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## **Attracting Principals to the Superintendency: Conditions that Make a Difference to Principals**

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### **Abstract**

Responding to a perceived shortage of school superintendents in Ohio as well as elsewhere in the nation, this study examined the conditions of the job that make it attractive or unattractive as a career move for principals.

The researchers surveyed a random sample of Ohio principals, receiving usable responses from 508 of these administrators. Analysis of the data revealed that principals perceived the ability to make a difference and the extrinsic motivators (e.g., salary and benefits) associated with the superintendency as conditions salient to the decision to pursue such a job. Furthermore, they viewed the difficulties associated with the superintendency as extremely important. Among these difficulties, the most troubling were: (1) increased burden of responsibility for local, state, and federal mandates; (2) need to be accountable for outcomes that are beyond an educator's control; (3) low levels of board support, and (4) excessive pressure to perform. The researchers also explored the personal and contextual characteristics that predisposed principals to see certain conditions of the superintendency as particularly attractive or particularly troublesome. Only two such characteristics, however, proved to be predictive: (1) principals with fewer years of teaching experience were more likely than their more experienced counterparts to rate the difficulty of the job as important to the decision to pursue a position as superintendent, and (2) principals who held cosmopolitan commitments were more likely than those who did not hold such commitments to view the salary and benefits associated with the superintendency as important. Findings from the study provided some guidance to those policy makers who are looking for ways to make the superintendency more attractive as a career move for principals. In particular, the study suggested that policy makers should work to design incentives that address school leaders' interest in making a difference at the district level. At the same time, they should focus on efforts to reduce the burdens that external mandates contribute to the already burdensome job of school superintendent.

## **Introduction**

If popular press coverage is any indication, there seems to be mounting concern about an administrator shortage. Anecdotal reports suggest that fewer applicants are now applying for administrative positions than have done so in the past (e.g., Cooper, Fusarelli, & Carella, 2000; Pugmire, 1999; Steinberg, 2000). Professional organizations have focused in particular on the low numbers of applicants for principalships (NAESP/NASSP, 1998). So far, however, there has been little systematic research to clarify the situation by showing how conditions associated with school administration, especially the superintendency, relate to educators' decisions about whether or not to pursue such positions.

Regardless of the extent or severity of the shortage, boards of education have an on-going interest in knowing that there will be an ample pool of applicants to fill vacancies (see e.g., McAdams, 1998). And if critical shortages do indeed materialize, the concerns of boards will intensify. State policymakers also have an interest because they have some control over pipeline issues, such as licensure requirements (see e.g., Ashbaugh & Kasten, 1992; Fenwick & Pierce, 2001). Moreover, policymakers bear some responsibility for the conditions that superintendents face on the job. For example, in many states, accountability legislation introduces pressure for performance that superintendents may find extremely difficult to address (see e.g., Graves, 1995).

Despite the efforts of some districts to look for talented leaders from outside of the ranks of the educator workforce (e.g., Mathews, 1999), the traditional career path for educational administrators involves the move from teaching to the principalship to the superintendency (Glass, 1992). For this reason, the question “what conditions tend to attract and what conditions tend to deter principals from considering the superintendency?” seems germane to those concerned with the recruitment of capable district leaders. Moreover, among principals, different subgroups might find the various conditions associated with the superintendency to be more or less salient to their decision to pursue or not to pursue a position as superintendent.

This study addresses four research questions directly related to these concerns:

- What conditions associated with the superintendency do principals see as attractive?
- What conditions associated with the superintendency do principals see as objectionable?
- What characteristics of principals predispose them to see certain features of the superintendency as attractive and certain other features as objectionable?
- What characteristics of the context in which principals work predispose them to see certain features of the superintendency as attractive and certain other features as objectionable?

## **Review of Related Literature**

This study fits in with and expands research efforts that have explored the working conditions that characterize school leadership positions. In general, this line of inquiry has demonstrated that many educators are reluctant to pursue leadership positions because of the demands of the job, the increased pressure to show “results,” and the inadequate remuneration (e.g., Cooley & Shen, 2000; Gewertz, 2000; Houston, 1998).

