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# Demonstrated Actions of Instructional Leaders: An Examination of Five California Superintendents

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**Abstract**
This exploratory study focuses on the perceived and actual leadership characteristics and actions of five district superintendents in California who focused on the core technology of education - curriculum and instruction. In-depth interviews were conducted with these superintendents, their principals and members of their boards of education. The selection of superintendents for this study were guided by three criteria: peer recognition as instructional leaders, district demographics and aggregated increases in CAP (California Assessment Program) scores in grades 3, 3&6, and 3 6&8 for the academic years of 1986-87 to 1989-90. Interview responses indicated that superintendents in this study perceived four attributes to be essential in their ability to be successful instructional leaders. These attributes are: (1) Possession and articulation of an instructional vision; (2) the creation of

an organizational structure that supports their instructional vision and leadership; (3) assessment and evaluation of personnel and instructional programs; and (4) organizational adaptation. By employing responses given by the superintendents in this study and looking closely at what they articulated as their role in promoting curriculum and instruction as well as the larger organizational structure a preliminary model of perceived superintendent behaviors was constructed.

To confirm perceptions, actions, and behaviors articulated by the district superintendents, triangulation interviews were conducted with school principals and school board members in each of the participating districts. A 52- item questionnaire was also administered to every principal and school board member in these districts. Responses of these personnel confirmed the articulated actions and behaviors of these superintendents in their promotion of the technical core of curriculum and instruction.

## Introduction

This research focuses on the perceived instructional leadership characteristics of several highly effective California school superintendents. What makes the research new is not that it comes from a state widely known for its educational innovation, especially that of its chief school officers. The research is new because it focuses on a growing problem now widely shared by chief school officers in this and other states as they struggle with being behind rather than at the leading edge of school reform across the country.

The superintendents at the core of this study were sure that their districts could make a bigger difference in their students' learning than was common across their region and within the state. And despite the remoteness of their central office from the classrooms in which differences must ultimately be made, they were convinced that there must be things that they could do as leaders that would impact on those classrooms curricular, teaching and testing core. If, as the growing body of literature on middle managers suggested, principals could and should be instructional leaders (Dwyer, 1984; Martin & Willower, 1981; Ogawa & Hart, 1985; Peterson, 1984), they wondered why could and should not they?

Their journey to instructional leadership and ultimately effectiveness was neither easy nor unidirectional. Indeed, in even undertaking the journey at all, they had more than their share of obstacles. Chief of these was: A field of educational leadership rive by politics of pragmatism and those of idealism. On one side of this dogfight stood a large majority of respected scholars and practitioners who asserted that educational leadership is primarily a technical matter. For these leaders, the "behavior-thing" had meaning, and leadership revolved around getting others in the organization to accomplish particular tasks. These leaders encouraged potential instructional leaders to pay attention to matters such as personnel administration, school law, school business management and finance, technology and facilities planning. On the other side of this dogfight, stood a smaller but vocal minority of equally respected individuals who asserted that education leadership is primarily a moral matter. For these leaders, the "vision-thing" had meaning and leadership revolved around getting others in the organization to believe in certain things. So these leaders emphasized that the potential instructional leaders should focus on topics such as ethics and values, covenants and commitments, and educational futures instead.

A field of educational leadership in which instructional leadership was of very low priority. Even as top ranked programs of educational administration strived toward major reform in the training of school leaders, the bulk of these reforms rarely focused on issues in instructional leadership. Indeed, one mid-90's study from the influential University Council of Educational Administration (Pohland & Carlson, 1992), ranked instructional leadership seventeenth out of the top 23 subject matter areas offered at the member institutions of UCEA. Even the widely advocated topic of the eighties, instructional supervision, tied for ninth in this survey.

A field of instructional leadership in which the theoretical base is relatively large but the empirical is small. Indeed, even at the time this research began and sometime well

after our pool of superintendents had begun their journey as instructional leaders, there were only a handful of studies to which one could turn for guidance about how a superintendent might think, feel, and behave as an instructional leader. While we reserve here the right to summarize later in this paper the findings of two of the best of these studies (Bjork, 1993; Coleman & LaRocque, 1990; Kowalski & Oates, 1993; Murphy & Hallinger, 1986; Peterson, Murphy, & Hallinger, 1986) and compare and contrast them with our own, suffice it to say this handful of studies stands in sharp contrast to the handfuls of studies that have focused on principals as instructional leaders.

A field in which the small pool of empirical research available had not focused on the thinking, feeling, and action of demonstrably effective instructional leaders. The leaders researched were not chosen for their actual success in promoting student learning as that success is typically judged by their public stake-holders, namely, by some kind of test scores or other hard evidence of learning progress. Nor were they chosen for their demonstrated success with those that they were supposed to lead and, in particular, their school boards, their principals and their teachers. So, even if potential instructional leaders took the findings of these few studies on the superintendent as an instructional leader to heart, these leaders had no firm reason to believe that thinking, feeling, and acting as indicated would decidedly impact on the learning of their students or the development of their public and professional staffs.

This study asked demonstrably effective instructional leaders to reflect on the question, "What is your perception of the district superintendent's role in the promotion of curriculum and instruction? The work presented here is based on an examination of the instructional leadership behaviors and activities of five school superintendents in California.

