Politics First: Examining the Practice of the Multi-District Superintendent

Daniella Hall
Clemson University
&
Erin McHenry-Sorber
West Virginia University
United States

Abstract: Over the past decade, multiple states have implemented a form of regional school district consolidation referred to as multi-district unions. Their organizational structure enables districts to retain individual school boards within regional local education agencies, all of which are overseen by a superintendent and a central board. However, no empirical research has been conducted to date on the ensuing work of multi-district superintendents. In our exemplary case study, we analyze time records, interviews, and observations to understand the role allocations and work of one multi-district superintendent. We find the division of time and ensuing responsibilities of the multi-district superintendent is predominantly political to the organizational structure of the union, and we conclude with implications for policy and practice.
Keywords: multi-district superintendent; superintendent; school board; multi-district union; joint union; regionalization; consolidation; rural schools; local control; case study

Iniciativas políticas: Examinando las prácticas de múltiples distritos superintendentes
Resumen: A lo largo de la última década, varios estados han implementado una forma de consolidación regional del distrito escolar referida como sindicatos multi-distritales. Su estructura organizativa permite que los distritos regulen consejos escolares individuales en las agencias regionales de educación local, todos supervisados por un superintendente y un consejo central. Sin embargo, ninguna investigación empírica se ha realizado hasta el momento sobre el trabajo posterior de los superintendentes de múltiples distritos. En nuestro estudio de caso ejemplar, analizamos registros de tiempo, entrevistas y observaciones para entender las asignaciones de funciones y el trabajo de un superintendente de múltiples distritos. Creemos que la división del tiempo y las responsabilidades subsiguientes del superintendente de múltiples distritos es predominantemente política para la estructura organizativa de la unión y concluimos con implicaciones para políticas y prácticas.
Palabras clave: múltiple distrito superintendente; superintendente; unión de múltiples distritos; unión común; regionalización; consolidación; escuelas rurales; control local; estudio de caso

Iniciativas políticas: Examinando as práticas de múltiplos distritos superintendentes
Resumo: Ao longo da última década, vários estados implementaram uma forma de consolidação regional do distrito escolar referida como sindicatos multi-distritais. A sua estrutura organizacional permite que os distritos regulem conselhos escolares individuais nas agências regionais de educação local, todos supervisionados por um superintendente e um conselho central. No entanto, nenhuma pesquisa empírica foi realizada até o momento sobre o trabalho subsequente dos superintendentes de múltiplos distritos. Em nosso estudo de caso exemplar, analisamos registros de tempo, entrevistas e observações para entender as alocações de funções e o trabalho de um superintendente de múltiplos distritos. Achamos que a divisão do tempo e as responsabilidades subsequentes do superintendente de múltiplos distritos é predominantemente política para a estrutura organizacional da união e concluímos com implicações para políticas e práticas.
Palavras-chave: múltiplo distrito superintendente; superintendente; união de múltiplo distrito; união comum; regionalização; consolidação; escolas rurais; controle local; estudo de caso

Introduction

Nationwide, the daily work of superintendents is increasingly complex. District leaders must negotiate changing political landscapes; oversee district operations, finances, and human resources; and ensure equitable academic progress while meeting local, state, and federal requirements, among other tasks. In addition to program and personnel reductions, a common response to financial challenges has been school and district consolidation in the form of forced statewide mergers and local initiatives. Such consolidation efforts are complex, politically contentious enterprises (e.g., Fairman & Donis-Keller, 2012; Mathis, 2015). Often grounded on the promise of economies of scale (Howley, Johnson, & Petrie, 2011), consolidation may create opportunities for increased academic and social opportunities (Nitta, Holley, & Wrobel, 2010). Yet mergers can result in larger class sizes, distant student-teacher relationships, increased student transportation time, local resistance, and most salient to this research, a loss of local control over schooling (Blauwkamp, Longo, & Anderson, 2011; Howley & Howley, 2006; Nitta et al., 2010).

Multiple states, including Maine, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, and Vermont, have implemented a form of regional district consolidation designed to preserve local control while retaining the benefits of economies of scale (Fairman & Donis-Keller, 2012; Howley et al., 2011).

Under this revised regionalization model, individual, semi-autonomous school districts retain local school boards, but are loosely centralized into geographic governance unions. The resulting local education agencies (LEAs), referred to as joint or multi-district unions, are overseen by a superintendent, central office, and a central school board. Policymakers hypothesize that this form of regionalization reduces costs by decreasing the number of superintendents and central office administrators in a given region, while enabling districts to retain some measure of local control.

Although multi-district unions are gaining popularity in the Northeast and Midwest, to date no peer-reviewed research has been conducted on the work of these multi-district superintendents. This administrative reorganization has the potential to exacerbate existing challenges and generate new demands for multi-district superintendents who must work with multiple school boards in a single region. The lack of research is problematic for educational policymakers evaluating multi-district consolidation proposals without knowledge of the potential effects on the work of these leaders, as well as for the practice of multi-district superintendents themselves.

The purpose of this study is to address the critical lack of research on the new phenomenon of multi-district unions with an in-depth examination of the work of a multi-district superintendent. Our qualitative study is structured as an exemplary case study of one superintendent who oversees ten rural communities in a multi-district union. Using a combination of superintendent time records, interviews, and ethnographic observations, we address the following questions: 1.) how does a multi-district superintendent divide time across role allocations; 2.) how does the multi-district union structure affect the work and role allocations of the superintendent?

In the following sections, we draw from the body of literature on superintendent role allocations and research on rural and regional superintendents to frame our analysis of the work of a multi-district superintendent. We find the multi-district superintendent's time allocation significantly differs from research on single district superintendent role allocations. We then analyze how the organizational structure of the multi-district union shapes the superintendent's work, finding that he must act primarily in a political role as an advisor to his multiple local boards in the decentralized LEA. We conclude with recommendations for policy and practice.

Theoretical Framework: Superintendent Role Allocations

The work of superintendents is multi-faceted, necessitating a broad range of administrative responsibilities and skills. Because this research on the multi-district superintendent is exploratory in nature, we employ Cuban's (1988) practice-driven framework of superintendent role conceptualizations to make sense of these diverse, and at times competing responsibilities. Drawing from a detailed historical review of superintendents' time allocations, Cuban identifies three dimensions of superintendent leadership: instructional, managerial, and political work.

Superintendents' managerial responsibilities, necessary to "maintain organizational stability" (Cuban, 1988, p. 136), range from LEA fiscal oversight; building and grounds maintenance administration; personnel management; union negotiations direction; and organizational data collection, organization, and communication (Cuban, 1988; Johnson, 1996). Previous studies on superintendent roles document the significance of managerial tasks (Browne-Ferrigno & Glass, 2005; Crowson, 1987; Kowalski, 2005). Managerial roles make up the majority of responsibilities for superintendents (Cuban, 1988), comprising an average of 43% of their time (Jones & Howley, 2009).

Although managerial work is a significant component of superintendent time, many district leaders assert instructional responsibilities are the most important tasks overall (Glass et al., 2000; Massachusetts Association of Regional Schools, 2009; Peterson, 2002), in part because one of the superintendent's primary roles is to set district-wide educational vision and goals, and ensure timely

progression towards meeting them. Superintendents' instructional work includes establishing instructional goals, providing professional development for faculty and staff, selecting and overseeing district-wide curriculum and pedagogy, ensuring goals can be achieved through the organizational mechanisms in their LEAs (Cuban, 1988; Johnson, 1996), and overseeing district accountability measures and outcomes (Bredeson, Klar, & Johansson, 2011). Cuban (1988) and Jones and Howley (2009) both found superintendents spend an average of 30% of their time on instructional tasks.

The political work of superintendents necessitates communication, public relations, and statesmanship skills (Björk, Browne-Ferrigno, & Kowalski, 2014; Cuban, 1988; Johnson, 1996; Kowalski, 2005). This leadership role requires developing and maintaining relationships with key stakeholders including school boards, parents, community members, special interest groups, administrators, and teachers. Cuban (1988) and Boyd (1976) argue a superintendent must collaborate with multiple stakeholder groups to ensure the community's values are reflected in the goals and outcomes of the district. Furthermore, empirical studies find superintendents' adeptness at political tasks influences the extent to which school district visions are realized (Johnson, 1996; McHenry-Sorber, 2014; Petersen & Short, 2001; Trujillo, 2013), as well as the length of superintendent tenure (Grissom & Andersen, 2012; Mountford, 2003). Nonetheless, superintendents spend the least amount of time on political tasks (Cuban, 1988), reporting 27% of their time devoted to this leadership dimension (Jones & Howley, 2009).

In sum, research show superintendents' time is primarily spent on managerial tasks, followed by instructional work, with the least time on political work (Cuban, 1998; Johnson, 1996; Jones & Howley, 2009). However, the literature focus has been on traditional, single-district LEAs. To date, no empirical work has been conducted on the dimensions of leadership for multi-district superintendents. By employing role allocations as a theoretical frame for our analysis, we seek to understand how a multi-district superintendent allocates time across roles, and what the implications are for a multi-district superintendent's daily work.