Recent findings such as these seem to confirm rather than to contradict findings from earlier studies of the superintendency. Raymond Callahan (1962), for example, provided considerable evidence suggesting that, even in the early 1900's, superintendents (especially those in large cities) were pressured to demonstrate accountability both in terms of financial management and in terms of educational outcomes. Although there have been challenges to Callahan's claim that superintendents were extremely vulnerable as a result of these pressures for “scientific management” of schools (see e.g., Button, 1991; Eaton, 1990; Thomas & Moran, 1992), most educational historians acknowledge that such pressures did exist (see e.g., Cuban, 1976).

Contemporary case studies (e.g., Johnson, 1996) also demonstrate the complexity of the role that superintendents undertake when they try to balance educational, managerial, and political leadership in ways that promote school improvement. According to some researchers (e.g., Glass, Bjork, & Brunner, 2000), the complexities confronting superintendents have increased in recent decades, compounding the pressures traditionally associated with the role. Several conditions account for the added pressure. First, state-level requirements -- for instance, for school and district accountability --

have intensified. Because, in many communities, local citizens do not concur with the state education agency's interpretation of educational quality, such mandates often sandwich superintendents between the interests of their constituencies and the interests of the state (see e.g., Chalker, 1999). Another source of pressure results from the increasing power of teachers' unions (Haley & McDonald, 1988). Interactions with these groups can become particularly troublesome when union interests do not fit in well with the school reform efforts desired by district leaders (see e.g., Ballou, 1999; Lieberman, 1984; but cf. Koppich, 1991). Finally, changing demographics make the job of school administrators more complex, as various community groups compete to define the mission of schools in ways that match their values and expectations (see e.g., Houston, 1998; Portin, 1997).

Superintendents' jobs are also made more difficult when these school leaders are unable to garner adequate resources to implement the sorts of district improvements expected of them (Houston, 1998). According to Houston (2001), the expectations for reform and the resources allocated to districts are out of alignment. In fact, Glass and associates (2000) found that superintendents identify lack of financial resources as the one factor that most seriously limits their effectiveness. Moreover, in districts with limited resources, superintendents' low salaries may provide these administrators with another source of job-related stress (Yvarra & Gomez, 1995).

In spite of the difficulties of district leadership, research clearly shows that most superintendents are satisfied with their jobs. In a survey of superintendents from several different states, Cooper and associates (2000) found that most of these school administrators reported that their jobs were challenging, rewarding, and satisfying. In addition, these superintendents overwhelmingly regarded themselves as effective, with 96% of those surveyed agreeing that their work made a significant difference in children's lives. Similar findings were reported by Ramirez and Guzman in their study of rural superintendents in Colorado. Hill and Ragland (1995), moreover, found that long work hours did not seem to detract from superintendents' job satisfaction. It appears that the ability to make a difference and to exercise leadership may offer sufficient satisfaction to superintendents to enable these school leaders to persist in their work despite its obvious challenges (Wesson & Grady, 1993; 1994).

## **Methods**

We surveyed a random sample of 826 of the 3644 principals in the state of Ohio (i.e., a sample draw with a 95% confidence level and 3 confidence interval) using an instrument that included 19 variables related to conditions of the superintendency. Each respondent was asked to rate on a 4-point Likert scale the extent to which a specific condition would affect his or her decision to pursue a position as superintendent. The variables were organized into three scales reflecting the types of concerns that, based on previous research, seemed to be salient. Confirmatory factor analysis demonstrated that these three scales – the “making a difference scale,” the “hard job scale,” and the “extrinsic motivator” scale – were, in fact, discrete and explanatory.