## Procedures

### Identifying and Selection of Instructionally Focused Superintendents

Employing both quantitative and qualitative analyses drawn from in-depth interviews and school personnel surveys, the collection of data was conducted in three phases. Phase one consisted of inductive and hypothesis-generating interviews with five district superintendents identified and recommended as instructional leaders (Goetz and LeCompte, 1984). The purpose of these interviews was to explore district superintendent's perceptions of functions and responsibilities they perform in the promotion of curriculum and instruction (Seidman, 1991). Phase two consisted of triangulation interviews (based on responses and domains generated from the phase one interviews) with two randomly chosen principals and one school board member in each district. The third phase of the study consisted of administering questionnaires to all principals and school board members in each of these districts who had been active for a minimum of two years during the CAP measurement period and tenure of the district superintendent. Like the phase two interviews, the surveys were used in order to explore the articulated actions and behaviors of district superintendents. Additionally, systematic review of district documentation was also conducted during the third phase.

### Selection of Instructionally Focused Superintendents

The ability to locate "instructionally focused" superintendents is not an easy task. No politically savvy district administrator would ever admit that (s)he was not focused on issues of curriculum, instruction and student achievement, but the managerially reality of the position often forces the district superintendent to concentrate on issues other than instruction (Dunigan, 1980; Hannaway & Sproull, 1978; Pitner, 1979). Therefore the selection process of instructionally focused superintendents took a somewhat deductive approach. An initial list of the names of superintendents perceived to be instructionally

focused was guided in part by the recommendations of participants in several pilot interviews and conversations (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992;Seidman, 1991;Dwyer, 1984).

These recommendations were obtained from several sources: Faculty members in the Educational Policy, Organizational and Leadership Studies program at the University of California Santa Barbara who were involved in the administrative certification program; pilot interviews with three district superintendents, one assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction and two elementary school principals located in southern and central California as well as a lecturer in the Confluent Education program at UCSB who had previously served as an elementary school principal and superintendent. This snowball sampling approach (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992) eventually led to a list of eight superintendents.

While recommendations revealed the names of superintendents, the importance of establishing reasonable quantitative measures of instructional effectiveness was the next step. Two sets of data were examined, demographic data on each district and these districts' performance on the California Assessment Program (CAP) achievement test during the tenure of these superintendents.

*District Demographics* : To ensure that these districts led by these superintendents were similar in type (urban, suburban, rural), size and student populations served, demographic data were collected utilizing the information from the California Basic Educational System (CBEDS) for the school years of 1985-86 and 1989-1990. Information on total student population, minority student population and percentages, as well as the percentages of limited English speaking students (LEP) and percentages of dropouts for each of these districts were complied. Each district was then contacted and asked to provide the percentages of students graduating and going on to institutions of higher education. Examination of these data revealed that they were similar in size, percentage of minority and LEP students, number of student who did not finish school and students who graduated and went on to two and four year institutions.

*CAP Achievement Test* : Until 1990, the California Assessment Program (CAP) achievement test was administered annually to students in the third, sixth, eighth and twelfth grades CAP assess a range of school achievement including basic skills, critical thinking and problem solving aligned to the California State curricular frameworks (Heck, Larsen, & Marcoulides, 1990). State ranked percentiles for these grades in the general subjects of reading, word recognition, and math from 1985-86 to 1989-90 for these districts were obtained. A review of these data indicated that five of these superintendents were heading districts that had the largest percentile growth in test scores for the areas of reading and mathematics in grades 3, 3&6 and 3,6&8 for the academic years of 1986-87 - 1989-90 (see Table 1). Of course such scores have been criticized as a sole measure of educational effectiveness, still they have been widely used for research in California schools as a common measure of student learning at the state, district, and school level (Hart and Ogawa, 1987; Murphy, Hallinger, Peterson and Lotto, 1987).

**Table 1**
**School District Characteristics**

| District | Schools | Student Enrollment | District Structure | CAP Percentile Growth (1986-87 to 1989-90) Grades | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | 3 | 3&6 | 3,6&8 |
| 1 | 15 | 9,174 | K-12 | 110 | 120 | 138 |
| 2 | 9 | 6,069 | K-12 | 112 | 202 | 174 |
| 3 | 11 | 5,541 | K-12 | 37 | 128 | 126 |

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 4 | 10 | 9,108 | K-12 | 53 | -- | 175 |
| 5 | 15 | 9,527 | K-12 | 79 | 92 | 150 |

## Instrumentation

A scheduled standardized interview protocol was developed to ascertain the role of the district superintendent in instructional promotion and responsibilities (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984). Questions were primarily open-ended and were based on literature describing superintendent task behaviors and priorities as well as review of instructional models that have been implemented on a district-wide level. Phase Two: Triangulation interview questions based on the information and domains generated by data gathered in the phase one interviews were used with randomly selected principals and school board members in each district. In order to probe the perception of these district personnel, interview questions were generally worded and left open-ended. Phase Three: The fact that responses of principals and school board members in the phase two interviews corroborated and confirmed many of the perceptions and actions articulated by the district superintendents, a fifty-two item questionnaire was constructed and sent to all principals and school board members in each district. Survey items were primarily based on five point Likert scale. There were some binary and forced choice items as well, which primarily examined duties, roles and responsibilities of school principals and school board members.