Rural, Regional, and Multi-District Superintendents

In our analysis of multi-district superintendents, we begin with the premise that the U.S. public school system is notable in its diversity, from large urban districts to small rural districts. The overarching contextual factors of school districts—organizational governance structures, geographic locale, size, community demographics, and so forth—influence superintendent leadership practices (Leithwood, Louis Seashore, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004; Masumoto & Brown-Welty, 2009). Although we find empirical consistency of the role allocations of superintendents both temporally (Cuban, 1998) and across different state contexts (Jones & Howley, 2009), the leadership practices of superintendents vary depending on their district context (Bredeson et al., 2011; Lamkin, 2006). Our analysis, then, considers existing research on superintendents in rural and/or locally controlled settings to approximate the types of issues encountered by multi-district leaders.

To assess the prevalence of superintendents leading more than one district, we conducted a national review of district governance structures, first using comparative data from the Education Commission of the States (ECS, 2016), and then by examining each state's publicly available superintendent and school board data.[1] A key feature of multi-district unions is that their

---

[1] We analyzed ECS 50-state comparison reports for regional superintendents, local school boards, and local superintendents (ECS, 2016), searching for explicit references to multi-district unions, as well as for discrepancies between the number of local boards and superintendents in a state. States with more boards

superintendents govern more than one school district; therefore we excluded regional superintendents who oversee multiple districts, but are not the local district leader for each, such as regional, intermediate, and cooperative unions (e.g., New York's BOCES, Georgia's RESAs).

Through our analysis, we found evidence of multi-district or joint unions in the predominantly rural, locally controlled New England states including Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Vermont. We also found evidence of superintendents overseeing multiple or joint districts similar to multi-district unions in the rural states of Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota, and Oklahoma.

Given the prevalence of multi-district unions in rural states, and the paucity of research on multi-district superintendents, we synthesize relevant scholarship on the roles and responsibilities of the rural superintendent to inform our work. Rural districts comprise over one-half of all districts nationwide (NCES, 2014). These districts tend to be geographically large, with low population density, generating significant leadership challenges for funding, student transportation, and school staffing (Johnson, Showalter, Klein, & Lester, 2014; Lamkin, 2006). Rural school districts—while far from homogenous—encompass similar characteristics that influence leadership practices. Howley, Howley, Rhodes, and Yahn (2014) argue that because rural districts serve as sites of local democratic engagement, rural superintendents are intimately connected to the local community and "play a pivotal role" in attending to community interests (p. 621). Further, they attend to "local particularities" that have significant ramifications for the school district and community (Howley et al., 2014, p. 621). As prominent leaders in their communities, rural superintendents operate in a fishbowl (Budge, 2006; Sperry & Hill, 2015), making them far more likely to engage in frequent, informal political communication with community members than their urban counterparts (Bredeson et al., 2011).

Rural superintendents must also conduct their work with smaller administrative teams than their urban and suburban peers. Several comparative studies found rural superintendents were more likely to oversee small central offices than urban superintendents, therein increasing their managerial responsibilities (Bredeson et al., 2011; Jenkins, 2007). As a result, rural superintendents may have more managerial tasks in comparison to non-rural superintendents. Lamkin (2006) explains:

> The burden of being the only administrator in the central office—sometimes in the district—plus the demands of the closely-knit rural community and the calls for personal accountability render service to rural districts distinct from service to suburban or urban districts, where the superintendent would enjoy many layers of administrative assistance and separation from daily classroom and community concerns (p. 22).

Jones and Howley (2009) reached similar conclusions in their analysis of role allocations, reporting "the lower the district enrollment, the more likely it is that the superintendent will devote a substantial amount of time to managerial leadership," (p. 14). One of the motivations for creating multi-district unions is to reduce economic inefficiencies by condensing central office services

---

than superintendents were identified as potentially employing multi-district governance structures. Next, we searched each individual state's Department of Education website for superintendent and/or district data to confirm multi-district or joint unions, or dual superintendent appointments. We also conducted targeted searches to identify the organizational structures of potential multi-district or joint districts in each state. From this search, we found evidence of multi-district, joint, or dual-appointed superintendents in 11 states: Iowa, Kansas, Maine, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Montana, Nebraska, New Hampshire, North Dakota, Oklahoma, and Vermont.

(Fairman & Donis-Keller, 2012; Howley et al., 2011). It is therefore possible that managerial responsibilities will be greater for multi-district superintendents than single district leaders.

Rural communities and school districts, as proxies for communities, can be spaces of contestation and social exclusion rather than tight-knit homogenous spaces (McHenry-Sorber & Schafft, 2014; Sherman, 2009). Rural leaders are challenged to navigate divergent school and community values about the purpose of schooling, the work of educators, or the future of their communities (Budge, 2010; McHenry-Sorber, 2014). At times, rural superintendents may find themselves unable to meet community expectations for educational leaders (Gammill & Vaughn, 2011), at odds with dominant community values (Corbett, 2010; McHenry-Sorber, 2014), or struggling to promote change in a small community (Lamkin, 2006). As the educational leader of the district, rural superintendents must balance complex and divergent community needs and interests with external pressures to ensure high student outcomes, educational equity, and college and career readiness.

In addition to contestation within communities (McHenry-Sorber, 2014), rural superintendents may face the political challenges of divergent and critical beliefs between neighboring communities. Recent studies on regionalization in Vermont (Hall, 2016; Rogers, Glesner, & Meyers, 2014) and Maine (Fairman & Donis-Keller, 2012) found geographically proximal communities retained opposing beliefs about the goals, objectives, and outcomes of public education. In some regions, this lack of consensus undermined efforts to regionalize multiple towns into one cohesive district (Fairman & Donis-Keller, 2012; Rogers et al., 2014). These findings on the importance of context are particularly salient for multi-district superintendents, who may need to balance divergent, localized educational beliefs into cohesive district-wide policies and programming.

While no peer-reviewed studies have yet been published on multi-district superintendents, the Massachusetts Association of Regional Schools (MARS) conducted a 2009 survey on central office capacity in state regional unions, including joint and multi-district unions. The MARS study found superintendents working in smaller regional districts reported more responsibilities overall, and less time for instructional leadership. The study authors were not able to disaggregate findings for multi-district superintendents; however, they noted, "The extra time devoted to evening meetings, administrative reporting, and union negotiations by [multi-district] superintendents and other central office administrators of unions is largely invisible in our analysis, but it represents a significant loss of time for other tasks, e.g. instructional leadership," (MARS, 2009, p. 14). The survey by MARS, while limited in scope, suggests a zero-sum relationship wherein multi-district superintendents' time on political responsibilities reduces time available for instructional and managerial work.

Existing research on rural and regional superintendents provides a foundational understanding of the issues that may affect multi-district superintendents. Rural superintendents are more likely to work with small central offices and operate within a close-knit, public sphere in comparison to their urban and suburban counterparts. Regional superintendents may need to develop consensus across divergent groups or towns in their districts. Such challenges are likely to be exacerbated for multi-district superintendents in rural contexts who operate within similar geo-political contexts. Because there is a dearth of empirical research on the multi-district superintendent, this study examines these practices, specifically as they relate to role allocations.

Rural, Regional, and Multi-District Superintendents

To provide an in-depth examination of the work of a multi-district superintendent, we structured the qualitative study as an exemplary case study (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; Yin, 2013). The study[2] is comprised of multiple sources of data, including the superintendent's personal time records from 2013–2015; and interviews, documents, and ethnographic observations conducted between 2012 and 2016. Collectively, these data enabled us to analyze the work and experiences of a multi-district superintendent. To maintain confidentiality, site names and participants are identified using pseudonyms, and some identifying details have been modified. We begin this section with a description of context followed by a discussion of data collection and analysis procedures.

State Context: Vermont's Educational Governance System

Organizational structures of educational governance, from state education agencies to local districts, significantly shape the work of superintendent leadership (Bredeson et al., 2011). Similar to other states with sizable rural populations, Vermont retains a decentralized educational governance system largely unchanged from the common school model of the 1800s (Mathis, 2015). The state's 283 districts are loosely organized by region into Supervisory Unions (SUs), Supervisory Districts, or Interstate Districts (Vermont AOE, 2012). These regional districts and unions are overseen by superintendents and centralized boards. Superintendents are hired and evaluated by the composite, centralized boards, which are comprised of board members from local district school boards. The central boards oversee broad educational governance for the region, such as selecting curriculum, overseeing contract negotiations, and directing business, data, and personnel management. The superintendent is responsible for the educational and political oversight of each school, including hiring and supervising principals, teachers, and staff. However, each local district, usually comprised of a single town or city, retains its own school board as well. These local school boards are responsible for tasks such as developing an annual education budget for the town, managing local school facilities, and working with the superintendent to set policies and procedures for town schools. (See Figure 1: *Case study site organizational governance*).