The instrument also included questions eliciting demographic information about respondents (i.e., age, gender, years as a teacher, years as an administrator, highest degree obtained, experience as a coach). In addition a scale including six items measured the localist and cosmopolitan commitments of the principals. Localists were those who

believed it was most important to remain in their current districts, to live close to where they were born and raised, and to stay in the same communities for most of their lives. Cosmopolitans were those who believed it was most important to make a name for themselves in the field of education, travel to broaden their horizons, and leave home in order to seek career opportunities. This construct was deemed important because of the pioneering but somewhat neglected work of Carlson (1972), suggesting that place-bound (i.e., localist) and career-bound (i.e., cosmopolitan) superintendents harbor different reasons for pursuing leadership positions and follow different career trajectories.

In addition to data collected via the instrument, we imputed contextual data from two other sources: the Ohio Department of Education's *Educational Management Information System* (EMIS) and the National Center for Education Statistics' *Common Core of Data*. By using these publicly accessible resources, we were able to add to our data set accurate information about the community contexts in which our responding principals worked. The variables most salient to our analyses included locale (rural, non-rural), Appalachian/non-Appalachian, school SES (measured as percent eligible for free or reduced lunch), school size, and total per pupil expenditure.

Descriptive statistics were computed for each variable; then data were analyzed to determine (1) the extent to which the three sets of conditions – making a difference, hard job, and extrinsic motivation – were salient to principals in their decision-making regarding pursuit of a superintendency, (2) the characteristics of principals that predicted the extent of their concern about each of the three sets of conditions, and (3) the features of school context that predicted the extent of principals' concerns about each of the three sets of conditions.

## **Findings**

We received responses from 508 principals – a response rate of approximately 62%. Of the respondents, 36% were female and 64% male. Their average age was 47.3 years. The average years of experience as a teacher was 12.8, and the average years of experience as a principal was 10.2. In addition, 58.6 % of respondents had worked as coaches. Furthermore, among these principals, 51.8% tended to be more cosmopolitan than localist, while 48.2% tended to be more localist than cosmopolitan. With regard to highest degree earned, .6% held the Bachelor's, 88.2% held the Master's, 3.2% held the specialist degree, and 8% held the doctorate.

Among the principals, moreover, 24.1% worked in rural schools and 12.8 % worked in schools within Appalachian counties (as identified by the Appalachian Regional Commission). Schools' sizes, SES, and levels of funding, of course, varied considerably across the sample.

Preliminary descriptive analyses showed the individual variables that were most salient to principals' decision to pursue the job of superintendent. These variables were classified intuitively as "appealing conditions" and "unappealing conditions;" and the strength of each was revealed in its mean rating by the principals. Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for each "appealing" and each "unappealing" condition. As these data indicate, principals found the following four conditions most appealing: the chance to have a greater impact, the anticipated satisfaction associated with "making a difference," the opportunity to implement creative personal ideas, and the anticipated

satisfaction associated with the ability to provide support to school and district staff. They found the following four conditions least appealing: increased burden of responsibility for local, state, and federal mandates; the need to be accountable for outcomes that are beyond an educator’s control; low levels of board support; and excessive pressure to perform.

**Table 1**  
**Principals Ratings on a 4-point Likert Scale of Appealing and Unappealing Conditions of the Superintendency**

<b>Appealing Conditions</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>N</b>
chance to have a greater impact	3.17	.80	466
anticipated satisfaction associated with “making a difference”	3.11	.84	467
opportunity to implement creative personal ideas	3.06	.77	463
anticipated satisfaction associated with the ability to provide support to school and district staff	3.05	.75	462
high levels of board support	2.93	.97	454
improved annual salary	2.78	.85	466
improved benefit package	2.77	.88	468
greater control over work schedule	2.72	.83	464
increased opportunities for professional growth	2.70	.86	467
higher status	2.42	.84	465
<b>Unappealing Conditions</b>			
increased burden of responsibility for local, state, and federal mandates	3.08	.93	467
need to be accountable for outcomes that are beyond an educator’s control	2.94	.93	465
low levels of board support	2.90	1.03	457
excessive pressure to perform	2.90	.96	465
stress associated with anticipated conflict with teachers’ unions	2.75	.97	463
increased work load	2.64	.95	464
lack of clarity about job expectations	2.45	.87	466
need for greater amounts of technical knowledge	2.32	.8	466
superintendency is overly dominated by males	1.78	.90	464

