Education and Urban Society
Volume 41 Number 3
March 2009 317-337
© 2009 Corwin Press, Inc.
10.1177/0013124508329626
http://eus.sagepub.com
hosted at
http://online.sagepub.com

# Exploring Superintendent Leadership in Smaller Urban Districts

## Does District Size Influence Superintendent Behavior?

Guilbert C. Hentschke
Michelle B. Nayfack
Priscilla Wohlstetter
*University of Southern California, Los Angeles*

Much of the existing literature on urban school reform focuses on how the relatively small number of our nation's largest urban districts are approaching school reform with these objectives in mind. However, does smaller district size have any bearing, direct or indirect, on the nature of superintendent leadership? The authors' exploratory research investigates the interplay between superintendent leadership strategies and behaviors, and district reform initiatives in a sample of relatively well-performing, smaller urban districts in California. The authors conducted interviews with superintendents and members of their leadership teams in four urban districts to examine how district size might influence superintendent leadership strategies, reform initiatives, and personal behaviors. The authors found that the personal leadership behaviors and associated operating processes (strategies and tactics for execution) appeared remarkably distinct from what superintendents do (or are expected to do) in very large urban school districts. The implications of these tentative findings are discussed in the conclusion.

***Keywords:*** *educational leadership; urban reform; superintendents*

**Authors' Note:** This research was supported by a grant from the Weingart Foundation. However, we wish to note that the contents of this article do not necessarily reflect the position or policies of the foundation. We express our sincere thanks to the four superintendents and members of their leadership teams who gave generously of their time and effort to participate in this study. Finally, we thank our research team colleagues at the Center on Educational Governance at USC, especially Ally Kuzin, Cassandra Davis, and Paul Galvin.

Urban education reform often is associated with problems, initiatives, and performance of our nation's largest school systems. Districts like New York City, Los Angeles, Chicago, Miami, and about 10 others in the same size category, have tried numerous reforms (like most school districts); however, these efforts are disproportionately documented (Hill, Harvey, & Campbell, 2000; Sipple, Killeen, & Monk, 2004; Wong, 2000). The reasons behind their visibility derive from a number of factors. Within metropolitan areas, these districts are the "big gorillas," often garnering large percentages of the region's media coverage, large fractions of government and philanthropic support, considerable policy and administrative oversight, and more attention from the academic community interested in urban education. Often smaller districts near these larger districts serve students of similar demographics, but because they are small, research on superintendent leadership behavior in these urban districts has not drawn the same level of attention. This is particularly surprising given the considerable attention devoted to the study of economies of scale (the association between district and/or school size and productivity) by economists.

The long-run trend (until very recently) of increased school and district size fostered an array of studies of various correlates of size. Early advocates of increased efficiency and equity saw benefits from increased size; they were followed by others concerned by the association of large size and issues of student outcomes, internal control, and public participation (Guthrie, 1979). The extreme conditions associated with very small (rural) districts and very large (mega, urban) districts fostered over several decades a variety of economies of scale studies seeking to ascertain optimum sizes, above which "diseconomies" set in (see, for example, Bilow, 1986, St. Louis & McNamara, 1971; Riew, 1966, 1972; Wales, 1973). Although these scale economies studies did not persist (due in part to methodological problems and questionable assumptions about production functions in public schooling), concerns with a variety of managerial issues associated with district size, degree of centralization, and their effects on superintendent leadership capacity have continued (see, for example, Guthrie, 1979; McPherson, 1988; Waters & Marzano, 2007).

These studies, supplemented by similar studies of nonschool organizations, examined size-related dimensions of managerial and organizational effectiveness (Bilow, 1986; Dessein, 2002; Guthrie, 1979; Laffont & Martimort, 1998; McPherson, 1988). In general, these studies concluded implicitly or explicitly that, despite possible scale economies, increases in organizational size tended to be associated with problems of communication, collusion, coordination, delegation, control, and overall managerial effectiveness.



Although these and other studies examined district size, per se, and issues of urban superintendent leadership, per se, it is not clear whether current understandings about urban superintendent leadership, especially what may be characterized as successful urban superintendent leadership, are generalizeable across both the more visible, very large urban school districts and the less visible, smaller urban school districts.

The question takes on somewhat more importance with the recognition that there are more "urban kids" attending school in the smaller urban districts than in the larger urban districts. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) categorizes districts by student enrollment using ranges of 25,000 or more, 10,000 to 24,999, 5,000 to 9,999, and 2,500 to 4,999.[1] Our study looks at districts serving between 5,000 and 35,000 students. According to NCES data for the 2004-2005 academic year, only 153 large urban districts (those serving more than 35,000 students) exist in the United States. In California alone, only 21 districts statewide enroll 35,000 students or more. Far more common are smaller urban districts—those districts serving between 5,000 and 35,000 predominantly minority, low-income students (1,759 nationwide).[2] Furthermore, smaller urban districts actually serve 6.5 million more urban students than do large urban districts.[3] Considering the prevalence of these urban districts, it is surprising that very little research focuses specifically on efforts to improve educational quality in these school systems (Anderson, 2003; Kercheval & Newbill, 2001).