## Data Collection

All superintendent interviews ranged between one and one half to two hours in length. After each interview session, verbatim transcriptions were prepared from an audiotape.

Interviews of principals and school board members were conducted in person and by telephone. These interviews ranged between fifty minutes and one hour and each interview was audiotaped and verbatim transcripts were also made.

A fifty two item questionnaire based on domains and behaviors articulated in the phase one interviews and confirmed in the phase two interviews was administered to every principal and school board member that had been active for a minimum of two years in each of the five school districts. The questionnaire sample consisted of forty-four school principals and thirty- one school board members, sixty-three out of seventy five total respondents, an eighty four percent response rate, completed surveys.

## Data Analysis

It is true that informants can and do give inaccurate and misleading data, even though they are doing their best to be helpful (Dobbert, 1982). The reliance on self-reported data by district superintendents could lead to problems concerning the validity of the information received. Because previous research has indicated weak linkages between organizational levels in school districts this study understood that perceptions of actions or behaviors at one level of the organization may not be shared with other levels (Crowson, Hurwitz, Morris, and Porter- Gehris, 1981; Deal and Celotti, 1980; Hannaway and Sproull, 1978).

Answers to interview questions were placed on summary sheets and matrices and then examined to determine if any relationships were apparent. A two-part domain analysis for each interview was conducted (Spradley, 1979) The analysis included analyzing each interview individually across the questions categories. Once individual interviews had been examined and categorized, responses were put on a domain matrices that examined district responses. This matrix was examined in order to determine if themes or consistency were apparent in the perceptions of the respondents regarding their role and participation in curricular and instructional promotion. The open-ended nature of

the questions provided an abundance of data on a number of themes.

All analysis of the personnel questionnaire was conducted using SYSTAT (version 5.0). Three types of analysis were used on the completed surveys. First, descriptive statistics were computed for purposes of summarizing the demographic characteristics of the sample and the ratings for each item appearing on the survey (frequencies, means and standard deviations). Second, Cronbach's alpha coefficients (Crocker & Algina, 1986) were calculated in order to ascertain the degree of internal consistency exhibited by the instrument. Examination of the reliability analysis indicated that the instrument exhibited moderated to strong internal consistency. The overall alpha coefficient was equal to .87. Finally, Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficients and Kendall-Partial Rank Correlation Coefficients were calculated to test the overall strength and the relationship of four components of the model of superintendent perceived behaviors in district curricular and instructional promotion.

## Results

The five superintendents reported that they were involved in all aspects of decision making in their school districts, but all of them concentrated more energy, time and resources to the technical core of curriculum and instruction. First, they articulated a personal vision for the education of children and through different leadership styles, successfully wove that vision into the mission of their districts. Second, through the hiring and replacing of personnel, involvement of school board members, shared decision making and the implementation of various instructional strategies they were able to create an organizational structure that supported their vision and role as instructional leader. Finally, they monitored and assessed the programs and personnel using a variety of hard and soft indicators but always with the objective of making the organization more instructionally sound.

### Personal Responsibilities

Superintendents in this study gave examples of functions that they did in order to promote instruction within their districts. These functions are referred to as personal responsibilities and can be defined as functions that are neither initiated by nor deferred to other members within the organization. The responsibilities articulated by the participating superintendents were the establishment of an instructional vision, risk taking, being highly visible, modeling and signaling examples of district valued behavior and acting as a district cheerleader.

*Vision*

Vision has been defined as a set of professional norms that shape organizational activities toward a desired state (Coleman & LaRocque, 1990). Sergiovanni (1990) defines it as beliefs, dreams and direction of the organization and the building of consensus to get there. The term vision in this study is defined as the personal beliefs about the education of children and the expressed organizational goals and/or mission for the school district to accomplish these beliefs.

Superintendent responses strongly indicated that the establishment of a vision or goals was of paramount importance for the district's success in instruction. When asked about their role in the instructional process and specific things that they did to promote instruction their responses were: "The superintendent has to have the vision and sense of what can be" (Superintendent 1, hereafter S1). "I think my role is to establish the vision for this district and to be sure that everybody that works here assimilates and personalizes this vision" (S2). "The vision is real important because it forms a structure or the platform for every decision you make" (S3). "The superintendent has to be more that a catalyst. He must be the keeper and seller of the vision" (S4). "To secure access to a rich curriculum

for all students and support networks to help assure that all youngsters are successful is something that we've tried to permeate in terms of our vision for all students" (S5).

Some of the personal visions articulated by these superintendents were: "To ensure that all students acquire the knowledge, skills, and attitudes essential to become productive members of society" (S1). "My commitment to the public is to provide a quality education for all children and to treat people with courtesy and care" (S2). "All students can learn and it is the responsibility of the school to ensure that they are successful" (S4). "I believe it is the responsibility of the school district that every student has access to quality educational programs and access to be successful in meeting the goals of those programs" (S5).

Though the articulation of a vision was essential at the beginning, vision alone is insufficient to promote academic success. The next essential component was the superintendents' ability to successfully integrate the vision throughout the organization. "You have a vision and you transfer that vision into goals. In a school district, whatever it is that you establish as your goals, should then influence the establishment of district outcomes" (S1).

