

The School Board President's Perception of the District Superintendent: Applying the Lenses of Social
Influence and Social Style

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Abstract

This exploratory study used components found in social influence theory and social style to examine the school board president's perceptions of the district superintendent's ability to influence the construction of the board agenda and voting decisions made by school boards in 131 randomly chosen school districts. Social influence theory and social style suggest that credibility, social attractiveness, assertiveness, and emotiveness are effective and compelling elements of influence. Results from this study suggest that favorable board decision making for superintendent-recommended action items is closely related to the superintendent's trustworthiness (perceived use of skills and knowledge for the good of the district), expertise (specialized knowledge of the superintendent) and social attractiveness (perceived compatibility with board presidents). Findings also indicate that the attributes of social influence theory and social style are perceived as essential in the superintendent's ability to develop and maintain a cooperative working relationship with board members and the community.

One of the greatest challenges to education in the 21st century is to reinvent, reshape, and transform educational institutions. Few individuals involved in this Herculean effort would deny the fact that the world of school leadership and policy implementation is increasingly more complex as school leaders are confronted with these transformation imperatives as well as a multitude of contemporary and multifaceted issues vying for attention and precious resources (Cunningham & Cordeiro, 2000). At the center of this endeavor we find district superintendents immersed in a vague and uncomfortable harmony of opposing forces (G. R. Carter & Cunningham, 1997). As educational reform shifts in form and texture (Murphy, 1990), strongly voiced arguments for issues such as site-based management, teacher empowerment, and parental choice, coupled with reforms aimed at school curriculum, graduation requirements, the testing of teachers and students, and a growing disenchantment with bureaucratic forms of school management have brought significant challenges to the superintendents' authority and leadership (Grogan, 1996; M. S. Norton, Webb, Dlugosh, & Sybouts, 1996). Responding to calls for greater involvement of school administrators, teachers, and parents, district leaders often find themselves in a position where they must support and facilitate school-based decisions, shared leadership, and other site-based approaches to school leadership (G. R. Carter & Cunningham, 1997; Crowson, 1987). One prominent example is the Goals 2000 legislation, which requires school leaders to build broad-based panels and develop programs to enable community members to participate in leadership decision making (Riley, 1994). As superintendents manage all of these various national, state, and local pressures for improving school performance, a critical factor in their ability to be successful is their relationship with the local school board (G. R. Carter & Cunningham, 1997; D. G. Carter, Glass, & Hord, 1993; Danzberger, 1993; Danzberger, Kirst, & Usdan, 1992; McCurdy, 1992). Research has indicated that the association of the district superintendent and board of education has far-reaching leadership and policy implications that greatly affect the quality of a district's educational program (McCurdy, 1992; Nygren, 1992; Odden, 1995). Blumberg and Blumberg (1985) suggest that the most critical association in running a school system is the interplay between the superintendent and board of education.

To the casual observer, the roles that the superintendent and board of education play in the leadership and governance of the district appear well-defined, yet a myriad of investigations examining the subtleties and dynamics of this relationship and the impact it has on the leadership of the school organization indicate otherwise (Campbell & Greene, 1994; Carpenter, 1987; Crowson, 1987; Danzberger, 1993; Glass, 1992; Iannaccone & Lutz, 1994; Kowalski, 1999; McCurdy, 1992; M. S. Norton et al., 1996; Tallerico, 1989). Studies have consistently and clearly articulated that a poor relationship between the superintendent and the board of education deters school improvement (Danzberger et al., 1992), affects the quality of educational programs (Nygren, 1992), weakens district stability and morale (Renchler, 1992), impedes

critical reform efforts such as district restructuring (Konnert & Augenstein, 1995), reduces collaborative visioning and long-range planning (Kowalski, 1999), causes discontent and erodes the effectiveness of the school division (Cunningham & Cordeiro, 2000), and eventually results in an increase in the “revolving door syndrome” of district leaders (G. R. Carter & Cunningham, 1997; Renchler, 1992).

Research conducted on superintendents has attributed a variety of personal and political factors for their success or failure in their relationship with the board of education. Many conclude that interpersonal skills such as communication, empathy, trust, persuasiveness, and clarity of role are essential in the development and maintenance of a cooperative relationship between the superintendent and board of education (Berg, 1996; Bratlein & Walters, 1999; G. R. Carter & Cunningham, 1997; Feuerstein & Opfer, 1998; Glass, 1992; Hoyle, English, & Steffy, 1998; Kowalski, 1999; McCurdy, 1992; Tallericco, 1989; Yukl, 1994). Scholarship in this area has also pointed to the fact that a superintendent’s effectiveness is largely dependent on his or her ability to influence critical policy decisions (Blumberg, 1985; Crowson, 1987; Danzberger et al., 1992; Zeigler, Jennings, & Peak, 1974; Zeigler, Tucker, & Wilson, 1977). Therefore, the success of the superintendent in leading schools in an era of shared decision making will require interpersonal skills that foster the superintendent’s ability to define, recommend, and support on policy issues and decisions facing the district.

BOARD PRESIDENT AND SUPERINTENDENT

Although the school board president plays an integral role in facilitating and modulating the relationship of the district superintendent and the board of education, empirical literature examining this relationship is scant. Studies that have been conducted indicate that little attention has been given to examining how district superintendents and school board presidents interact with each other in attending to their respective duties and responsibilities in leading the school organization (Allison, 1991; Allison, Allison, & McHenry, 1995). Some of what we know and have operationalized about the board president and superintendent relationship is derived from the popular/professional literature and profiles of board presidents (Campbell & Greene, 1994; Castilla, 1994; Council, 1994; Feistritz, 1992; Freund, 1988; McCurdy, 1992; Smoley, 1999). Although the scarcity of research in the extant literature may limit our understanding of the complexity of these roles, work that has looked at this relationship clearly indicates the significance of these critical actors in district governance.