As indicated in the discussion of research methods above, we made the assumption,

based on our reading of the related literature, that several of the variables identifying appealing and unappealing conditions would combine to form discrete and meaningful scales. We tested our assumptions about the items that would be associated by performing a confirmatory factor analysis in which we used varimax rotation to accentuate strong associations. This analysis showed that the significant factors comprised of associated items explained 50.53% of the variance on the instrument and corresponded to three themes that were clearly evident in previous literature. These themes related to (1) the satisfaction associated with “making a difference,” (2) the distress associated with the difficulty of the job (the “hard job” factor), and (3) the satisfaction associated with extrinsic rewards such as salary and benefits (the “extrinsic motivators” factor). Appendix A presents the items that load on each of the significant factors and their factor loadings. We identified factors as reliable using Stevens (1996) criteria. In order to examine the extent to which the three sets of concerns represented by the three reliable factors were salient to the principals, we computed and compared scale means using paired-sample t-tests. We found that principals rated “making a difference” as most salient (mean = 3.02), “hard job” as second most salient (mean = 2.82), and “extrinsic motivators” as least salient (mean = 2.66). Differences between pairs of means were all highly significant ( $p < .0001$ ).

We then constructed multiple regression equations to identify significant predictors of level of concern for each of the three sets of conditions. In each equation we included the scale measuring a set of conditions (i.e., “making a difference,” “hard job,” or “extrinsic motivators”) as the dependent variable and the characteristics of principals or of their schools as independent variables. In the equations that considered the influence of the characteristics of principals we excluded “highest degree obtained” from among the independent variables because, with over 88% of respondents holding the Master’s as the highest degree, there was very little variance. We also excluded the independent variable “age” because of its moderate bivariate correlation with “years of experience as a principal” ( $r = .52$ ). In the equations that considered the principals’ school contexts, we omitted the dummy variable, “Appalachian/non-Appalachian” because of its bivariate correlation ( $r = .32$ ) with the variable, rural/non-rural.

With regard to the effect of principals’ characteristics on the extent to which they saw “making a difference” as salient, the overall equation was non-significant and explained a minute fraction of the variance. (See Table 2.) It appears that the characteristics of principals we measured had little bearing on the extent to which they saw the possibility of making a difference as important to their decision to pursue or not to pursue the position of superintendent.

**Table 2**  
**Summary of Multiple Regression Analysis of Principal Characteristic Variables Predicting Concern for “Making a Difference” (N = 410)**

<b>Variable</b>	<b><i>B</i></b>	<b><i>SE(B)</i></b>	<b><math>\beta</math></b>
Gender	.108	.081	.081
Years as teacher	.003	.005	.036

Years as principal	-.003	.005	-.033
Experience as a coach	.011	.075	.009
Localism	-.023	.032	-.036
Cosmopolitanism	.088	.031	.141
Adjusted $R^2 = .01, p = .119$			

Results were similar for the “hard job” scale, where the overall equation was significant ( $p = .048$ ) but explained very little of the variance on the scale (adjusted R square = .017). (See Table 3.) Only one variable, years as a teacher, had a significant effect. Principals with less teaching experience were more likely than their more seasoned counterparts to rate the difficulty of the job as salient to the decision to pursue a position as superintendent.

**Table 3**  
**Summary of Multiple Regression Analysis of Principal Characteristic Variables Predicting Concern for “Hard Job” (N = 396)**

Variable	<i>B</i>	<i>SE(B)</i>	$\beta$
Gender	-.138	.085	-.100
Years as teacher	-.011	.006	-.109*
Years as principal	-.001	.005	-.014
Experience as a coach	-.039	.079	-.029
Localism	.066	.034	.097
Cosmopolitanism	.021	.033	.033
Adjusted $R^2 = .017, p = .048, *p < .05$			

With regard to the “extrinsic motivator” scale, the overall equation was significant but also explained relatively little (3.7%) of the variance on the scale. (See Table 4.) One predictor, cosmopolitanism, exerted a significant influence. A principal was more likely to view the salary and benefits associated with the superintendency as important if he or she held cosmopolitan commitments.