*Taking Risks*

Another part of the articulation process was taking risks; not always doing the cautious or safe thing. "If you want to improve you have to be willing to take risks when you believed those risks will lead toward better teaching and more effective learning on the part of students" (S5). The superintendents in this study saw themselves as risk-takers, and expressed a personal responsibility to offer instructional programs that they felt were in the best interest for the students and for the goals of the district. Several of the superintendents recounted events when they either eliminated or expanded programs in the district or dismissed popular principals/administrators knowing initially these decisions would risk support and potentially cause a rift in their relationship with members of the school board.

*High Visibility*

Personal presence was perceived by these superintendents to do three things: demonstrate teacher support, monitor classroom instruction, and to get a first hand account of what was going on at the various school sites. The superintendents in this study indicated that they enjoyed school visitations and felt that their presence on school sites signaled their support of teachers and what they were trying to accomplish. "I show interest in how kids, in how teachers are teaching and kids are learning, by going to the sites and visiting with the teachers and observing classrooms" (S2). Although they enjoyed visiting schools, superintendents saw school visitation as their opportunity to monitor and evaluate each of the school sites. They were particularly interested in assessing technical core operations and expressed that the only way to know what was really "going on" was to spend a good deal of time walking around, looking, asking questions, and being involved. "One of the things that I sees as of significant importance is visibility. Frequent visits, meetings and interaction with staff. Yesterday I visited every elementary summer school classroom. I didn't stay long, but I went and made contact with each one of the teachers. Some places I just stayed fifty seconds, some places I stayed ten to fifteen minutes, depending on the room, but they're used to that. I never tell them when I'm coming to their campuses. I stop in though and say, "I'm here!" They're not allowed to get on the loud speaker and say that the superintendent is here or anything like that. They can't do that. I want to see the real world and everybody's used to that. And so, I'll hit 1,000 classrooms a year" (S1).

Finally, they saw personal visits to schools as a way of managing and reinforcing district goals by talking with principals and teachers about the various program goals and objectives and seeing first hand if district goals were being reached. "Another thing that I like to do and principals and teachers are aware of this. I always encouraged a room environment that is reflective of the instructional program and that includes the display of

student work. So, when I visit a classroom, I go in and look at the student work. Now, if I see student work that is really not according to standard, I'll say to the principal, "Have you been in there and looked at that room?" "Go take a look at it!" They know I'll do that. This lets them know that the instructional goals of the district are important" (S3).

*Modeling*

"Modeling" and "signaling" in these interviews were terms used by the superintendents to mean the same thing. They can be defined as setting personal examples of district valued behavior. "The keeper of the vision has to signal what is important in the company and you signal them in many different ways. You signal through what you write. You signal through what you say. You signal through what you do" (S1). Though modeling/signaling by the superintendents occurred most often in meetings with senior staff, principals, teachers and parents. It also occurred in the classroom. Superintendents indicated that modeling and signaling were articulated through the meeting agendas, in the types of inservice and speakers offered for the staff's professional development, and the allocation of resources given by the district office in the way of staff development. "By supporting financially the district's efforts to do better for kids, I try to model it in everything that I do. We do a lot of training and a lot of staff development. So, we support teachers so they can learn to be more professionally competent and we drive the agendas to a certain extent by the kind of staff development that we provide" (S2).

*Cheerleading*

Cheerleading was defined as recognizing and presenting programs, schools and individuals that reflect and encompass the vision and mission of the district. As one superintendent said, "Recognizing islands of excellence," within the district. It consisted of the public promotion of innovations, strategies and persons that were working and succeeding in achieving district goals. Cheerleading most often occurred when the superintendent publicly recognized individuals and groups in district meetings, having them conduct presentations in front of parent groups (e.g., PTA) and the school boards as well as honoring them in district newsletters and the local paper. "I'm going out there to recognize high performance to help people celebrate when we have success. Call attention to success. Identify islands of excellence and acknowledge that" (S2). Creation of an Organizational Structure Supporting Instruction

Superintendents in these districts emphasized that the possession and articulation of a vision and personal actions were essential but not sufficient to successfully promote instruction in their districts. The creation of an organizational structure that facilitated and promoted instruction was paramount in institutionalizing their vision. Responses of the superintendents indicated that this was accomplished through two means. First is management of the organization. The rudiments of this strategy as articulated by the superintendents in this study included: Collaboration with the school board, the hiring, transfer and/or replacement of administrative personnel, working and closely supervising school principals, the creation of a hierarchy of district departments, and personal visits to classrooms. The second method was the employment and use of instructional and assessment strategies. These included the use of the California State Curriculum Framework, district- aligned curriculum, district adopted instructional strategies, and intensive staff development.

## Management

In the context of these interviews, management represents district organizational policies and personal supervision of members of the organization by the district superintendent in order to facilitate and achieve district goals.