Although there may be some similarities in reform and leadership efforts in smaller districts and our nation's largest urban districts, it is both premature and counterintuitive to assume that district size does not impact the efforts in both areas (Wills & Peterson, 1992). If we recall numerous local initiatives of the last half century in favor of breaking up our largest urban districts (see, for example, Bland, 2007; Gao, 2003), then it is plausible to assert that at least some education stakeholders believe that district size matters. By examining superintendent leadership behavior specifically in smaller urban districts, separate and apart from their larger counterparts, we may begin to understand better the influence of size on district reform strategies, at least as it bears on superintendent leadership behavior.

## Urban District Reform and Superintendent Leadership

Although there is a growing body of literature examining the role of district central offices in supporting improvements in student learning, the

majority of this research on urban district reform has focused primarily on large urban school districts (Anderson, 2003; Childress, Elmore, & Grossman, 2006; Marsh et al., 2005). Conclusions drawn from this body of district reform research focus on reform strategies employed by large urban districts including the following: (a) a sustained focus on teaching and learning, (b) a systemwide approach to reform, (c) a strong focus on professional development, and (d) the use of data to inform decisions and increase accountability (Marsh et al., 2005). Togneri and Anderson (2003) studied five high-poverty districts ranging in size from 3,000 students to more than 45,000 students across five states. They found that successful districts concentrated on aligning curriculum with state standards and developing school leadership. Snipes, Doolittle, and Herlihy (2002) attributed a district's success to factors like leadership stability, a shared vision for improvement, and district capacity to respond to students' needs at the local school level. In addition, a number of studies on district reform highlight effective data-driven decision making as a key component to improved student achievement (Anderson, 2003; Bainbridge & Sundre, 2003; Fullan, 2005; Kercheval & Newbill, 2001; Marsh et al., 2005; Ragland, Asera, & Johnson, 1999).

Most recently, Childress, Elmore, and Grossman (2006) launched the Public Education Leadership Project, which focused on urban district reform. The research team spent 4 years studying the successes and failures of 15 urban districts ranging in size from 7,900 students to 146,200 students, then partnered with 9 of these districts to test and refine new approaches in management. The district model recommended by Childress et al. focused on an integrated approach to leadership that combined strategic leadership (i.e., developing explicit improvement strategies for teaching and learning); developing a culture of collaboration, high expectations, and accountability; building support among stakeholders (especially the school board); and managing the school environment and resources.

Marsh and Robyn's (2006) working paper on school and district responses to the federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) provided superintendent-specific reform strategies. They reported high percentages of superintendents who used state assessment data to develop district improvement plans, who focused on professional development, and who made changes to district curricula and instructional materials. Wills and Peterson (1992) also studied how superintendents responded to state mandates for district improvement. They tried to determine the role that district size plays in superintendent reform strategies and concluded, "District size appears to be an influencing factor related to the superintendent's role in the improvement process" (p. 247). Their qualitative work examined small, midsize, and large districts but defined large districts as those enrolling more than 2,500 students.



In her 1996 work on the superintendency, Susan Moore Johnson highlighted a lack of research, especially that which focused on observing superintendents in the context of their districts to better understand "what leaders do and how they do it" (Johnson, 1996, p. 19). Johnson described superintendents as political, managerial, and instructional leaders—a framework that has been adapted and adopted in later research on educational leadership (Kowalski, 2005). Johnson also discussed the expectation that superintendents create educational visions to guide their constituents. All 12 superintendents in her study communicated the need to create a vision for their districts (size of districts ranged from 2,600 to 27,000 students). Since Johnson's work in 1996, very little work on the superintendency has emerged, with the existing empirical literature focusing on survey data hoping to describe the current state of the superintendency—the ever-multiplying job responsibilities and the environmental, political, organizational, and personal factors (contexts) that affect job performance (Glass, Bjork, & Brunner, 2000) and leadership choices (Johnson, 1996).

In expanding the discussion of leadership beyond the superintendency specifically, there are many more existing models of effective school leadership from which to choose. Leithwood (2006) commented, "Leadership serves as a catalyst for unleashing the potential capacities that already exist in the organization" (p. 182). He listed four core categories of leadership practices: setting direction, developing people, redesigning the organization, and managing the instructional program. These core practices have been examined by a variety of scholars using a number of different terminologies.

Davies (2006) also incorporated the importance of educational vision into his theoretical model of strategic school leadership. He described strategically focused schools as those that were "educationally effective in the short term but [have] clear frameworks and processes to translate core moral purpose and vision into excellent educational provision that is challenging and sustainable in the medium- to long-term" (p. 3). His work emphasized the importance of strategic leadership as a style of leadership operating in concurrence with managerial leadership, one that advocates for the achievement of short-term educational objectives as well as long-term capacity building for sustainability.

Sustainable leadership, a core component in Davies' model of strategic leadership, was also emphasized in Fullan's (2005) work on leadership and sustainability. Fullan asserted that the current state of leadership in school districts is disruptive; leaders are not stable over time, and there is no plan in place to produce future leaders to serve when others retire. He felt that a new type of leadership, systems-thinking leadership, was critical for sustainable improvement in schools and districts. Systems thinkers promote

sustainable change by (a) leading with a driving conceptualization and moral purpose; (b) building capacity, especially laterally; (c) advocating a commitment to ongoing learning; and (d) developing external partners. Like strategic leaders, those committed to sustainable leadership also have the ability to focus on both short- and long-term district objectives.