Historically, Vermont statutes limited superintendent power. For example, superintendents did not have the authority to hire school principals until 2010. While different agencies have moved to expand superintendent authority, Vermont superintendents' scope of influence continues to be limited by current legislative statutes (V.S.A. § 153). Presently, Vermont superintendents still lack authority for other foundational responsibilities such as owning buildings or property on behalf of the SU, such as central offices or bus garages (Vermont AOE, 2014).

Although Vermont's LEAs may appear atypical in comparison to other state governance structures, the state's multi-district union model is representative of multi-district unions nationwide (ECS, 2016). Vermont's system most closely aligns with those in Maine, Massachusetts, and New Hampshire, and is similar to regional and joint districts in predominantly rural states including Iowa, Kansas, and Montana.

---

[2] The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the corresponding author.
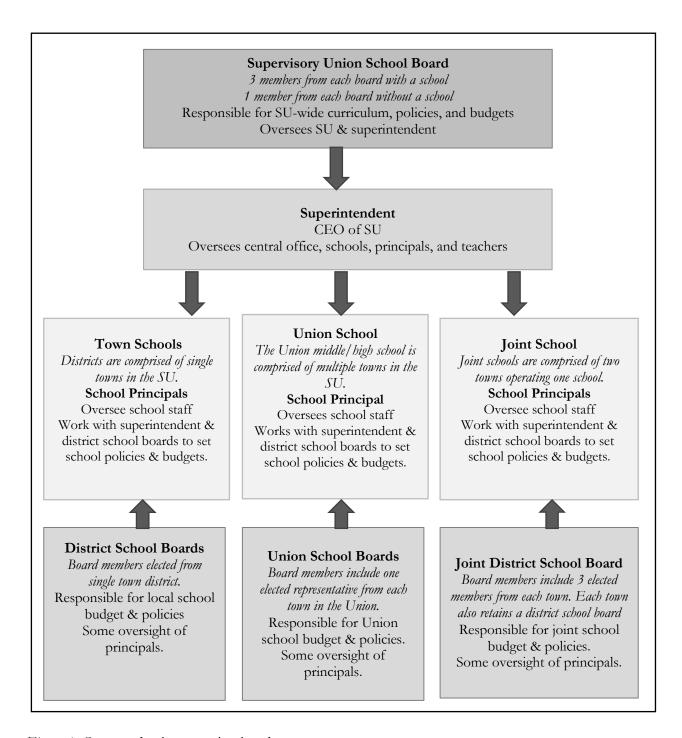
Supervisory Union School Board
3 members from each board with a school
1 member from each board without a school
Responsible for SU-wide curriculum, policies, and budgets
Oversees SU & superintendent

Superintendent
CEO of SU
Oversees central office, schools, principals, and teachers

Town Schools
Districts are comprised of single towns in the SU.
School Principals
Oversee school staff
Work with superintendent & district school boards to set school policies & budgets.

Union School
The Union middle/high school is comprised of multiple towns in the SU.
School Principal
Oversees school staff
Works with superintendent & district school boards to set school policies & budgets.

Joint School
Joint schools are comprised of two towns operating one school.
School Principals
Oversee school staff
Work with superintendent & district school boards to set school policies & budgets.

District School Boards
Board members elected from single town district.
Responsible for local school budget & policies
Some oversight of principals.

Union School Boards
Board members include one elected representative from each town in the Union.
Responsible for Union school budget & policies.
Some oversight of principals.

Joint District School Board
Board members include 3 elected members from each town. Each town also retains a district school board
Responsible for joint school budget & policies.
Some oversight of principals.

Figure 1: Case study site organizational governance

Site Context: Organizational Governance for the Case Study SU

Comprised of 10 local school districts spread across 350 square miles, the exemplary case study site is one of the largest SUs in Vermont. The SU contains one union middle/high school which includes multiple towns, and a mix of single town districts and joint-district elementary schools. Reflecting a common organizational arrangement for large SUs in New England, some towns operate a town district elementary school, but also belong to a union district middle and/or high school in the SU. In addition to the superintendent, the central office staff is made up of approximately 10 administrators who oversee finances, human resources, information technology, and special education for the SU.

On the district level, each town retains its own local school board. As is typical in Vermont, the joint and union schools also have their own school boards. As a result, some towns have more than one school board: a district board for the town-based elementary school, and a union board for the middle/high school. Altogether, the SU contains more than 10 local boards, as well as the central board. Per Vermont Statutes, the central board is made up of members of each local school board; the central board for the case study SU has over 30 board members. Figure 1 provides an overview of the organizational structure for the case study SU.

Data Collection

Data sources included interviews with 20 participants, 18 hours of school board meeting observations, 12 hours of annual town/school meeting observations, and 38 documents, including the superintendent's personal time records from 2013–2015.

We conducted five formal, semi-structured interviews with the superintendent, who chose to be identified by the pseudonym Dr. John Smith. These interviews addressed, but were not limited to, daily routines, policy-work, principals, school boards, and educational priorities. Each interview lasted between 1.5–2 hours, and was recorded and transcribed. We also conducted six informal interviews with Dr. Smith over the course of the study, which ranged from 45 minutes to four hours in length. The informal conversations were pre-emptively disclosed as research material, documented as memos, and were used to provide background context for the SU and individual districts (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; Trujillo, 2013).

On the district level, we interviewed a selective sample of school board leaders and principals to provide further context for the study (LeCompte & Schensul, 2010). Using role-specific semi-structured interview protocols (Creswell, 2012), we interviewed five principals, three district school board chairs, one of whom was also the SU central board chair, and 12 current or former district school board members. Topics for district level interviews included, but were not limited to, SU and district governance and role allocation; perceptions of leadership; current educational, economic, and policy issues; and the context of each community. All interviews lasted between 30 and 90 minutes, and were recorded and transcribed.

To provide detailed analysis of the experience of the superintendent's work with boards and administrators, we conducted multiple ethnographic observations. We observed 14 local school board meetings, five annual town meetings, one year-in-review SU board meeting, and one central office administrative team meeting. Observations were documented using ethnographic fieldnotes and expanded after leaving the field (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011).

The primary document source for the study is the superintendent's time records from 2013–2015. Dr. Smith maintained these records independently to document his hours for school boards, and voluntarily shared the 2013–2015 period of records for the study. Dr. Smith started his tenure as a superintendent of this SU prior to 2010; thus, these documents encapsulate the work of an experienced district leader. The superintendent's time records include comprehensive, detailed

notations of his daily time allocation across districts and activities. Dr. Smith provided explanation of his notation system via email and phone interviews. Additional documents were collected to provide further insights as to emerging issues and themes in the study, including official minutes from school board meetings, annual town and school reports, and newspaper articles focused on educational issues in the region. Collectively, these documents provided background on policy decisions, community context, district governance, and relationships between different educational actors over the course of the academic calendar.

Data Analysis

We employed a social constructivist approach to analyzing our data that incorporated policy document analysis with thematic coding of interviews and ethnographic fieldnotes (Ragin & Amoroso, 2010). We first coded qualitative interviews, ethnographic fieldnotes, and additional documents inductively using NVivo to descriptively capture emerging themes and patterns of Dr. Smith's work (Creswell, 2012). The coded data were constructed into a conceptually ordered matrix, whereupon we identified thematic patterns related to our framework (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). We comparatively analyzed the matrix in an iterative process to identify variations in role allocation and confusion (Creswell, 2012). We then further analyzed early codes that existed outside the framework to allow for unanticipated themes to emerge (Ragin & Amoroso, 2010).

We descriptively analyzed the superintendent's time records using Excel. Using Dr. Smith's time record notes, we coded his time records by role allocation (see Table 1: Superintendent Smith's Role Allocations, SY 2013–2014). We then calculated the total time Dr. Smith spent for each role overall, as well as his total time spent working with each district. The 2015 time records were incomplete, as Dr. Smith provided them to us in March 2015. We therefore limited our descriptive analysis to the superintendent's time records from SY 2013–2014, and used the partial data from SY 2014–15 to confirm trends. We then comparatively analyzed the descriptive statistics with qualitative data. Finally, we conducted data triangulation by comparing interview, observation, and document data (Miles et al., 2014) to assess perceived and enacted role allocation of district governance. The superintendent, a district administrator, and a school board chair provided member checks to confirm validity of findings.

Findings

In this exemplary case study, we find the multi-district superintendent's time is divided across three role allocations – political, managerial, and instructional tasks – with the majority of time spent on political tasks, and less time on managerial and instructional responsibilities. Rather than working from a centralized point of authority, the multi-district superintendent adopted a political advisory role of shared leadership within the semi-autonomous districts where the primary governance authority resides in local school boards and school principals.

In the following sections, we first descriptively analyze the role allocations of the superintendent's time records. We then investigate each role allocation to understand how the superintendent carries out his political, instructional, and managerial responsibilities. We conclude by discussing how the governance structure of the district shapes the nature of the work of a multi-district superintendent.