*School Board*

Common features among these superintendents were the conditions under which

they were hired. All five were recruited by the school board with a mandate to improve the instructional program of the district. They felt that this was a significant factor in their ability to promote their ideas and vision with relative ease and in general encountered minimal amounts of conflict with their boards over instructional issues. Though the membership of the school boards has changed during the tenure of each superintendent, the school boards reportedly have supported the efforts of these superintendents to improve the instructional program. To ensure the board's perpetual support, three of the superintendents regularly send board members to conferences, to observe other districts, and include them in staff development inservices focusing on instructional strategies that are being implemented within the district. When asked about getting the school board to share in their vision of instruction and to underwrite them, each superintendent pointed to the fact that they keep their boards involved and appraised of what is happening in the district and the goals they are trying to achieve.

The superintendents in this study expressed that another benefit of their recruitment by their respective school boards was the significant amount of leeway given them to replace personnel in the district. This freedom permitted the superintendents to do two things: (1.) To put key people in important leadership positions (i.e., assistant superintendents and principals) and (2.) to create a hierarchy of district departments.

*Hiring, Transfer and/ or Replacement of Personnel*

The hiring and placement of personnel was articulated as an essential component to the instructional success of their districts. Each superintendent recounted a time when they felt it necessary to replace a member of their senior staff. There were two primary reasons given for these individuals removal. The first was the inertia of the previous administration in the area of instruction and these individual's participation in the inertia. The second and most common reason was the unwillingness of these people to share in and work toward the "new vision" of the incoming superintendent. "I had a person who I felt was a good manager, but just not a good instructional leader and we moved that person into a job that took advantage of his skills" (S5). Only one superintendent said that he replaced a senior staff member because of incompetence. "After I put in a new team, I fired another district administrator because he was totally incompetent. You have to get rid of the •gate keepers• when you come in to improve a school district" (S1). All of the superintendents articulated that the role of their principals is to be the instructional leaders at their respective sites. A significant part of this responsibility requires the principal to develop detailed site level plans, active leadership, planning, and participation in all staff development, frequent observation of teachers and grounding teacher feedback in district adopted instructional goals.

Superintendents in this study also commented on the fact that it because this was a different paradigm for several of their "old building and grounds" oriented principals, they found it necessary to replace principals in their districts. One superintendent replaced half of his principals in the past six years, four of them in his first year. The reasons were the unwillingness or inability of these principals to share in and work toward the vision of the superintendent. "I had to change a principal because the instructional leadership at that school wasn't what it was supposed to be and wasn't getting to the point where you could see that it was going to get any better. The individual was a nice guy, a great guy, but just not meeting, just wasn't doing it. Couldn't see it. Didn't understand it. Couldn't grasp it" (S3).

*Hierarchy of Departments*

The importance of personnel being-in-the-right-place was also made evident when these superintendents spoke about establishing a hierarchy of departments within the district. Each of the superintendents maintained that of all the departments in the district,

the instructional department was paramount and that other departments existed to support instruction. In only one district was this hierarchy a formalized district policy, the remaining four districts indicated that there was clear "understanding" by the staff members in the district office. In order to facilitate the time necessary to focus on the technical core, superintendents hired and placed highly competent individuals that shared in their vision to head each of the departments. According to the superintendents in this study, the assistant superintendents heading the non-instructional departments, e.g., business and personnel knew of the hierarchy and therefore were given a reasonable amount of autonomy and authority with key check points which permitted easy monitoring by the district superintendents. This alleviated the superintendents from some of the otherwise peripheral organizational concerns and gave them time necessary to promote technical core issues.

*Principals*

The personal supervision of principals by superintendents was the most common method used to keep a finger on the pulse of district schools. Much of what was said by the superintendents implied that principals were the critical line in the successful promotion of an instructional vision. Principals were required to lead, plan, participate in and act as a resource for teachers at their school site. "We start working on aligning the curriculum and on teaching teachers teaching strategies that would help them to become more effective. We began a very intense program of supervision, evaluation, and feedback for teachers. We taught the principals all this stuff and sent them forth" (S2).

The format of principal - superintendent interaction was fairly standard throughout the five districts. Principals were required to meet with the superintendent on a regular basis. This consisted of between two to four formal meetings a month plus any meetings with the principals at their school site. Each principal was required to write an instructional and leadership plan for his or her school annually. The goals of these plans were to reflect and integrate district policies and objectives with goals for their particular school. These plans were then read and commented on by the superintendent and returned to the principals. In some cases, because of a lack of specificity concerning goals, principals were required to rewrite and resubmit it to the district superintendent.

The school site plans were used in two related -evaluative capacities. The first acted as an assessment tool of the district office in establishing a school's ability to successfully achieve district and site goals outline in the plan. The second was in the evaluation of the principal. All of the superintendent in this study personally evaluated the school principals. By and large, a principal's length of tenure in these districts rested primarily on these evaluations. The evaluations were narrative, detailed and very extensive, "No forms or boxes to check off" (S4). Fundamentally, they were based on the principal's ability to meet the objectives and goals outlined in the school site plan. For example, in one district a goal for each school was to outline and strategically implement the Madeline Hunter Model. The superintendent listened to audiotapes of the principal•s conferencing with teachers about the teacher's usage of the model. These conversations then became part of the principal's annual evaluation.