This literature on urban district reform and superintendent leadership clarifies two generalizations: First, there is a lack of research explicitly focusing on smaller urban districts and, in particular, how the behavior of district superintendents in the execution of their leadership might vary. Second, the distinction between descriptive work and normative recommendations is often unclear. Most of the evidence is drawn from surveys of districts of varying sizes or from school-based leadership models, and is offered in support of specific reform and leadership strategies. The purpose of our exploratory research is to study the types of reform initiatives smaller urban districts adopt and the strategies their superintendents employ. Such knowledge will begin to allow for a more complete understanding of how district administrators perceive district size, district reform, and superintendent leadership as contributing to student achievement. It will also serve as the foundation for preliminary hypotheses about the effect of district size on superintendent leadership that can help guide future research.

Our work addresses the following three research questions:

*Research Question 1:* What types of reforms are smaller urban districts adopting to drive student achievement efforts?

*Research Question 2:* How do superintendents in these urban districts behave (e.g., leadership styles)?

*Research Question 3:* To what extent does district size influence superintendent leadership and reform decisions?

## Research Methods

This is a multisite case study designed to collect exploratory data on urban district leadership and reform strategies. We chose to use the descriptive case study approach to gain an in-depth understanding of context and meaning for those involved. This approach also emphasizes discovery, rather than confirmation, and it is useful when investigating areas of education where little research exists (Merriam, 1998). Our objective was to fill a gap in the research on district reform and leadership by investigating smaller urban districts from the perspectives of their superintendents and leadership teams. We aimed to do so in a particularistic, descriptive, and heuristic manner as suggested by Merriam. We also hope to generate hypotheses that will serve as the foundation for future research on urban district reform.



For this study, we selected a purposeful sample of four smaller urban school districts that had been successful in improving student achievement. The four districts were selected based on secondary analysis of student test scores from the state's accountability system (2002-2005), as well as on their ability to fit the research team's definitions of *small* and *urban*.

One of the goals of this study was to understand how district reform initiatives might be contributing to consistent improvement on state measures of student achievement. Therefore, our team identified districts that were consistently meeting growth targets, set forth by the state accountability system, as a major sampling criterion. The funding agent was interested primarily in school districts in the southern California area, so we further narrowed our list to districts in Los Angeles, Riverside, and San Bernardino counties.

The next two sampling criterion, small and urban, included districts enrolling between 5,000 and 35,000 students that also served a majority of students traditionally labeled as *at-risk* or *underserved*. Those districts considered urban also enrolled a high volume of students who qualified for free or reduced-price lunch.

A total of 25 Los Angeles County area districts fit our sampling criteria. Because we were interested in superintendents' perceptions of district success and effective district leadership, the final sample of 4 districts was selected in collaboration with the foundation supporting the research. Basic demographic information for the sample districts is provided in Table 1.

First round interviews with all four district superintendents were conducted in December, 2005, and were followed by a second round of interviews with the superintendents and two members of each superintendent's leadership team, who were nominated by the superintendents.[4] The second round of interviews occurred in June, 2006.

Data collection for the study included (a) semistructured interviews and (b) document review. For all interviews, structured protocols were used to limit potential variation across multiple interviewers. The first-round superintendent interview protocol focused predominantly on district reform initiatives and included prompts about district and superintendent experience, descriptions of current reform initiatives, catalysts for district reform, decision makers with respect to reform policies, and perceptions of reform initiatives' successes in increasing student achievement. Each interview lasted approximately 90 min.

**Table 1**
**District Demographics**

| District | Enrollment | % Free and Reduced-Price Lunch | % Minority (non-White) Population |
|---|---|---|---|
| A | 27,565 | 50.0 | 65.9 |
| B | 16,630 | 63.8 | 99.4 |
| C | 7,704 | 90.6 | 98.5 |
| D | 6,485 | 74.9 | 90.3 |

Source: School Accountability Report Cards. California Department of Education. Available from http://www.cde.ca.gov

Based on initial perceptions about superintendents and their districts' successes, the research team decided that further study was needed to fully understand the phenomena in question. Second-round interviews with the superintendents and members of their leadership teams focused on strategic planning within each district, as well as leadership styles and strategies used to accomplish district goals. Respondents were also asked about the role that district size played in their decision making. In total, the data set consisted of 8 superintendent interviews and 6 district leader interviews. Most study participants had a long tenure in their respective districts (average = 20 years), a quality often cited as critical in ensuring the quality of qualitative interviews. Three out of the four urban superintendents rose through the curriculum and instruction side of the house; the fourth had a financial background.

The research team also collected relevant documents from each district superintendent and their leadership team. These documents included district strategic plans, district mission statements, and other documents describing the implementation of district reform initiatives.

All interviews were transcribed and coded for emerging themes. *Atlas.ti*, Version 4.2, a qualitative software program manufactured by Scientific Software Development, was used to code and analyze interview transcripts. The data were coded iteratively, first for general content pertaining to district reform initiatives and district objectives and priorities, and then for evidence pertaining to leadership, particularly with respect to how superintendents went about implementing reforms. Our aim was to identify both case-based reform and leadership practices along with cross-cutting themes.