Multi-District Superintendent Time Allocations

From our descriptive analysis of SY 2013–14 time records, we found Dr. Smith spent 51.8% of his time on political tasks, 24.6% of his time on instructional tasks, and 23.6% of his time on

managerial tasks. These findings are described in Table 1: Superintendent Smith's Role Allocations, SY 2013–2014.

The time allocations for Dr. Smith deviate from Cuban's (1988) historical analysis of single district superintendents, and from Jones and Howley's (2009) contemporary analysis. Dr. Smith's time allocations invert managerial and political responsibilities, while also reducing the overall time on instructional tasks, compared to Jones and Howley's (2009) findings. Furthermore, our analysis supports the hypothesis posited by the MARS study (2009) that multi-district superintendents spend the majority of their time on political tasks.

Table 1
Superintendent Smith's Role Allocations, SY 2013—2014

Superintendent role allocations	Responsibilities and tasks for each category	Total hours	% of total time
Managerial Tasks	Managerial components of Administrative Team Meetings (central office staff and school principals); email correspondence; staffing issues, trainings, and celebrations; central office work including shoveling, painting, plumbing or lighting repairs, furniture assembly, repair or moving, recycling, filing, and gardening	535.9	23.6
Instructional Tasks	Instructional components of administrative team meetings (central office staff and school principals); consulted with principal and/or visited the school; led or attended professional development	557.6	24.6
Political Tasks	Work for school boards: preparing for meetings, travelling to and attending meetings, and researching issues for the boards; other work with educational agencies, organizations, and non-profits in the region and state.	1176.8	51.8
Total Hours		2270.3	

Note: Responsibilities and tasks for each category use Dr. John Smith's descriptions.

In the following sections, we examine Dr. Smith's political, managerial, and instructional responsibilities in practice to understand why his role allocations are predominantly political, and what the implications are for his daily work. Through our analysis, we find the extensive political

work required of a multi-district superintendent reduces time available for instructional and managerial work. Furthermore, the semi-autonomous nature of the multi-district union necessitates relationship-building, negotiations, and developing consensus within each individual district. As a result, the superintendent adopts an advisory role within the SU, empowering district leaders to create locally responsive policies and programs that may vary from other districts in the SU. We conclude that the position of a multi-district superintendent is inherently political, and warrants further empirical inquiry of the multi-district superintendency to support future policy and practice.

Political Responsibilities

The multi-district superintendent spends the majority of his time (51.8%) on political tasks, particularly school board-related work (e.g.: planning for, traveling to, and attending school board meetings). The organizational structure of multi-district unions includes both individual district school boards as well as a composite, central school board. As the SU contains multiple school boards, it is logical that a multi-district superintendent would spend more time on school board-related political work in comparison to single district superintendents. However, it is nonetheless striking that Dr. Smith's time spent on political tasks is nearly double the time of single district superintendents reported in other studies (Cuban, 1988; Jones & Howley, 2009).

A major factor shaping the superintendent's time on political tasks is the quantity and geographic distance of monthly board meetings spread across the SU. Dr. Smith typically attends 10 district school board meetings and one central board meeting per month. The number of board meetings increases during key periods of the year, such as annual budget planning in late winter and spring. For example, Dr. Smith attended over 20 board meetings in March 2014. Board meetings are held at each district school, which are in turn spread across more than 300 square miles of rural, mountainous terrain. School board meetings are held in the afternoon or evening; therefore, the superintendent is working until late in the evening several nights each week. "It's time consuming, that's all you can say about it," Dr. Smith reflected on his multiple board meetings. To balance his late evening schedule, Dr. Smith arrives at work mid-morning, typically between 10:00 and 11:00 am, on days following board meetings. Other central office staff work more traditional school hours, thereby reducing the amount of time the superintendent and SU administrators' work hours overlap. The multi-district superintendent's extensive time spent on political tasks is thus partially explained by the logistics of multiple board meetings.

The organizational structure of the SU further shapes the political work of the multi-district superintendent. Ostensibly, the SU is governed by a central board that oversees most centralized decisions for the region, a design intended to streamline governance for the superintendent by placing the primary locus of control in a single, composite board. However, the central board was consistently described by participants as ineffective and lacking authority. Board members reported not attending meetings due to distance, weather, confusion over required attendance, and frustration over the size of the meetings. "I mean there's 30–40 of us," one board member said, adding, "we try to sit in the back, like to be near a door or window, an escape" because the meetings are long and unproductive. Dr. Smith concurred, sharing multiple instances of being unable to complete basic work because of a lack of a quorum.

Instead, local-level district boards retain significant control in the SU. This semi-autonomous district governance model in the SU necessitates a differentiated leadership approach for each of the district boards. Dr. Smith indicated negotiating relationships with more than 30 individual board members across the SU was a significant challenge. "I don't have the authority to tell the boards to do anything," he shared. Dr. Smith describes a flexible arrangement whereby he works with local administrators to develop understanding and support for key policies. He refers to this work as a

political "dance" where he works behind the scenes to negotiate mutually respectful relationships with his many boards. In one example regarding the town district of Conway, Dr. Smith shared:

> I do a delicate dance with them because I rationalize, this is not a problem school, this is not a problem district, this is not a place that's going to hell. It's going the other way. Well, I'm not into just making enemies... So they do a little dance with me and they pretend that they care about my opinion on matters and so forth and I pretend that I'm doing something for them but it's [the board chair's] show.

Dr. Smith's metaphorical use of "dance" in the above quotation reflects his perception of political maneuvering in this district based on the established leadership of the school board chair. The superintendent's engagement in political leadership at Conway is mutually performative, a deliberate series of interactions by both the board and the superintendent wherein they maintain an appearance of traditional governance roles. However, Dr. Smith explicitly recognizes the authority of the board chair, and makes the calculus that in a strong district such as Conway, it is politically sound to enable board members to take the lead for educational decisions. In turn, the superintendent acts in an advisory capacity. We found similar evidence of political "dances" whereby Dr. Smith enabled local district leaders to act semi-autonomously in three other town districts in the SU, and describe one such example in detail below.

The superintendent's decision to engage in a political dance of empowering boards and principals is shaped, in part, by the decentralized nature of the multi-district union. Because each district board operates semi-autonomously within the multi-district union, SU-wide policies must be approved by each board individually. Dr. Smith explained the policy adoption process:

> Now it's a tremendously duplicative repetitious act in this SU, and I don't think people recognize it. It's a way for the boards to engage, for the public to engage and feel they're doing something serious about policy, but their legal options are really not very many. We can't really vary from what's legally acceptable. So, it's basically me taking the same policy around [to] everybody, doing it over and over again.

While cognizant of local-level decision-making about education, Dr. Smith's imperative as the superintendent is to move all districts toward a common vision. His political work necessitates a local, ground-up approach to negotiation and consensus with each district board. Dr. Smith carries out this work by empowering local district leaders—principals and school boards—to introduce and advocate for SU-wide policies. In turn, Dr. Smith adopts a political advisory role to provide timely information and resources to help these local leaders implement proposed plans. By enabling local educational leaders to initiate district-based adoption of SU-wide initiatives, Dr. Smith is best able to move the SU toward common practices and policies despite divergent beliefs about education.

The superintendent's advisory approach to political work is evident in his plan to implement the national Free and Reduced-Price Lunch (FRL) program across the SU. Dr. Smith believed the program was of critical value for low-income children and families in his region. Yet he faced several hurdles in developing support for implementation: most of the district's schools were small, lacked modern kitchen space, and/or were geographically remote and had limited access to central kitchen services. Due to the potential logistic and financial challenges of implementing the plan, multiple stakeholders in each district needed to approve the initiative. The following example illustrates how the superintendent employed a political advisory role while enabling local district leaders to develop SU-wide support for the initiative.

The superintendent shared that his first step was building support among school principals during the monthly administrative team meetings. Dr. Smith then enabled principals to bring the

FRL plans forward to their respective school boards, rather than having the proposal come from the central office. One board chair recounted, "[The principal] came to us one year and said, 'You know what, I really think we need the school lunch program.' So, we went through all of the steps of [putting together] the school lunch program." From the board members' perspective, the idea emerged from the principal based on a school need, rather than as a top-down directive from the central office. In turn, Dr. Smith took on the role of expert advisor and proponent of the FRL program during school board meetings, helping districts by providing resources, researching their questions, sharing strategies from other districts in the SU, and making connections for the programs.

The superintendent's strategy of enabling each principal to create a school-specific proposal engendered the creation of FRL plans uniquely suited to the needs of each school. In Conway, an entrepreneurial and fiscally conservative town, the principal framed the school lunch program from an economic perspective: children would be better prepared for school, potentially reducing the need for intervention services, and the program would provide jobs for local residents. In comparison, the district leaders in Ashfield, a progressive college town, designed their FRL program so that it would ensure local, organic food was available for all students regardless of family income as a means to support local farms and build a sense of community around school-based meals. In each case, the principal led the way in implementing the FRL program while the superintendent worked as an advisor for the boards.