*Instructional Strategies*

When selecting an instructional model or district wide strategy, there was a consistency across these districts in their criteria. Their decisions were based on three things. First, the model of strategy would have to facilitate the articulated vision and goals of the district. Second, it was necessary that the instructional strategy be grounded in research and practice. Finally, it would have to have a "grass roots" acceptance by a majority of teaching staff. Only two districts made use of the same instructional model, (i. e., Outcome-Based Education and Mastery Learning) while the remaining three used a variety of modes, e.g., Cooperative Learning and Madeline Hunter throughout their schools.

*Intensive Staff Development*

When a strategy or model had been adopted, extensive staff development was made available to teachers, principals and board members. Each of the superintendents expressed confidence in the professionalism and ability of their teachers but realized that the teachers could benefit from learning alternative ways of presenting material. "I think that we have to let the professionals adapt from a menu of well accepted research and educational practices, and let them use those strategies that best suit them" (S5).

Though each of the districts in this study used a variety of instructional methods, the underlying similarity was that each district made available to their staffs - workshops, conferences, speakers, resources and even courses at local colleges in order to help them to improve their instructional repertoire. One superintendent captured the idea in this statement, "We saw teacher training as an important part of the effort to improve our instructional program. If people know how to teach they will teach. If they don't know how to teach they won't. They'll come up with other things to do to fill the time" (S3).

*Assessment and Evaluation*

Once a vision had been articulated and programs and personnel were in place, questions such as, "Are the students more successful?" "Is the organization serving the children better?" and "Are programs achieving their objectives?" had to be addressed and answered. According to the superintendents of this study, the next responsibility for the district was to monitor and assess the district's chosen path.

The assessment of instructional success as well as personnel performance relied on the use of both hard and soft indicators. Aside from California Assessment Program (CAP) scores as a means of assessing district and grade level progress in reading, language and math, three of the five districts belonged to the CAS Squared Consortium. CAS Squared made use of an aligned curriculum and provided districts with individual and class scores not measured or reported by CAP. Other evaluative tools included the school site leadership and instructional plans submitted by each school principal at the beginning of the school year. Personal observations by the superintendent and district staff as well as other soft indicators.

A point of interest of this study was the evaluative criteria used by these superintendents in determining whether or not an instructional program should be retained or replaced. The criterion used by the superintendent's was diverse. Three of the districts in this study made use of "soft" indicators when making a decision to retain or replace a program, (i.e., teacher and parent feedback, peer evaluations, community feedback, and district staff feedback) along with some "hard" data, (i.e. CAP scores, district standardized tests, CAS Squared). The two districts using the Outcome-Based Education model made use of "hard" data bands that were tightly aligned to district outcome curriculum goals. If, at the end of one to two academic years, the outcome goals were not being met and or surpassed, the program would be altered or replaced. The underlying criteria in their decisions rested on the idea of whether or not the organization would be able to serve the needs of it's students better. If replacing a program (or person) permitted the organization to improve student learning the replacement generally would be made. "I think, considering everything in the organization, would the total organization be serving kids better or worse? If the bottom line is the organization is going to serve kids better if I make that decision (to replace the program) I'm going to go ahead and do it. If I determine it's not, I'm not" (S2).

## Model of Superintendents Perceived Behaviors In District Curricular and Instructional Promotion

By employing responses given by the superintendents in this study and looking closely at what they articulated as their role in promoting curriculum and instruction as well as the larger organizational structure a preliminary model of perceived superintendent behaviors was constructed (See Figure 1).

The model depicts the four significant behaviors these superintendents preformed when promoting instruction within their districts. It demonstrates the flow of their vision and how this vision directs each part of the organizational structure, from the goals and objectives of the district, to the various programs and personnel and the means of evaluation and assessment of both.

## Principal and School Board Member•s Perceptions

Superintendents stated that principals and school board members played a pivotal role in the successful promotion of instruction within the district. According to the superintendents, principals primarily accomplished this through the writing of school site instructional plans that incorporated district goals and objectives, the observation and evaluation of teachers in the classroom, and planning and participation in staff development and through the monitoring of the principals in these functions by the district superintendent.

School board members (SBM) were encouraged to learn about district instructional strategies in national, state, county and district level workshops and inservices. They were involved in the establishment of district instructional goals and objectives and more significantly the board members that participated in this study articulated an "aligned philosophy" with the district superintendent about what had to be accomplished in order to have an academically successful school district. Other areas of critical importance were fiscal stability of the district and labor peace with certified and classified employees.

### Interview and Survey Data

In order to determine whether principals and school board members functioned in the

duties and roles as articulated by the district superintendent and what their perceptions of the superintendent are in regard to his role in the promotion of instruction, this study made use of open-ended, triangulation interviews (Spradley, 1979) with ten randomly selected principals and four school board members in these five districts. Confirmation surveys were then designed to corroborated data received from these key informants (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984). The sample of principals and (SBM) surveyed had to have been active in the district for a minimum of two years during the five years of academic growth. The survey sample consisted of forty-four school principals and thirty-one school board members, sixty-three out of seventy five total respondents, an eighty four percent response rate, completed surveys.