## Findings

From our analysis of the district data emerged two distinct dimensions of superintendent leadership: (1) those which addressed the strategies, processes, and content of urban school district reform; and (2) those which emphasized the personal leadership behavior of superintendents and those with whom they worked most closely. Findings supporting each of these two leadership categories are presented separately below.

### Strategies, Structures, and Content of Small Urban District Reform

The overall character of small urban school district reform was composed of 8 interdependent themes, each reported in varying levels across the school districts studied and all associated directly or indirectly with (a) the general *strategies* employed by the district, (b) the broad *structural dimensions* associated with reform, and (c) the *contents* of the specific reform efforts. We did not parse the eight themes into these three categories, largely because district leaders did not; instead, we focused on each individual theme and its interdependence with the others.

District reform efforts were heavily influenced by, and developed at least partly in response to, federal and state accountability legislation (Theme 1). On the broadest level, superintendents cited the NCLB Act as a strong motivator for district reform. Surprisingly, most saw NCLB as a positive force, saying things like, "It helps us to stay really, really focused," and "It caused us to take a very close look at the various subgroups that we work with in our school district." Federal legislation catalyzed reform efforts for specific subgroups of students. One district in particular focused reform efforts on English-language learners (ELLs); they were in the midst of developing new programming to address ELL students who were not advancing toward reclassification. In addition, within districts that contained high schools, the California High School Exit Exam was also a strong motivator for curricular reform in mathematics and language arts.

Beyond curricular reforms, another characteristic of district response involved the creation of formal, board-adopted strategic plans (Theme 2), which contained the broad blueprints of reform, including problem analysis and planned action. One superintendent described how her district developed its strategic plan 8 years ago and how the plan was updated every 15 to 18 months. According to the superintendent, the strategic plan was the

catalyst for reform in the district and served to guide all decisions within the district. For example, one of the objectives of the strategic plan was for every child to graduate from high school and make a successful transition to postsecondary or a first career. To fulfill this objective, the California High School Exit Exam was a key indicator. The strategic plan was also useful for facility planning: The district passed a $450 million obligation bond to build 12 new schools. When asked about how the district spent funds received from outside grants, the superintendent cited technology because of its place in the strategic plan. This superintendent further explained, "Everything that goes to the board has to be linked to our strategic plan. Every principal's evaluation is connected to the strategic plan, every teacher's objectives are connected to the strategic plan, so we have a very targeted focus and a mission."

As a means of leveraging resources, districts employed formal strategies to promote public engagement (Theme 3), and to help increase the likelihood of community buy-in. Formal strategies of public engagement extended the notion of collaboration outward in the hopes of involving a number of different types of organizations in the district reform process. Examples of these strategies to increase public engagement included partnerships with (a) county departments of education for professional development, (b) local nonprofit organizations for after-school programming and/or social services, (c) local and national private foundations for financial support, and (d) local universities for early college course taking. In addition, superintendents spoke of numerous efforts to specifically engage the local community by attending meetings at local churches and becoming involved with city government. Many also mentioned trying to develop various parent services, ranging from parent centers on school campuses to a "dad's club" aimed at involving fathers in the classroom.

Whereas the first three themes, discussed above, were characterized by external influence, the subsequent five themes describe the contents of reform initiatives in the four urban districts, that is, the actual education problems that surfaced and the primary tactics employed to address those problems. Chief among the five was *system coherence* (Theme 4), that is, the manner in which the parts of the educational system—standards, curriculum, assessment—were interconnected. One superintendent discovered when she first came to the district that graduation requirements varied from classroom to classroom because standards had not been established and decision making was based on subjective evaluations of what should be taught from teachers' individual perspectives. The superintendent's response was to implement districtwide standards, develop both secondary and elementary



curricula, and institute benchmarking assessments to generate data for tracking progress and targeting interventions. A similar disconnect echoed through conversations with the other superintendents, and system coherence tended to be their "first-order of business" on arriving at their districts.

Another common education problem—*low-performing students and schools* (Theme 5)—was also closely associated with system coherence; when the system was not functioning coherently, low-performing students were both the result and the victims. For example, in one district ELL students were the biggest priority. Principals were required to include among their school goals strategies for helping students in this subgroup to gain one proficiency level each year and to meet adequate yearly progress (AYP) targets. The district identified outstanding teachers at different schools and then used them as coaches to present workshops, plan and demonstrate lessons, and help teachers evaluate and problem solve. In addition, the district scheduled ELL students for English-language development no less than 45 min a day, 5 days a week.

*Data-driven decision making* (Theme 6) was the primary method for diagnosing problems of system coherence and student performance, whereas *professional development* (Theme 7) constituted the principal means for addressing issues associated with data-driven decision making and other district reform initiatives on a large scale. With respect to data-driven decision making specifically, every district we studied placed growing importance on using data to diagnose weaknesses in both student achievement and staff performance. One superintendent developed what he called data action teams as a tool to improve data use across the district. Data action teams had members who were both practitioners and researchers—they understood how to get and use data. The data action teams visited and worked with each school site during teacher-structured planning time, which was embedded in the school day. This same superintendent explained, "The purpose of those meetings is really to discuss student data—how is Johnny doing—and then discuss how you actually look at the data. We also focused on identifying promising practices." The data teams worked very closely with individual schools in the district, as well as district personnel, on an extended basis to teach skills related to data use.