The political dance of the superintendent is illustrated in the fieldnotes from one Ashfield board meeting on options for school lunch providers wherein the superintendent adopted an advisory role during a principal-led discussion. Rather than directing the meeting himself, or providing an overview of the options to the school, the superintendent enabled the principal and the board members to lead the conversation. He would then step in with advice and clarifications when needed, a quick step dance of observation and anticipated need.

When the board became stymied on the total cost projected by one provider, the superintendent stepped in to explain the process to the team: "What happens is they ask all these questions to figure out what projected income is available. This is a bid, but this is just a rough estimate. I can assure you it's pretty much in keeping with the other schools in the SU." In the brief exchange, Dr. Smith advised by providing relevant explanations of a budget process, while also drawing from his expertise working with other districts to reassure the board. Yet he also left the decision process in their hands. Later in the conversation, the board focused on the importance of "farm-to-school… home-cooked, mostly organic" meals, whereupon Dr. Smith shared that one provider was "well-regarded in the places they work with and they certainly are able to be responsive to changes in nutrition requirements," indicating that the provider would be best able to meet Ashfield's specific food choices. His responses in this meeting illustrate the advisory role he adopts in providing tailored information for the specific priorities of each board, while also drawing from his expertise and knowledge across the SU. By engaging in a political dance whereby Dr. Smith enabled district leaders to take on the primary decision-making under his expert guidance. By 2015, all but one district adopted a FRL program, and the district that did not adopt the program continues to pursue options that would work for their remote geographic locale.

There are two significant implications of Dr. Smith's policy work: first, the schedule of school board meetings reduces his time and availability to work with principals and central office staff during the school day. Second, the fragmented nature of a multi-district governance structure limits his ability to act as a political authority. The superintendent cannot provide unlimited attention to one board. Instead, he seeks to build consensus across multiple, divergent boards when trying to pass policies through a political dance, enabling local leaders to move policies forward on his behalf,

as best suits the region. As a result, the superintendent adopts a political advisory role for each local board, and adapts his recommendations based on the specific needs of each district.

Instructional Responsibilities

The instructional responsibilities of a superintendent include oversight of the curriculum, instructional practices, assessment, student outcomes, and professional development of the educators in the district. Dr. Smith spends approximately one-fourth (24.6%) of his total time engaged in instructional tasks. This time allocation is less than what superintendents nationwide report (Jones & Howley, 2009), and significant given that superintendents report preferring instructional work to political work (Glass et al., 2000; Kowalski et al., 2010). In our analysis, we find Dr. Smith has a strong educational background and a deep, personal commitment to the educational responsibilities of his role. However, the political demands and organizational structure of the district limit his time and authority to direct educational initiatives and programs. Instead, the semi-autonomous nature of the district necessitates that Dr. Smith build consensus among educational administrators, while accepting some degree of variability of implementation across the SU.

Dr. Smith's work as a superintendent is informed by his experience as a teacher and school principal in the region. Multiple participants in the study enthusiastically disclosed that Dr. Smith was their former teacher; one board member shared Dr. Smith "...was one of the best teachers I ever had." Dr. Smith expressed great enjoyment over his instructional responsibilities, and committed to regularly visiting classrooms and schools as part of his work as superintendent. His involvement took many forms, ranging from informal school visits to formal teacher and administrator observations. Teachers and principals shared enthusiastic stories of Dr. Smith appearing at schools dressed in costumes ranging from Abraham Lincoln to Pythagoras. Dr. Smith's engagement in the instructional practices of schools was deliberate, beginning with the first year of his administration. He explained:

> Now, one thing I did when I first took this position was I went around to every school and I sat for at least 45 minutes in everybody's classroom. And of course, the teachers were like, amazed. I told them, "I'm not writing anything, I'm just getting a lay of the land, you know?" . . . They appreciated it, because it—that never happens in their lives. I mean, the chances of you having a superintendent in your classroom for 45 minutes is like slim to none. But it's an investment that's paid off in terms of my knowledge.

Dr. Smith valued understanding the instructional practices across his SU, as reflected in his commitment to spend time observing teachers. This example also illustrates how Dr. Smith builds and values personal connections not only with district leaders, but with individual teachers. The superintendent continues to conduct formal reviews of each teacher in the SU. However, indicative of his tendency to engender authority to school principals, Dr. Smith conducts this review behind the scenes, providing information to principals, but empowering them to use his information as they deem appropriate. Dr. Smith said:

> I meet with the principals in their offices in May or June, end of the year, and I read all those [teacher] evaluations... And I write notes on them, little stickies, and I review those with the principals. I figure if I don't read them, then I'm not valuing them and thinking they're important enough.

Despite the superintendent's commitment to directing the educational culture and outcomes of the district, we find that his educational work is fundamentally shaped by the organizational structure of

the multi-district union. Over the course of the study, Dr. Smith repeatedly sought SU-wide consensus on educational issues including a standard elementary report card, professional development, assessments, and student outcomes. Yet on the majority of educational issues the superintendent was unable to reach universal consensus; instead, he accepted a range of variability for each initiative. In the following section, we describe Dr. Smith's attempts to build consensus on the use of formative assessments as a means to illustrate how the governance structure of the multi-district union affected his instructional leadership practice.

Standardized assessments are a significant educational issue for superintendents nationwide, many of whom are now evaluated based on student outcomes. In Vermont, all public schools were required to take the Common Core-aligned Smarter Balanced (S-Bac) assessments beginning in academic year 2014–15. In response, Dr. Smith wanted his schools to adopt standardized assessments for formative student evaluations, which he believed were critical as a means to ensure teachers are "looking at how kids are progressing or making gains." Without SU-wide formative assessments, Dr. Smith explained: "when we go from one teacher to the next, we don't have a baton that's being passed that can show that very well." However, each individual district needed to approve the adoption of a new formative assessment program.

Dr. Smith began the initiative by introducing the concept of formative assessments with district leaders. At the time, the majority of schools in the SU used Northwest Educational Assessments (NWEAs) for formative assessments. However, the extent to which each used NWEA assessment data to inform instructional work varied significantly across the SU. Additionally, two schools did not use the NWEA at all: Plainfield used a different testing program due to teacher opposition to NWEAs, and Ashfield did not use any testing programs due to teacher and community opposition to standardized assessments in general. Despite the significant variability of practices and opinions across the SU, Dr. Smith sought to develop administrative consensus on the implementation and use of formative assessment data to improve instructional practices.

The superintendent's attempt to corral all districts into using the same formative assessment system necessitated political negotiations to develop principal and school support. In keeping with his decision to shared leadership responsibilities, the superintendent tasked an administrator to present on NWEA and S-Bac assessments for the monthly administrative team meeting. After the presentation, Dr. Smith framed the importance to principals, explaining "the annual assessment is not providing adequate information on student performance. We have committed in the past to a local assessment." However, Dr. Smith also acknowledged his tolerance for variability, telling the assembled team, "I'm not coercive enough about this, I suppose."

In response, the principals engaged in a lively debate with Dr. Smith and each other, pushing back against the proposal, questioning the need for a centralized assessment system, and discussing how formative assessments would align with their specific school cultures. Dr. Smith provided space for principals to engage in this debate, although he became visibly frustrated as several district principals increasingly pushed back against adopting or expanding the use of NWEAs as formative assessments. After one principal expressed opposition, the superintendent exasperatedly interjected, "I do think this is an effort to raise the question, what is the utility or futility of doing anything together?!" Indeed, despite Dr. Smith's efforts, the school principals were not able to reach consensus on formative assessments. Instead, the presenting administrator finally asserted there are "multiple pathways to get to agreed-upon outcomes," and the rest of the principals agreed. Schools that wanted to use NWEAs as formative assessments would continue to do so, while Plainfield and Ashfield were free to use alternate measures. Dr. Smith later expressed frustration over the inability to develop consensus for the initiative, as he believed in the educational goals of the district, and wanted to employ a consistent approach across school sites in using formative assessments.

Some scholars assert instructional decisions should be a central responsibility of a superintendent (e.g., Cuban, 1998; Glass et al., 2000; Johnson, 1996). In the case of this multi-district SU, however, the superintendent's instructional authority is limited due to the organizational structure of the union. In the multi-district union, principals and school boards retain authority as the educational leaders of their semi-autonomous districts, thereby increasing their voice in implementation of SU policies and programs. The superintendent can propose initiatives, as he did with the use of NWEAs as formative assessments SU-wide, but the choice to implement many of those policies and programs resides in the educational leaders of each local district. Lacking the ability to mandate policies, the superintendent in this case study instead sought to develop consensus through communication and relationship-building with each of his educational leaders. Yet Dr. Smith also expressed awareness that universal adoption for educational programming was unlikely, and consequently accepted some variability of implementation across the SU. Furthermore, due to the extensive time spent in political work, the superintendent had less time available to engage in instructional work. Thus, the multi-district superintendent's ability to enact consistent educational policies across the district does not appear to be feasible without negotiations and flexibility for school districts.