## Findings

Within district analysis of triangulation interview statements and survey responses with principals and SBM revealed that a significant majority of these pivotal personnel possessed similar perceptions of their role and the role of the district superintendent in promotion of curriculum and instruction. Interviews and within district percentages and frequencies demonstrated that principals perceived themselves as leaders and instructional resources at their respective school sites. (See Table 2)

### Table 2
### Percent of Principals Answering "Yes" to Survey Questions (n=35)

| | Districts | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| **As a Principal were you required to:** | | | | | |
| Develop site level leadership plans | 100% | 88% | 100% | 100% | 100% |
| Site plans incorporated district objectives | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |
| Regularly observe teachers teaching | 100 | 88 | 100 | 100 | 100 |
| Teacher observations based on district instructional strategies | 71 | 86 | 100 | 100 | 100 |
| Participate in staff development | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |
| Observed by the district superintendent | 100 | 86 | 100 | 100 | 100 |
| Principal evaluations based on goals and objectives developed in site level plan | 86 | 100 | 75 | 86 | 80 |
| Meetings with district superintendent were primarily focused on instructional issues | 100 | 83 | 100 | 100 | 100 |
| Superintendent made frequent school visits | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |
| Superintendent observed teachers teaching | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |
| Superintendent met with teachers at school | 100 | 86 | 100 | 100 | 100 |
| Superintendent is instructionally focused | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |

Statements and survey responses made it apparent that principals were required by the district superintendent to write site-level plans that incorporated district goals and objectives, to observe and evaluate teachers, to lead and conduct inservices and staff development programs, and to incorporate district adopted instructional strategies in the curricular format at their school sites. Principals were evaluated annually by the district superintendent and a predominant criteria of their summative evaluation was their ability to successfully meet the goals outlined in their school site plans. Principals also articulated and

noted that they perceived their respective superintendent as instructionally focused.

School board members (SBM) confirmed much of what was articulated in the superintendent interviews. School board members perceived the district superintendent as instructionally focused and willing to "take risks" in order to promote their instructional vision. They stated and noted a philosophical alignment with the district superintendent on instructional matters, while indicating general involvement in determining instructional goals and objectives for their respective districts. (See Table 3)

**Table 3**
**Percent of School Board Members (SBM)**
**Answering "Yes" to Survey Questions (n=28)**

| | Districts | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| **As a School Board Member were you:** | | | | | |
| Encouraged by the district superintendent to gain knowledge in instructional strategies | 63% | 100% | 83% | 100% | 100% |
| Assisted in establishment of district instructional goals | 75 | 100 | 50 | 75 | 100 |
| Overall agreement between SBM and district superintendent in the areas of academic and instructional issues and programs | 100 | 100 | 83 | 100 | 100 |
| Did the district experience labor disputes with staff that interfered with the planning or implementation of classroom instruction? | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Did the district superintendent risk popular support to promote instruction? | 88 | 60 | 100 | 86 | 80 |
| Is the district superintendent instructionally focused? | 100 | 100 | 83 | 100 | 100 |

They indicated that relationships between the district and certified and classified personnel agencies had not interfered with the planning or implementation of instructional issues during these years of measurement. When queried about the fiscal stability of the district, SBM had stated that the district had become fiscally stable before or under the stewardship of the present superintendent.

As a group, interviews and within district frequencies and percentages indicated that principals and SBM perceived their respective superintendent as possessing and articulating an instructional vision. They also perceived the mission of the school district, the criteria used in the selection and implementation of instructional strategies and staff development as well as the agenda of school board meetings, the criteria used in the assessment of instructional programs as influenced by the vision of the district superintendent. (See Table 4).

**Table 4**
**Percent of Principals and School Board Members(SBM)**
**"Strongly Agreeing" or "Agreeing" to Survey Questions (n=63)**

| | Districts | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Superintendent possessed vision | 100% | 100% | 100% | 100% | 100% |
| Vision was focused on instruction | 93 | 92 | 93 | 100 | 100 |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| District mission reflected this vision | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 91 |
| Vision influenced staff development | 100 | 100 | 93 | 100 | 100 |
| Vision influenced instructional programs | 86 | 92 | 93 | 100 | 100 |
| Vision influenced school board agenda | 86 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 91 |
| Vision influenced principal evaluations | 100 | 100 | 93 | 100 | 82 |
| Vision influenced criteria used in assessment of instructional programs | 86 | 92 | 100 | 100 | 100 |
| Vision influenced the modification of district instructional programs | 93 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |
| Superintendent encouraged collaboration | 77 | 92 | 92 | 40 | 100 |
| Superintendent received input from principals | 53 | 100 | 86 | 55 | 70 |
| Superintendent received input from SBM | 64 | 92 | 65 | 64 | 64 |
| Academic success due in part to superintendent vision and involvement | 93 | 92 | 93 | 100 | 100 |
| Superintendent strongly focused on curriculum and instruction | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |

Though a majority agreed that the superintendent encouraged collaborative decision making, responses from all districts in this study indicated that collaboration primarily occurred at the school site level with little input from groups such as teachers, principals, and parents at the district level. Principals and SBM perceived that the assessment of instructional programs and their modification relied on both "hard" and "soft" indicators, while the replacement of district and school site personnel relied more on •hard• indices (e. g., test scores, ability to achieve stated goals and objectives.) Participants also indicated that the academic success of their respective district could be, in part, to the vision of the district superintendent in instructional matters.