Another superintendent had a slightly different approach to data-driven decision making. She focused on helping principals understand the importance of doing their own research and made it a priority to model this behavior. In her own words she explained, "When you are getting ready to work with your staff, you need to have access to the scholarly research so that you have some backing and support behind you."

As was mentioned earlier, professional development was the primary means for addressing staff deficiencies in data use, technology use, and more traditional activities involving new or updated curriculum. Most superintendents stressed that professional development needed to be focused toward the bottom line: student achievement, whether it was directed by the school, or by the district central office.

Finally, as a companion to the homogenizing effects of system coherence, *instructional programs of choice* (Theme 8) were developed to respond to individual student (and faculty) interests. Strategies related to instructional programs of choice were extremely pervasive across all four districts. About 6 or 7 years ago, one district sought federal grants to create magnet schools. Today, although not all schools in the district are schools of choice, a majority of them are. The district has a seamless K-12 international baccalaureate program, and other magnet programs with a focus on environmental education, prelaw, premedicine, and communication arts.

Another district developed a model of school choice called the Village Academy, which was a high school that offered high-tech, project-based learning. It was also home to an early college program that provided an accelerated opportunity for students to earn their associates degree at a local community college, and also helped them earn a high school diploma at the same time. When asked about his motivation for this choice initiative, the superintendent explained, "We are trying to build a sense of positive competition, not just duplicate the high schools." Other justifications included using choice programs as interventions for at-risk students, satisfying parent requests, and preparing students for the 21st century job market. For example, the superintendent of a K-8 school district invited a charter management organization to open up a college-prep charter high school to serve students graduating from the district's middle school. Soon after, with support from parents, a second charter high school opened in the district with a math and science focus.

## Superintendent Leadership Behavior in Small Urban School Districts

From the findings associated with the strategies, structures, and content of reforms described above, we and others have inferred the obviously central role of the district superintendent. The eight themes, regardless of how well they were executed in an individual district, strike chords of familiarity among members of the school reform community, especially those associated



with urban schools. Although the form and emphasis associated with each theme varied, even significantly, depending on local conditions, the constellation of themes echoed many if not most of the planks in the current platform for urban school district improvement initiatives in the United States. What may well distinguish (arguably) successful school reform efforts in smaller urban school districts, however, was the distinctly different behavior of the superintendents in these districts, that is, the relatively hands-on role played by superintendents and the impact of their behavior on the roles of those with whom they worked most closely, that is, central office staff and school principals. Among the variety of ways in which they manifested hands-on instructional leadership, three of the most central included (1) the manner in which they secured, controlled, and used student achievement and related data; (2) the concrete nature of the curricular and instructional strategies they oversaw personally; and (3) the schedule of operational processes and activities in which they placed themselves and others with whom they worked.

*Secure, control, and use of student-relevant information.* Superintendents in the four sample districts were personally involved in generating, controlling, communicating, and managing student-relevant information. Student-relevant information included individual student assessment data, but entailed much more, including teacher assessments, district strategies and goals, and school profiles. In the hands of the superintendent, information was both a lever for action, revealing specific learning issues with specific groups of students, and a guide to action, suggesting specific curricular and instructional initiatives.

With respect to being a lever for action, superintendents drove the creation of a variety of content-based and benchmarking assessments aimed at unearthing the root causes of failure for specific student groups. Two superintendents, in particular, spoke of the necessity to secure reliable data on student achievement in math and language arts, especially for ELLs. They explained that these needs surfaced from reviewing state-level assessments. In response, district assessments were developed to serve both diagnostic and benchmarking needs, with results sent directly to the superintendent who then used the data to drive planning meetings with school and district administrators. The district data also served as a predictor for student performance on state assessments.

One superintendent explained how math performance data served as a lever for change:

> We looked at the test scores again and found out there was a real disconnect . . . this was not any surprise . . . between what happens in third-grade mathematics and on up to high school, up to Algebra 1. There was no good math being taught. In fact, in some cases, we found out that when we disaggregated the data, many of our teachers at the fifth- and sixth-grade levels were still teaching 2.6 math skills.

After reviewing these data, the superintendent worked with her leadership team to develop pacing plans for the math teachers in her schools. She also grouped the district's elementary, middle, and high schools into "feeder patterns" in an effort to facilitate cross-school communication and to connect math instruction from grade to grade.

Another superintendent spoke of a notebook she keeps on hand containing test scores, evaluations, and memos from each school in the district. She takes her notebook on every school-site visit so she can monitor how the school is addressing student needs that have emerged from district assessments. Having access to detailed student data helped the superintendent closely monitor all principals' instructional decisions. Having access to school-site, teacher and administrator evaluations also enabled the superintendent to hold staff accountable for the schoolwide goals they had committed to.