Managerial Responsibilities

Dr. Smith spends the smallest percentage of his total time (23.6%) on managerial tasks. The superintendent self-reported disliking many of these required tasks. Dr. Smith's limited time and interest in managerial tasks diverges from previous research on single districts, where superintendents report managerial responsibilities encompass the majority of their time (Jones & Howley, 2009), and are of high importance and value for their work overall (Kowalski et al., 2010).

There are two factors that appear to influence the extent of managerial work the superintendent engages in across the SU. First, from a logistical standpoint, Dr. Smith's daily schedule does not provide extensive time for managerial responsibilities, as his time is dominated by board meetings. As previously noted, Dr. Smith shifted his schedule to accommodate evening board meetings, therein reducing the amount of time he has available during the day for managerial work.

Second, the organizational structure of the multi-district union engenders flexibility for districts to take responsibility for key managerial tasks, or for them to delegate that responsibility to the SU central office. Several districts in the union, such as Conway and Ashfield, prefer to maintain oversight for tasks such school operations, budgeting, and communication with their local communities. Their independence, while periodically frustrating to the superintendent, reduces some of the managerial workload on the central office. Using the example of setting board meeting agendas, Dr. Smith explained:

> It's interesting that in my case, the ideal situation would be that the superintendent and the board chair would collaborate on the agenda for the meeting… I do it to a lesser degree. I initiate the agenda for [the middle and high school], that's the only one I do myself. At [Plainfield], the board chair initiates it and we check in with each other. I have other board chairs that issue their agenda half an hour before the meeting. Actually, I rationalize, I don't have the time to work on all these agendas, so it's fine with me if they have a preform agenda… And they usually try to send it out to me.

In his explanation, Dr. Smith indicates his acceptance and patience with managerial variability across the SU. By sharing governance responsibilities with districts, the superintendent creates a mutually beneficial arrangement, engendering independence to districts who prefer autonomous governance,

while reducing managerial work for the superintendent and central office. However, shared governance does come at a price, in that the more autonomous communities are less likely to perceive Dr. Smith as a managerial leader for their respective districts. Conway, for example, retains the majority of their own managerial work, prompting Dr. Smith to state, "They're not saying superintendent is the authority. That's not what that board's about." This sentiment is echoed by Conway's school board members, one of whom noted that the superintendent had "very little" oversight of Conway's district.

       While the shared managerial responsibilities with local boards reduced the overall workload for the multi-district superintendent, this has the potential to create conflict when the superintendent needs to intercede for specific managerial tasks. For example, Dr. Smith is responsible for negotiating union contracts with teachers in the district, a standard managerial responsibility for superintendents. The majority of teachers in the district have the same contract which was negotiated by Dr. Smith, central office staff, and the SU teachers' union. In the SU, however, several districts negotiate their own local contracts for teachers and staff.

       Conway is one such district employing a divergent approach to local teacher contracts. The Conway board does not provide a salary schedule for teachers. Instead, the teachers and board agree to an annual percent increase to teacher salaries. While both board members and faculty reported a contentious transition to this contract model, most agree that the model is a good fit for Conway, where the majority of staff have taught at the school for over 20 years. In the words of one teacher:

> Many of us tapped out and there was no way for us to go on a straight salary schedule... And the board felt that they wanted to reward us for our years of service, the courses we took, so it was easier for them to work on percent [increases] of our existing salary, so a 3% raise for next year or whatever it turns out to be.

Although Dr. Smith expressed some frustration over the variability in the SU, he also recognized the value in allowing some districts to negotiate their own contracts. Using Conway as an example, Dr. Smith explained his rationale for allowing the district's variable approach:

> Legally I should be placing [Conway's new teacher] in a salary schedule based on my analysis of what the person's experience and background is. That's what I do for all the other schools. But they haven't asked me... it's not a battle that I'm going to fight... They value the superintendent partially because I don't give them much grief, and I am able then to do what they want to do. They've had more trouble with previous superintendents. They actually know that retaining good people requires money, and that's a concept that some of these other boards don't get. So that's an asset, from my point of view. I don't want to make enemies with a board that recognizes that if you want to have good people, you've got to pay for them.

The superintendent recognizes his authority to oversee the teacher contracts in Conway, and acknowledges working differently with other districts in the SU. However, Dr. Smith also draws from his knowledge of the board and school to recognize that the board's practices are of value for its local teachers. While unsupportive of their lack of a salary schedule, he does agree with teacher salary levels and the board's rationale behind the salary plan. The superintendent's justification in giving Conway greater discretion over teacher salaries was recognized by Conway's board chair. The chair explained, "The superintendent knows we have a good program, and he's happy, so we make them look good and they leave us alone. He hasn't forced a lot of things he could have forced on us. He allowed us to negotiate our own contract with our staff." Both leaders appear to understand the context in which the superintendent provides Conway with flexibility and limited oversight.

In sum, the multi-district superintendent spends less time on managerial roles than other roles due to the semi-autonomous structure of the SU. A significant portion of the superintendent's time is spent attending multiple board meetings outside of traditional work hours, thereby minimizing time available for office work. The superintendent leverages the organizational structure of the SU by enabling districts to take on managerial responsibilities, which reduces his overall managerial work. Similar to his approach with instructional responsibilities, the superintendent also engenders some managerial variability for districts based on his assessment of their needs and strengths. While the superintendent does not always value the extensive variability of governance in the district, he deliberately chooses areas to allow greater flexibility for the good of his SU overall.

Discussion and Implications

The work of a multi-district superintendent is inherently political, due to the organizational structure of the multi-district union. Within the multi-district union, local districts retain some degree of autonomy. The majority of the superintendent's daily work is therefore spent on school-board related tasks. Although approximately half of Dr. Smith's work is not formally political, his daily routines are full of politically-driven decisions about governance and autonomy. This in turn reduces his overall time available for managerial and instructional responsibilities.

These role allocations invert Cuban's (1988) framework of the superintendency. In this case, Dr. Smith spent the greatest amount of time on political tasks, followed by instructional, and managerial, respectively. This research suggests a number of deviations from Cuban's framework related to the practice of the multi-district superintendent around each of Cuban's superintendent roles. First, Dr. Smith's political tasks, in addition to dominating his time, differ from those purported by Cuban in nuanced, but significant ways: while the multi-district collaborates with multiple stakeholder groups, he is more reliant on local boards and principals to ensure community values are reflected in district work. As evidenced by the FRL and standardized assessment examples in this case, the representation of these values was of greater concern in process than policy outcome; that is, values were addressed through diverse means to achieve common SU-wide outcomes. Secondly, respect for local autonomy and reliance on local school boards and principals, as well as limiting state statutes in this case, translates to fewer union negotiations and personnel management by Dr. Smith, as these managerial tasks can be delegated to the local level. Finally, while the superintendent may set instructional goals for the SU, the power of local-level leaders can curtail his ability to direct district-wide curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment decisions. The continual negotiation between superintendent and local-level power over decision-making across traditional superintendent roles reinforces the weight given to political responsibilities for Dr. Smith.

The experiences of Dr. Smith depict a complex role overseeing a decentralized, semi-autonomous SU where the context of each individual district requires differentiated leadership. The organizational structure of the multi-district union appears to shape his practice, altering the superintendent's instructional work to that of an advisor who helps inform, guide, and develop consensus across semi-autonomous districts. The superintendent empowers local leaders to introduce policies and programs, while also engendering flexibility for implementation and adoption of SU-wide initiatives. The net result is the multi-district superintendent acts as a political advisor for each local district, encouraging it to achieve some degree of alignment within a decentralized system.

Dr. Smith is cognizant that a multi-district superintendency may seem confusing or problematic to single district administrators. However, he believes the organizational structure is beneficial for his work as a superintendent:

> I view it as a positive attribute to have so many boards. It may not be very efficient, or make sense to other people, but for me, I like it. It suits me. I wouldn't want to work with just one board. They're too dependent. Just one board becomes so dependent and narrow that the administration or the board can become obsessed with a particular issue. Having just one board tends to reduce the options of thought and perspective . . . Some people really have an axe to grind. I'm sure most of my colleagues across the nation have experience with these characters. But they're elected to public office, and so the challenge is to work with them as a superintendent. When I have so many boards, I can really put that obsession in perspective.

To Dr. Smith, the multi-district structure enables him to be a statesman who advises each district, while also slowly herding his multiple school board members towards greater consensus and uniformity of practices, policies, and programs. Dr. Smith's approach to leadership includes empowering local principals and boards to take on managerial and instructional leadership roles that might traditionally be part of the superintendent's work. He also enables principals to bring forth proposals he initiates, such as implementing Free and Reduced-Price Lunch, thereby ensuring SU-wide programs can encapsulate local needs. Likewise, some district boards are able to take on managerial responsibilities that would otherwise be run through central office, thereby preserving some local control while reducing the central office workload. By providing a flexible approach to leadership, Dr. Smith responds to and preserves the semi-autonomous governance structure of the union. A consequence, however, is that he is frequently unable to gain uniform adoption of initiatives, policies, and programs. Instead, as superintendent, Dr. Smith seemed to develop patience and acceptance of variability across his region.