## Conclusion

The findings and conclusions of this study are limited in their generalizability since they were derived from exploratory interviews and survey instruments and were only used in five non-randomly selected medium sized school districts in California. The explanation and interpretation of the findings also has several reasonable alternative explanations. While superintendents in this study credit personal vision as fundamental to the instructional success of the district, there are at least three important organizational factors that may serve as reasonable alternative explanations for these districts success. They are: 1.) The ability of the superintendents to replace principals and other administrators who did not share the superintendent's vision and mission. 2.) The fiscally stable conditions of the district as well as the latitude given each of these superintendents by their boards of education. 3.) The strict alignment of the district curriculum to teaching strategies and district outcomes. Limitations also reveal that further general research is recommended in order to obtain a more complete comprehension of the superintendent's role in curriculum and instruction.

With this caveat aside, the findings from this study suggest a new and somewhat different leadership role for the district superintendent in the core technologies of curriculum and instruction. Emerging from the data were several critical themes demonstrating consistencies among the instructionally focused superintendents. This included creation of a vision, increased visibility, modeling of academic expectations, developing rapport with the school board, and management of instructionally oriented programs.

First, this study demonstrates the importance of creating an instructionally oriented vision and communicating this vision throughout the school district. For example, each of the superintendents in this study demonstrated an instructionally oriented vision for academic success. This finding is consistent with other research that suggests that educational reform is impossible without visionary leadership by superintendents (Kowalski & Oates, 1993). These superintendents communicated their vision of excellent teaching and learning through continual communication with principals. Carter et. al., (1993) describe the importance of utilizing principals to carry their message to each individual school in the district. Superintendents attempted to transform their vision into an instructionally oriented vision for academic success through strong and tightly coupled leadership. Vision and strong leadership has previously been determined to be a critical element of successful instructional leadership (Bredeson, 1996; Carter et al., 1993; Murphy & Hallinger, 1986; Peterson, Murphy & Hallinger 1987).

Second, high visibility was also demonstrated by the superintendents in this study. High visibility in schools and in classrooms has been linked to instructionally effective schools (Bjork, 1993). This visibility also led to the modeling of high academic expectations, which was found to be a critical action demonstrated by the instructionally successful superintendents. This is also consistent with past research that deems frequent visits to schools as a necessary component of demonstrating the importance of instruction (Carter et al, 1993). These superintendents visited classrooms frequently throughout the district and reported classroom observations to the principal. Consequently, the superintendents modeled the importance of instruction to the teachers, students and principals. Perceived discrepancies, by the superintendent, between the districts mission and the teaching in the classroom were quickly disseminated to the principal who could act to correct the differences with the individual teacher.

Third, each superintendent was able to illustrate the importance of instructional leadership through professional development and shared decision-making. Each district made available an abundance of workshops and possibilities of attending conferences promoting alternative teaching methods. This availability of professional development opportunities demonstrated the importance of teaching and learning in the district. Through these visible opportunities for teachers, each superintendent illustrated that teaching and learning was clearly the most important objective of the school district. Through providing such professional development activities the superintendent is communicating the importance of teaching and learning.

The study demonstrated the critical nature of the superintendent's individual action of creating an academic oriented vision and maintaining this vision through high visibility. With each visit to a school the superintendent modeled the importance of the instructional oriented vision through appearance as well as signaling to the principal when discrepancies arose between the district wide mission and an individual teacher's actions in the classroom.

Fourth, each participating school district demonstrated support from the school board for superintendent decision making. In this study, these instructionally focused superintendents had clear support from the school board. In fact, most of these five superintendents were hired due to their previous instructional experience and success. This study supports previous research, which has demonstrated the importance of school board support (Griffin & Chance, 1994). Support of the school boards permitted the superintendents in this study to take significant risks in their promotion of the technical core. This finding has reflects previous research in this (Kowalski & Oates, 1993). Without the support of the school board, a superintendent is less likely to take risks that could yield academic results due to the fear of losing his/her job. With the average tenure of a superintendent currently 2 to 3 years, this is a realistic fear.

Furthermore, school board support is directly related to additional findings in this study. These superintendents were able to exercise power in regard to placement of individuals in positions of leadership (i.e., district administrators and principals) due to the support and freedom in decision making extended from the school board. By allowing the

superintendents to place individuals in strategic positions they are guaranteed to align self-chosen individuals to positions that greatly influence instructional leadership. This authority vested by these school boards into their respective superintendents permitted them to replace administrative team members who were not instructionally oriented and/or committed to the instructional vision of the district superintendent.

Previous studies have demonstrated the importance of shared decision making with the superintendency and the school board, yet this study exceeds this interaction with decision making freedom extended to the superintendent. This finding should lead to new research into the dynamics of decision-making freedom for the superintendent and effective schools.

Fifth, each of the superintendents in this study used assessment and evaluation techniques to determine if the district's school performance was meeting articulated expectations. Their employment of curricular designed principal evaluation, feedback from district personnel, standardized test scores and district instructional programs. This information provided the superintendents in this study with feedback mechanisms on the success of their programs. This type of evaluation is consistent with research in this area (Coleman and LaRocque, 1990; Murphy and Hallinger, 1986).

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