One district superintendent spoke specifically about the multiple forms of information that she and her cabinet found useful to guide decisions. She included student achievement data, as was expected, but also emphasized data assessing community perceptions of schools and student satisfaction surveys. A different district that we studied created benchmark assessments as part of its effort to use multiple performance measures, rather than state and national assessments exclusively. These benchmarks were incorporated into the district's central database where they enhanced existing measures of student performance (report cards, teacher-made tests, state assessments) and guided reform decisions.

As is clear from the above examples, superintendents placed a strong emphasis on gathering various forms of district data that they then used to guide decisions spanning from the development of district goals to the creation of district assessments, to the oversight of school-level administrators. Those behaviors that supported information gathering also contributed to an above-average involvement by the four superintendents in curriculum and instruction when compared to superintendents in very large urban school districts.

*Personal involvement addressing concrete curriculum and instruction issues.* We have already described how one superintendent's desire to gather



student data on math achievement served as a lever for action in the creation of an enhanced math curriculum across the district. Despite having a director of instruction who had been with the district for more than 25 years, it was clear from our conversations with her administrative team that the superintendent was extremely involved in the development and implementation of these new curricula by way of daily updates, campus visits, and interactions with staff. This example was one of many we encountered in which the superintendent was personally involved in what might be considered relatively technical and detailed curriculum and instructional initiatives.

Such initiatives follow almost naturally from personal involvement in the analysis of student-relevant information. Ranging from program development and curriculum alignment to district-specific assessments and targeted classroom interventions, superintendents were either directly involved on a routine basis, or closely monitored and directed these initiatives. Monitoring often came in the form of daily interactions with their immediate administrative teams. Some of these interactions were very informal, what many superintendents and school personnel described as an *open-door policy*. Other interactions were more formalized. For example, one superintendent required all of her associate superintendents to write her a "Friday letter" to update her on their progress from the week.

Campus visits proved to be a common method used by superintendents to closely monitor instructional objectives established either in the district strategic plans, or in school-site plan developed by principals in conjunction with the superintendent. One superintendent commented, "I probably spend 50% of my time, if not 60% of my time, in the schools." What's more, she went on to explain, "When I'm in classrooms, I will take over. The teachers know that. If the kids are misbehaving or not doing what they're supposed to be doing, I will stop the students, I will stop the teacher, and bring order to a classroom. I have no problem in doing that." This level of interaction with the students and the teachers shows a familiarity and curricular expectations that is far less common in larger urban districts.

*Interaction with school leaders and central office staff.* Notwithstanding the wide range of responsibilities associated with the urban superintendency, the four superintendents in our study, as noted earlier, spent significant proportions of their work week personally guiding and leading the instructional processes in their districts. Characterized by significant personal involvement in *all* of their schools, often with teams representing different district office departments, the urban superintendents also spent disproportionate amounts of time in their lowest-performing schools. In

these school-based interactions, very often the agendas focused on the school's student-relevant information and its progress on initiatives designed to address issues revealed in the data. Furthermore, the superintendents took it upon themselves to structure the routine working relationships among school-based educators, and between members of a school's leadership team and the district's leadership team.

The leadership team structures varied across districts. In one district, the superintendent established two different structures, one at the school level and another at the district level. At the district level, the teaching and learning cabinet (TLC) included the superintendent, the assistant superintendent for education services, the director of K-12 instruction, and the principal of a particular school. The TLC met with five of the lowest-performing schools in the district on an individual and monthly basis at the school site. Each site visit included a minimum of 2 hours with the principal and a walk-through of the school. Each site visit had a specific focus, whether it was looking at time on task, or implementation of an intervention, and the visit ended with all members pooling their ideas. The TLC was also an alternative governance system for these five schools and all budgetary decisions were made with the approval of the TLC. Although the TLC required a time investment by the superintendent, it did not require a large budget for sustainability.

At the school level, each and every school in the district created a leadership team, known as the *team response for achievement and curriculum* (TRAC) team. The TRAC team consisted of the principal, a leader from each grade level (hand-selected by the principal), and representatives from special education and the elective courses. The representation of a teacher from special education was important for TRAC because special education had a significant impact on state assessment results. For the first year, TRAC 1, team members attended intensive, full-day trainings every month facilitated by the county office of education in the areas of standards, instruction, and assessment. This block of time was taken from the regular school day. The schools either started late or were dismissed early one day a week, and the time was banked for training purposes. The next year, TRAC 2, these same members continued to participate together as a team. There was a higher level of accountability during the second year; a principal at a low-performing school must report to the superintendent on a monthly basis. The superintendent also had the option of requesting specific information from schools. At the end of 3 years, a strong cadre of leaders was born. In addition to the TRAC team, each school had a TRAC coach trained by the district to be an instructional leader on-site. TRAC coaches were usually the strongest teachers within the school and were



accountable to the principal. Both management structures were driven by the superintendent as accountability reforms aimed at increasing overall student achievement within the district.