An unanticipated finding of this study relates to the governance structure's reliance on local contexts. Given that the SU encompasses multiple, diverse community districts, each with its own economic, social, and demographic composition, it is apparent that this complex and multi-faceted SU context influences the practice of the multi-district superintendent's work. In this case, Dr. Smith negotiated differing levels of autonomy with various boards and principals depending on local level dominant values and economic fabric. This was exemplified through organic marketing of the FRL program in one school and teacher salary schedules in another. The importance of context is further illustrated in Dr. Smith's practices of increasing autonomy at the local level when those values and practices are in concert with his own vision for the SU, while asserting greater authority over local communities not in alignment with his agenda. Finally, the context of the SU contributed to Dr. Smith's political time allocations to the extent that the geographic isolation and rugged terrain of several districts contributed to greater time spent in transit to and from local board meetings.

As this is a single case study, it is possible—and even likely—that other multi-district superintendents employ different strategies to developing a centralized vision for their respective SUs. By design, multi-district unions preserve some degree of local control through the inclusion of local school boards; thus, we would anticipate local contexts would alter the conditions of the multi-district superintendent's practice. Yet multi-district unions are not designed as centralized LEAs, and as such, local educational leaders within SUs are unlikely to respond to top-down directive authority. Given this structure, Dr. Smith's experience may be typical of multi-district superintendents, as the position is inherently political when a superintendent must work with multiple boards.

As an early study on the phenomenon of the multi-district superintendent, this research posits three findings for future exploration. First, the multi-district union is characterized by tensions between the multi-district union's commitment to local control and autonomy and the

union's centralized goals and mandates. Second, our data suggest the multi-district superintendent has an inverse relationship to the established roles of the single-district superintendent: political, instructional, and managerial, in descending time allotment. Third, and consequently, this semi-autonomous nature of localized districts in decision-making increases the superintendent's role as political advisor, heavily reliant on the success of negotiations to move individual districts in a common, unified direction. This political dance requires flexibility on the part of the multi-district superintendent to implement initiatives based on local level contexts, values, needs, and interests. These findings indicate the power of the organizational structure of the multi-district union in influencing the deviant role allocations of the multi-district superintendent.

Implications for Policy Makers and Leadership Preparation Programs

Our exemplary case study illustrates how the role allocations of one multi-district superintendent is predominantly political, with less time available for instructional and managerial work. Policymakers evaluating multi-district unions might use this case study as a means to examine their priorities for LEA organization and governance. Based on our analysis, we believe it would be unlikely for a multi-district superintendent to be able to work like a single-district superintendent. What we can learn from this case study, however, is that a multi-district governance structure may enable preservation of local control for districts while providing expert advice from a certified administrator. For regions of the country seeking consolidation without loss of local governance, multi-district unions may be a feasible alternative, provided all involved understand the distinctiveness of the multi-district superintendent's role. The nature of this kind of regionalization is that the superintendent will not be able to provide the level of managerial or instructional oversight typical in other traditional LEAs. In turn, local boards and principals must be empowered and prepared to retain some degree of managerial and instructional leadership for their districts.

Proponents of consolidation may perceive this case of the multi-district superintendent to serve as another rationale for further centralization by eliminating local district boards. The centralization of decision-making with a clear hierarchy for decision-making should, arguably, reduce the amount of time spent on political tasks and increase time devoted to educational work. However, this research highlights the diverse communities represented in a multi-district supervisory union, each with its own ideas and values about the purpose of schooling. Centralized governance only further removes educational decisions from the community level (Tieken, 2014). Consolidation, then, does not reduce school-community tensions or conflicts between leaders and places; it simply concentrates them in one building, and has the potential to damage relations between the consolidated districts and the small towns where the school serves as the heart of the community (Howley et al., 2011).

More effective policy recommendations for multi-district superintendents should address improving the current structure of these regional districts. As previously discussed, Vermont's legislature has been slow to delegate necessary authority to superintendents, such as designating their role in hiring principals and school staff throughout the union and the authority to own property, forcing SUs to rent central office buildings and bus garages (V.S.A. § 153). From a policy perspective, ensuring superintendents are legally granted basic governance responsibilities would be a good start to improving their work in multi-district settings.

Based on our findings, we posit that superintendents in multi-district unions are likely to have significantly different experiences than their single district peers. Multi-district superintendents' work requires political facility, knowledge of the diverse context of their multiple communities, developing and maintaining positive external relations with multiple stakeholders, and retaining comfort with negotiation and variability across the LEA. We argue these skills are beneficial not only

for multi-district superintendents, but also for administrative leaders working in rural districts. Therefore, we recommend administrative leadership programs introduce the concept of joint or multi-district superintendents in their work, and develop some of the essential political and administrative skills that will help these superintendents succeed, regardless of their placements. We also encourage preparation programs to develop opportunities for professional development and networking specifically for regional superintendents. The MARS organization is one example of a group that supports ongoing development and networking for multi-district superintendents, and may serve as a good model for other states and organizations working with these administrators.

Implications for Research

As a single, exemplary case study, findings from our study are limited in their scope. More research on the work and time allocations of multi-district superintendents is needed, particularly to understand the range of experiences for these district leaders. Of particular importance will be an investigation on the size and work of central office staff in multi-district unions. Multi-district unions are proposed as a means to streamline central offices; therefore, more research is needed to understand the effects on upper levels of administration. It is unclear what additional stress, if any, a multi-district superintendent places on central office staff. Although multi-district unions are often proposed as a means to provide economies of scale, our study did not investigate the economic implications of this structure. Therefore, future work on central office staffing would benefit from examination on the financial aspects of such governance structures. Finally, given the lack of research on this increasingly popular organizational structure, we strongly advocate for large-scale research on the work of multi-district superintendents throughout the country.

As the country moves to consider increasingly large school districts as a cost-saving measure, it is important to take stock of the challenges and benefits that come with this form of governance. The challenges of a regional superintendency are numerous, yet Dr. Smith repeatedly confirmed his commitment and enjoyment of the work. In our last conversation, Dr. Smith shared, "I realize, reflecting on my career, I've been very fortunate to have all these boards. I act as a psychologist and a teacher in all these board meetings. My job has been helping all these well-intentioned people be the best they can be." While this study illustrates a single example of a complex role, this multi-district superintendent helps explain the complexities of leadership across a semi-autonomous region. Ultimately, the organization and work of a multi-district superintendent is the sign of regions where school boards are still perceived to have value and power in public schooling, bridging the gap between local control and centralized educational governance.

Acknowledgements

References

Björk, L. G., Browne-Ferrigno, T., & Kowalski, T. J. (2014). The superintendent and educational reform in the United States of America. *Leadership and Policy in Schools*, *13*(4), 444–465.

Blauwkamp, J. M., Longo, P. J., & Anderson, J. (2011). School consolidation in Nebraska: Economic efficiency vs. rural community life. *Online Journal of Rural Research & Policy*, *6*(1), 1-21. https://doi.org/10.4148/ojrrp.v6i1.1309

Boyd, W. L. (1974). The School Superintendent: Educational Statesman or Political Strategist? *Administrator's Notebook*, *22*(9), 1-4.

Boyd, W. L. (1976). The Public, The Professionals, and Educational Policy Making: Who Governs? *Teachers College Record*, *77*(4), 539-77.

Bredeson, P. V, Klar, H. W., & Johansson, O. (2011). Context-responsive leadership: Examining superintendent leadership in context. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, *19*(1918). http://dx.doi.org/10.14507/epaa.v19n18.2011

Browne-Ferrigno, T., & Glass, T. E. (2005). Superintendent as organizational manager. In L. G. Bjork & T. J. Kowalski (Eds.), *The contemporary superintendent: Preparation, practice, and development* (137-161). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Bryan, F. M. (2010). *Real democracy: The New England town meeting and how it works*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Budge, K. (2006). Rural Leaders, Rural Places: Problem, Privilege, and Possibility. *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, *21*(13).

Budge, K. M. (2010). Why shouldn't rural kids have it all? Place-conscious leadership in an era of extralocal reform policy. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, *18*(1), 1-26. https://doi.org/10.14507/epaa.v18n1.2010

Corbett, M. (2010). Wharf talk, home talk, and school talk: The politics of language in a coastal community. In K. A. Schafft & A. Y. Jackson (Eds.), *Rural education for the twenty-first century: Identity, place, and community in a globalizing world* (pp. 115-131). University Park, PA: Penn State Press.