**Table 4**  
**Summary of Multiple Regression Analysis of Principal Characteristic Variables Predicting Concern for “Extrinsic Motivator” (N = 415)**

Variable	<i>B</i>	<i>SE(B)</i>	$\beta$

Gender	.137	.080	.101
Years as teacher	-.001	.005	-.012
Years as principal	-.002	.005	-.016
Experience as a coach	.076	.075	.058
Localism	-.013	.032	-.020
Cosmopolitanism	.129	.032	.200*
Adjusted $R^2 = .037$ , $p = .002$ , $p < .05$			

The influence of school context features on the strength of principals' concern for the three major conditions of the superintendency (i.e., "making a difference," "hard job," and "extrinsic motivators") was even less pronounced than the influence of principal characteristics. None of the equations predicting the strength of principals' concern for these conditions was significant. Summary statistics for these regression models are provided in Tables 5, 6, and 7.

**Table 5**  
**Summary of Multiple Regression Analysis of School Context Variables**  
**Predicting Concern for "Making a Difference" (N = 382)**

Variable	<i>B</i>	<i>SE(B)</i>	$\beta$
Locale	.065	.081	.044
Total per pupil expenditure	.000	.000	.072
School SES	-.000	.001	-.019
School size	-.000	.000	-.022
Adjusted $R^2 = -.04$ , $p = .675$			

**Table 6**  
**Summary of Multiple Regression Analysis of School Context Variables**  
**Predicting Concern for "Hard Job" (N = 364)**

Variable	<i>B</i>	<i>SE(B)</i>	$\beta$
Locale	-.072	.086	-.046
Total per pupil expenditure	.000	.000	.060
School SES	.000	.001	-.117
School size	.000	.000	-.085

$$\text{Adjusted } R^2 = .007, p = .164$$

**Table 7**  
**Summary of Multiple Regression Analysis of School Context Variables**  
**Predicting Concern for “Extrinsic Motivator” (N = 384)**

Variable	<i>B</i>	<i>SE(B)</i>	$\beta$
Locale	.127	.080	.086
Total per pupil expenditure	.000	.000	.081
School SES	.000	.001	-.031
School size	.000	.000	-.001
Adjusted $R^2 = .001, p = .361$			

## Discussion

Overall, the analyses showed that principals rated the ability to make a difference as a superintendent as the most compelling reason guiding their thinking about whether or not to pursue such a position. Their concern about making a difference was reflected in their high ratings on questionnaire items related to the superintendents’ role in providing support to school and district staff, the ability of superintendents to implement creative personal ideas, and the general impact that district leaders can have. Based on this study, it seems, principals’ perspectives correspond closely to those of practicing superintendents with respect to the features of district leadership that are perceived to be most compelling (e.g., Cooper et al., 2000; Houston, 2001; Wesson & Grady, 1994).

This finding has important ramifications for policy and practice. Regarding professional preparation, those who design university and workshop programs for aspiring superintendents might find it useful to focus on the competencies that enable school leaders to promote district-level improvement. Giving administrators tools that can help them make a difference builds on these educators’ intrinsic motives for pursuing leadership roles (cf., Lortie, 1975). Furthermore, local boards would be well served by creating conditions that support superintendents’ efforts to foster meaningful district-level change. Increasing a superintendent’s term of contract, for example, might give him or her sufficient chance to have a noticeable impact on the district’s performance (cf. Yee & Cuban, 1996).