In other districts, superintendents established regular meetings with instructional leaders, both on an individual basis and collectively. Individually, superintendents met with each principal at least twice a year, often more, to establish annual goals (always an extension of the strategic plan) and to evaluate progress toward those goals, based on school-level data collected throughout the academic year. These meetings often also addressed the allocation of resources, which was driven by student data. Superintendents also created a variety of structures for collective interactions. One superintendent held monthly meetings with his principals as a group. These meetings were unique in that they were attended only by the principals and the superintendent; they did not include members of the central office staff. Also, the meeting agenda was assembled by the principals so that the meetings were designed around their primary concerns. As described earlier, another superintendent not only met on a weekly basis with her cabinet of central office administrators, but also met on a monthly basis with her management team—the constituent-based leadership team comprised of principals, counselors, and district administrators.

In their regular meetings with various school leaders, superintendents focused primarily on progress toward strategic goals and needs for professional development. One superintendent, in particular, discussed how she was working extensively with principals to refocus their efforts from operational duties to instructional leadership. In this district, the superintendent required principals to be in classrooms 70% of their day.

Through their personal engagement in information development, pedagogical improvement, and structured working relationships with numerous site-level and district office educators, these superintendents appeared to devote unusually large proportions of their personal time to their districts' instructional agendas. Such proportions of time are neither characteristic of, nor could realistically be expected of, their (perhaps equally successful) counterparts in very large urban school districts.

## Conclusion

Inferences from this exploratory study of superintendent leadership in smaller urban school districts are, by definition, preliminary, tentative, and

at best suggestive. Notwithstanding these caveats, several findings emerged. First, as suggested by the eight themes, the strategies, structures, and content of district reform in smaller urban districts were not discernibly different from that which is common among the largest urban districts. The smaller school districts we studied adopted a systemwide approach to reform, focused on teaching and learning, and used professional development and external partners to build capacity.

Second, we observed that the leadership behavior of superintendents in smaller districts appeared remarkably distinct from what superintendents do (or are expected to do) in very large urban school districts. Superintendents in this study had distinct operating processes (strategies and tactics for execution)—they were hands-on and personally engaged in instructional leadership.

Third, if the discernable differences between smaller and large urban school districts do exist, it may have less to do with differences in the levels of interest or expertise of superintendents than with classic organizational issues of size, span of control, and (dis)economies of scale associated with the costs of coordination. Although it is a truism that all leaders get their work done through other people, it also may be the case that the inevitable degree of size, specialization, and delegation associated with very large urban school districts mitigates the direct personal impact of an individual superintendent to a greater degree than in a significantly smaller urban district. Stated differently and somewhat more cautiously, superintendents in this study appeared to be *personally* engaged in behaviors characterized as hands-on instructional leadership. This is not to suggest that they were less engaged in other agendas characteristic of the superintendency. It is to suggest the possibility, however, that successful superintendent leadership in smaller urban school districts may be reflected in personal behavior, which was more hands-on and less delegated than is characteristic of successful superintendents in very large urban school districts.

Although these findings apply consistently to the results from this exploratory study, additional less obvious hypotheses emerge that offer questions to guide future research. Within the context of successful smaller urban school districts, we have examined the behavior of district superintendents. From our preliminary analysis, a variety of subsequent studies of "superintendent characteristics" suggest themselves—for example, the possible effects of longer tenure, or unusual academic and work experience on superintendent behavior and district performance. The exploratory findings presented here also suggest the need to examine more directly the interplay between district size and superintendent behavior, especially with regard to superintendents' personal use of data, personal involvement in technical instructional issues, and personal operating



routines with their closest district- and building-level supports. Do superintendents in less successful small urban school districts behave similarly to the superintendents we studied? Do superintendents in relatively successful, but very large urban school districts behave similarly? More fundamentally, what appear to be the underlying causes of these superintendent behaviors? Are these hands-on superintendents simply reluctant to delegate for a variety of reasons? Or is their behavior, as we have characterized it, in some way standard for superintendents in districts of this size? Are their behaviors actually more characteristic of regional or area superintendents or deputy superintendents in very large districts than of general superintendents? To what extent, if at all, do their apparently high levels of personal involvement in instruction-related improvements account for the high levels of student academic performance? Through an examination of superintendent behavior along some of the dimensions we have suggested, future research may yield new insights into the interplay between leaders and the organizations they lead.

## Notes

1. Data retrieved from the National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved January 16, 2007, from http://nces.ed.gov/quicktables/result.asp?SrchKeyword=district+size&topic=All

2. Data retrieved from the National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data. Retrieved May 2, 2006, from http://nces.ed.gov/ /bat/

3. Data retrieved from the National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data. Retrieved April 17, 2006, from http://nces.ed.gov/ccd/bat/

4. In one district, staff members were not interviewed because the district went through a change in superintendent during the course of our data collection; we felt that staff would be less likely to speak accurately about the new leader's strategies.

## References

Anderson, S. E. (2003). *The school district role in educational change: A review of the literature.* Toronto, Ontario, Canada: International Centre for Educational Change, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education.

Bainbridge, W. L., & Sundre, S. M. (2003). Policy initiatives to improve urban schools. *Education and Urban Society, 35*, 292-299.

Bilow, S. (1986). *The size of school districts: Economic and psychological perspectives.* Ithaca: State University of New York, College of Agriculture and Life Sciences at Cornell University.

