisions related to special education that has led to definitely a greater level of interest from superintendents with decisions in special education.

Sormani (2016) in looking at the perceptions of special education directors towards superintendents concludes that “superintendents fall back on what they know about special education focusing on legal compliance and finances when working with special education directors” (117). Again, this is a very managerial view of the work of superintendent. And while disappointing, this does largely reflect my experience. My conversations around special education are most often around budget and levels of service and not on specific interventions that may be particularly successful. Sormani’s findings indicate the key roles that special education directors see for superintendents include, “monitoring conflict and litigation costs, evaluating special education department performance, monitoring the efficiency of expenditures, advancing an inclusive vision, facilitating the school board’s understanding, and influencing internal communications” (124). These are useful categories to consider as I survey school superintendents in British Columbia and look at how they spend their time with a specific look within special education.

Jacobs (2012) looks at the role that US legislation like No Child Left Behind has focused superintendents on achievement results of all students, and thus increased their attention on students in special education. The funding topic is an interesting one, and one where we differ quite greatly from the United States, but similarly special education funding is front-of-mind for British Columbia superintendents. While examples are given in the United States around funding being linked to achievement results, in British Columbia, it is often around teachers’ contracts. So, it is not the success of students that impact funding, but the proper designation of students that lead to differentiated funding for districts. British Columbia school district regularly spend far more on special education than they receive in their budgets. In 2018,

Rozworski indicated that often districts spend twice as much on special education as they receive from government in British Columbia, with the remainder coming from general operating funds. The high expenditures on special education, and the need to take funding from general accounts influences the time superintendents will spend in this portfolio.

A general view in the research is that superintendents fall back on what they know about special education attending to legal compliance and budgeting. For the purpose of my study, it is interesting to see if how superintendents spend time related to special education in British Columbia is reflective of this apparent reality.

How This May Influence My Research

Special Education is one of the many areas that superintendents have responsibility for in the system. When looking at the work of British Columbia superintendents, I may consider looking at how much time they spend on tasks related to special education, and just what these interactions include, from meeting with parents, to designing and implementing policy, to general administrative oversight. I have wanted to “bucket” the work of superintendents into various categories, and considering the work related to special education seems worthy of further discussion.

References

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