Our analyses also revealed that principals were concerned about the challenges of the superintendency. Among the variables included on the “hard job” scale, they rated the following as most salient: “superintendent’s increased burden of responsibility for local, state, and federal mandates” and “the need to be accountable for outcomes that are beyond an educator’s control.” These responses suggest that the current focus on accountability may be adding to the stresses already associated with the superintendency (see e.g., Cooley & Shen, 2000). Policies that promote accountability mechanisms

responsive to local rather than state concerns may temper such added stress (e.g., Mathews, 1996).

Principals with fewer years as teachers were more concerned than others about the difficulty of the superintendency, and this finding suggests particular cautions regarding districts' recruitment of *principals*. Specifically, districts may want to avoid hiring as principals applicants who have limited experience as teachers. This suggestion, of course, also corresponds to recommendations concerning the background necessary for *instructional leadership* (Miller, 1987), and it fits in with certain research findings about predictors of effective school administration (Ballou & Podgursky, 1995). Our study, however, provides tentative support for the practice of hiring experienced teachers as principals on the grounds that these individuals will be more likely than their less experienced counterparts to pursue a full career in administration, eventually assuming the chief executive role. In times of administrator shortages, of course, districts with few other options will be likely to offer principalships to relatively inexperienced educators. This practice may enable such districts to fill school vacancies but may limit their long-term efficacy in cultivating leadership at the district level.

Our study also showed that extrinsic motivators such as salary, benefits, control over work schedule, and status were also important considerations when principals thought about the possibility of applying for positions as superintendents. In fact, principals who were committed to cosmopolitan values seemed especially attuned to these conditions. This finding is not surprising considering that these individuals place priority on accomplishment of career goals. For these career-bound administrators, work in small, lower-paying districts may often serve as stepping-stones to larger, more prestigious roles (see e.g., Carlson, 1972). Moreover, this finding has important practical consequences since, at least in Ohio, more than half of all principals harbor stronger cosmopolitan than localist commitments.

These results suggest that local boards and state policy makers should work to find ways to create incentive packages that are attractive to aspiring superintendents. According to several commentators, such compensation packages need to address salary, portable retirement plans, annuities, insurance, tuition reimbursement, expense account allowances, and support for moving expenses (see e.g., Educational Research Services, 1990; Heller, 1991; Shannon, 1987).

One other finding from this study, namely the uniformity of principals' concerns across demographic differences, seems pertinent. As our regression equations revealed, just a few personal characteristics and *no school context characteristics* exerted a significant influence on the strength of principals' concern for the three sets of conditions associated with the work of superintendents. This finding suggests that principals' views of the conditions of administrative work may be shaped by forces other than those attached to conventional social categories. Principals' views, it seems, are formed in an ideological space that transcends social location.

This conclusion leads to speculation about the ways professional socialization may function to define not only the character of school administrators' work but also their interpretations of its scope and meaning. And such speculations provide a hopeful path back to the profession itself as a place to look for continued, perhaps revitalized, support for the superintendency. This analysis does not go so far as to espouse a *laissez-faire* response to the problem of superintendent shortages (i.e., "if you advertise it, they will

come”), but it does suggest that the profession itself, without much mediation from local and state policy makers, may be able to reinvest the role of superintendent with sufficient authority and efficacy to once again make its attainment the aspiration of those educators with the greatest talent for leadership.

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## Appendix A

### Variable Loadings > .40 on the Three Significant Factors (Principal Components Analysis with Varimax Rotation; N = 417)

Factor and Variables	Factor Loadings	% Variance Explained
Making a Difference		20.7
Chance to have greater impact	.83	
Making a difference	.77	
Opportunity to implement ideas	.76	
Provide support to staff	.74	
Opportunities for growth	.60	
Hard Job		17.28

Responsibility for mandates	.80	
Accountability for outcomes	.76	
Increased work load	.70	
Conflict with unions	.70	
Low board support	.69	
Excessive pressure	.65	
Unclear job expectations	.56	
High board support	.55	
Extrinsic Motivators		12.55
Improved salary	.83	
Improved benefits	.79	
Control over work schedule	.65	
Higher status	.55	

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