Bland, K. (2007). School district breakup to be discussed [Electronic version]. *The Arizona Republic.* Retrieved March 21, 2007, from http://www.azcentral.com/arizonarepublic/local/articles/0227phxboard0227.html

Childress, S., Elmore, R., & Grossman, A. (2006, November). How to manage urban school districts. *Harvard Business Review, 84*, 55-68.

Davies, B. (2006). *Leading the strategically focused school: Success and sustainability.* London: Paul Chapman.

Dessein, W. (2002). Authority and communication in organizations. *Review of Economic Studies, 69*, 811-838.

Fullan, M. (2005). *Leadership and sustainability: System thinkers in action.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Gao, H. (2003). Board race revives LAUSD breakup issue [Electronic version]. *Daily News, Los Angeles.* Retrieved March 21, 2007, from http://www.thefreelibrary.com/BOARD+RACE+REVIVES+LAUSD+BREAKUP+ISSUE-a098114320

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

Guthrie, J. W. (1979). Organizational scale and school success. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, 1*, 17-27.

Hill, P. T., Harvey, J., & Campbell, C. (2000). *It takes a city: Getting serious about urban school reform.* Washington, DC: Brookings Institution.

Johnson, S. M. (1996). *Leading to change: The challenges of the new superintendency.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Kercheval, A., & Newbill, S. L. (2001). *A case study of key effective practices in Ohio's improved school districts.* Bloomington: Indiana Center for Evaluation.

Kowalski, T. J. (2005). *Evolution of the school superintendent.* Retrieved January 17, 2007, from http://www.corwinpress.com/upm-data/6756_bjork_ch_1.pdf

Laffont, J.-J., & Martimort, D. (1998). Collusion and delegation. *RAND Journal of Economics, 29*, 280-305.

Leithwood, K. (2006). The 2005 Willower family lecture: Leadership according to the evidence. *Leadership and Policy in Schools, 5*, 177-202.

Marsh, J. A., Kerr, K. A., Ikemoto, G. S., Darilek, H., Suttorp, M., & Zimmer, R. W. (2005). *The role of districts in fostering instructional improvement: Lessons from three urban districts partnered with the Institute for Learning.* Santa Monica, CA: RAND.

Marsh, J. A., & Robyn, A. (2006). *School and district improvement efforts in response to the No Child Left Behind Act.* Santa Monica, CA: RAND.

McPherson, B. R. (1988). Superintendents and the problem of delegation. *Peabody Journal of Education, 65*, 113-130.

Merriam, S. B. (1998). *Qualitative research and case study applications in education.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Ragland, M. A., Asera, R., & Johnson, J. F., Jr. (1999). *Urgency, responsibility, efficacy: Preliminary findings of a study of high-performing Texas school districts* [Electronic version]. Retrieved April 10, 2006, from http://www.starcenter.org/services/main.htm#product

Riew, J. (1966). Economies of scale in high school operation. *Review of Economics and Statistics, 48*, 280-287.

Riew, J. (1972). Scale economies in public schools. *Review of Economics and Statistics, 54*, 100.

Sipple, J. W., Killeen, K., & Monk, D. H. (2004). Adoption and adaptation: School district responses to state imposed learning and graduation requirements. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, 26*, 143-168.

Snipes, J., Doolittle, F., & Herlihy, C. (2002). *Foundations for success: Case studies of how urban school systems improve student achievement.* New York: MDRC for the Council of the Great City Schools.



St. Louis, L., & McNamara, J. F. (1971). Economies of scale for a state system of public school district. *Socio-Economic Planning Sciences, 7*(3), 295-303.

Togneri, W., & Anderson, S. E. (2003). *Beyond islands of excellence: What districts can do to improve instruction and achievement in all schools.* Washington, DC: The Learning First Alliance and the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Wales, T. J. (1973). The effect of school and district size on education costs in British Columbia. *International Economic Review, 14*, 710-720.

Waters, T. J., & Marzano, R. J. (2007). The primacy of superintendent leadership [Electronic version]. *School Administrator, 64*. Retrieved March 21, 2007, from http://www.aasa.org/publications/saarticledetail.cfm?ItemNumber=8435&snItemNumber=950&tnItemNumber=

Wills, F. G., & Peterson, K. D. (1992). External pressures for reform and strategy formation at the district level: Superintendents' interpretations of state demands. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, 14*, 241-260.

Wong, K. K. (2000). Chicago school reform: From decentralization to integrated governance. *Journal of Educational Change, 1*, 95-103.

**Guilbert C. Hentschke** is the Richard T. Cooper and Mary Catherine Cooper Chair in Public School Administration at the University of Southern California's Rossier School of Education, and is also affiliated with the Center on Educational Governance. He is the author of numerous publications on public, nonprofit, and for-profit education organizations.

**Michelle B. Nayfack** is a doctoral candidate at the University of Southern California's Rossier School of Education and a research associate at the Center on Educational Governance. Her research focuses on urban educational policy and reform, specifically issues related to system governance.

**Priscilla Wohlstetter** is the Diane and MacDonald Becket Professor of Educational Policy and the director of the Center on Educational Governance at the University of Southern California's Rossier School of Education. Her research explores the policy and politics of educational reform, as well as the relationship between school organization and improved school performance.