Creswell, J. W. (2012). *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Crowson, R. L. (1987). The local school district superintendency: A puzzling administrative role. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, *23*(3), 49-69. https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X87023003004

Cuban, L. (1988). *The managerial imperative and the practice of leadership in schools*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Education Commission of the States. (2016). *50-State comparison: K-12 governance structures*. Retrieved from http://www.ecs.org/k-12-governance-structures/

Education Commission of the States. (2016). *50-State comparison: K-12 governance structures, regional boards*. Retrieved from http://ecs.force.com/mbdata/mbquestRT?rep=K12G513Education Commission of the States. (2016). *50-State comparison: K-12 governance structures, regional superintendents*. Retrieved from http://ecs.force.com/mbdata/mbquestRT?rep=K12G613

Education Commission of the States. (2016). *50-State comparison: K-12 governance structures, local boards*. Retrieved from http://ecs.force.com/mbdata/mbquestRT?rep=K12G713

Education Commission of the States. (2016). *50-State comparison: K-12 governance structures, local superintendents*. Retrieved from http://ecs.force.com/mbdata/mbquestRT?rep=K12G813

Emerson, R. M., Fretz, R. I., & Shaw, L. L. (2011). *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226206868.001.0001

Fairman, J. C., & Donis-Keller, C. (2012). School district reorganization in Maine: Lessons learned for policy and process. *Maine Policy Review* 21(2), pp. 24 -40.

Gammill, S., & Vaughn, C. (2011). Lessons for a rural female superintendent: Gender, leadership, and politics. *Advancing Women in Leadership*, *31*(1), 113-123.

Glass, T. E., Bjork, L., & Brunner, C. C. (2001). *The study of the American superintendency, 2000: A look at the superintendent of education in the new millennium.* Arlington, VA: American Association of School Administrators.

Grissom, J. A., & Andersen, S. (2012). Why superintendents turn over. *American Educational Research Journal*, *49*(6), 1146-1180. https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831212462622

Hall, D. (2016). *Local control as resistance: Policy and practice of autonomous school boards.* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). The Pennsylvania State University: University Park, PA.

Hammersley, M., & Atkinson, P. (2007). *Ethnography: Principles in practice.* New York: Routledge.

Harmon, H. L., & Schafft, K. (2009). Rural school leadership for collaborative community development. *Rural Educator*, *30*(3), 4-9.

Howley, A., & Howley, C. (2006). Small schools and the pressure to consolidate. *Education Policy Analysis Archives, 14*(1), 1-31. https://doi.org/10.14507/epaa.v14n10.2006

Howley, A., Howley, C. B., Rhodes, M. E., & Yahn, J. J. (2014). Three contemporary dilemmas for rural superintendents. *Peabody Journal of Education*, *89*(5), 619-638. https://doi.org/10.1080/0161956X.2014.956556

Howley, C., Johnson, J., & Petrie, J. (2011). *Consolidation of schools and districts: What the research says and what it means.* Boulder, CO: National Education Policy Center.

Jenkins, C. (2007). Considering the community: How one rural superintendent perceives community values and their effect on decision-making. *The Rural Educator*, *28*(3), 28–32.

Johnson, J., Showalter, D., Klein, R., & Lester, C. (2014). *Why Rural Matters 2013-2014: The Condition of Rural Education in the 50 States.* Washington, D.C.: Rural School and Community Trust.

Johnson, S. M. (1996). *Leading to Change: The Challenge of the New Superintendency.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Jones, K., & Howley, A. (2009). Contextual Influences on Superintendents' Time Usage. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, *17*(23). https://doi.org/10.14507/epaa.v17n23.2009

Kowalski, T. J. (2005). Evolution of the school district superintendent position. In L. G. Bjork & T. J. Kowalski (Eds.), *The contemporary superintendent: Preparation, practice, and development* (1-18). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Lamkin, M. L. (2006). Challenges and changes faced by rural superintendents. *Rural Educator*, 28(1), 17-24.

LeCompte, M. D., & Schensul, J. J. (2010). *Designing and Conducting Ethnographic Research* (Vol. 1). Lanham, MD: AltaMira.

Leithwood, K., Louis, K. S., Anderson, S., & Wahlstrom, K. (2004). *Review of research: How leadership influences student learning.* The Wallace Foundation.

Massachusetts Association of Regional Schools. (2009). *A study of central office capacity in regional districts.* Holliston, MA: Author. Retrieved from http://www.doe.mass.edu/research/reports/2009/11MARS.pdf

Masumoto, M., & Brown-Welty, S. (2009). Case study of leadership practices and school-community Interrelationships in high-performing, high-poverty, rural California high schools. *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, *24*(241).

Mathis, W. J. (2015, Sept 8). William Mathis: The history of school consolidation battles. *Vermont Digger.* Retrieved from http://vtdigger.org/2015/09/08/william-mathis-the-history-of-school-consolidation-battles/?utm_source=VTDigger+Subscribers+and+Donors&utm_campaign=2f42eec13d-Weekly+Update&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_dc3c5486db-2f42eec13d-405531337

McHenry-Sorber, E. (2014). The power of competing narratives: A new interpretation of rural school-community relations. *Peabody Journal of Education, 89*(5), 580-592.

McHenry-Sorber, E., & Schafft, K.A. (2014). 'Make my day, shoot a teacher': Tactics of inclusion and exclusion, and the contestation of community in a rural school-community conflict. *International Journal of Inclusive Education, 19*(7), 733-747.

Miles, B. M., Huberman, A. M., & Saldaña, J. (2014). *Qualitative Data Analysis, 3rd Ed.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Mountford, M. (2004). Motives and power of school board members: Implications for school board-superintendent relationships. *Educational Administration Quarterly, 40*(5), 704-741. https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X04268843

National Center for Education Statistics. (2014). Rural education in America: Number of public school districts, by district urban-centric 12-category locale and state or jurisdiction: 2013–14 [Data file]. Retrieved from https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/ruraled/tables/a.1.a.-1.asp

Nitta, K., Holley, M., & Wrobel, S. (2010). A phenomenological study of rural school consolidation. Journal of Research in Rural Education, 25(2), 1-19. Retrieved from http://jrre.psu.edu/articles/25-2.pdf

Petersen, G. J. (2002). Singing the same tune: Principals' and school board members' perceptions of the superintendent's role as instructional leader. *Journal of Educational Administration*, *40*(2), 158-171. https://doi.org/10.1108/09578230210421114

Petersen, G. J., & Short, P. M. (2001). The school board president's perception of the district superintendent: Applying the lenses of social influence and social style. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, *37*(4), 533-570. https://doi.org/10.1177/00131610121969415

Ragin, C. C., & Amoroso, L. M. (2010). *Constructing social research: The unity and diversity of method.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Rogers, J. D., Glesner, T. J., & Meyers, H. W. (2014). Early experiences implementing voluntary school district mergers in Vermont. *Journal of Research in Rural Education, 29*(7), 1-14.

Sherman, J. 2009. *Those who work, those who don't: Poverty, morality, and family in rural America.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Sperry, S. R. & Hill, P. T. (2015). *The politics of K-12 education in small rural school districts: The case of Idaho.* Rural Opportunities Consortium of Idaho. Retrieved from http://www.rociidaho.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/ROCI_2014_K-12Politics_FINAL.pdf

Tieken, M. C. (2014). *Why rural schools matter.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press Books. https://doi.org/10.5149/northcarolina/9781469618487.001.0001

Trujillo, T. M. (2013). The disproportionate erosion of local control: Urban school boards, high-stakes accountability, and democracy. *Educational Policy, 27*(2), 334-359. https://doi.org/10.1177/0895904812465118

Voluntary School District Merger: Act 153. V.S.A. (2010).

Vermont AOE. (2014, Jan 14). *Report of the Act 156 (2012): Working group to develop an implementation plan for the transition of special education staff to employment by Supervisory Unions.* Barre, VT: Author.

Vermont School Boards Association. (2012). *The essential work of Vermont school boards: 2012 – 2015 ed.* Author: Montpelier, VT. Retrieved from http://www.vtvsba.org/work.html

Vermont State Board of Education. (2014 Aug 19). *Statement and resolution on assessment and accountability.* Montpellier, VT: State Board of Education.

Vermont Superintendents Association. (2009). *Leadership duties under Vermont law.* Author: Montpelier, VT.

Yin, R. K. (2013). *Case study research: Design and methods.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

About the Author

Daniella Hall
Clemson University
Dhall5@clemson.edu
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7712-1925
Dr. Hall is an assistant professor of educational leadership in the Department of Educational and Organizational Leadership Development at Clemson University. Her research focuses on school district leadership in rural contexts. Her current research examines the relationship between educational politics, administration, and local communities.

Erin McHenry-Sorber
West Virginia University
ecmchenrysorber@mail.wvu.edu
Dr. McHenry-Sorber is an assistant professor of higher education and senior scholar of the Center for the Future of Land-Grant Education at West Virginia University. Her research interests include relationships between rural schools and their contexts. Her current research projects include an investigation of rural teacher shortages and gendered barriers and opportunities to postsecondary access for rural Appalachian students.

---

education policy analysis archives

Please send errata notes to Audrey Amrein-Beardsley at audrey.beardsley@asu.edu

Join EPAA's Facebook community at https://www.facebook.com/EPAAAAPE and **Twitter feed** @epaa_aape.

education policy analysis archives
editorial board