Understanding the perceptions of school board chairmen and superintendents is important because of their close working relationship. Poor relations between these groups have the

potential to compromise the representative functions of the school board and hinder the school district's ability to serve the community. (Feuerstein & Opfer, 1998, p. 376)

In professional (Campbell & Greene, 1994; Castilla, 1994; Council, 1994, Freund, 1988; McCurdy, 1992) and empirical literature (Allison, 1991; Allison et al., 1995; Carpenter, 1987; Deem, Brehone, & Heath, 1995; Feuerstein & Opfer, 1998; Goldhammer, 1964; Holdaway & Genge, 1995; Lunenburg & Ornstein, 1996; Stewart, 1991), the board president and superintendent relationship is lauded as important in decision making in the area of school governance. The professional literature has primarily discussed the role and responsibilities of the school board president with specific duties or anecdotal recommendations (Campbell & Greene, 1994; Castilla, 1994; Council, 1994; Feistritzer, 1992; Freund, 1988; Smoley, 1999). In general, the board president meets and works closely with the superintendent in preparing the district's board meeting agenda. They are responsible to lead and facilitate the public and private (executive) board meeting sessions, encourage democratic participation of all board members, handle arguments or difficult board members, and keep and publish the board minutes (Feistritzer, 1992).

While acknowledging these technical roles and responsibilities, much of the current empirical literature concentrates on the potential influence of the board president and superintendent relationship centered within the context of the board meeting. Clearly, the board president is responsible for the integrity of the board process, including the effectiveness of meetings and the board's adherence to its own rules (Carver, 1991; Deem et al., 1995; Goldhammer, 1964). School board meetings are actually control systems that bring school resources into line with school policies (Lunenburg & Ornstein, 1996). Through the board president's leadership of these meetings, they shape much of what happens in the board's decision making, allocation of resources, and transaction of business facing the district. In line with these responsibilities, research has pointed to the fact that the president's position requires skilled handling of group process and decision making (Carver, 1991). To the extent that they are ineffective in this role, the board is likely to flounder, individual members may vie for informal leadership, the process of policy determination may become erratic and confused (Goldhammer, 1964), and meetings become marked by destructive and frequent use of episodic power (Deem et al., 1995). It is also evident from the work in this area that in attending to their responsibilities, the board president is more likely than other board members to have frequent communication with the superintendent outside of the formal board meeting (Allison, 1991; Goldhammer, 1964; Stewart, 1991). Albeit

that the content of these communications may vary, Allison et al. (1995) found that the most consistent subject discussed in these meetings was the form and content of the agenda for the upcoming board meeting. They also found that the second most frequent description of these discussions centered on rehearsals for the formal meeting by going over each agenda item in detail, anticipating questions, and preparing responses.

Given the fact that in many school districts board presidents and superintendents may communicate about the content and form of the board agenda, we know that a good deal of the policy considerations facing boards of education are influenced by and are responsive to internal and external factors (Blumberg & Blumberg, 1985; Boyd, 1976; Danzberger et al., 1992; Deem et al., 1995; Feuerstein & Opfer, 1998; Goldhammer, 1964; Odden, 1995; Zeigler et al., 1974). Research has repeatedly articulated that local boards of education are dependent on an array of external social, economic, and political influences, and their decisions are often predicated on consideration of a host of factors over which they have little or no control (Boyd, 1976; McCarty & Ramsey, 1971; Usdan, 1975). Practical realities suggest that these multiple and frequently competing perspectives and expectations often represent a bewildering array of administrative, legislative, and community priorities that play a major role in the development of local policies (Björk, 2001) and subsequently affect the type and scope of issues faced by a district. Yet even with the ambiguity of numerous competing pressures, superintendents and board presidents are ostensibly responsible for the content and format of the board agenda. Extant literature supports the notion that the superintendent and board president devote considerable time and thought in working together in developing and setting the agenda for formal board meetings and are recognized as key actors in the decision-making and agenda-setting processes (Allison et al., 1995; Deem et al., 1995).

BOARD AGENDA

Although the school board meeting agenda may not come to mind as a significant factor in district leadership and in the establishment and maintenance of good board-superintendent relationships, professional and empirical literature in the area indicate otherwise (Carpenter, 1987; Castilla, 1994; Glass, 1992; Konnert & Augenstein, 1995; McCurdy, 1992; Zeigler et al., 1977). Research supports the notion that important activities and conversations in local districts are not always reflected in the formal parliamentary board agenda (Zeigler et al., 1977) or board minutes (Nowakowski & First, 1989). Acknowledging the limitations of these documents,

investigators have used formal (parliamentary) board meeting agendas (Carpenter, 1987; Zeigler et al., 1974, 1977) as well as board meeting minutes (Lutz, 1977; Nowakowski & First, 1989; Scribner & Englert, 1977) in their examinations of school board behavior. The formal or parliamentary board agenda plays a significant role for several reasons. In the larger scheme of local governance, the board agenda represents a translation of federal and state mandates into local policy action (Shannon, 1992). It is the most visible means of defining policy issues to be presented and adopted publicly (Zeigler et al., 1974), as well as projecting an image of the school board and the superintendent in their ability to get the school business done efficiently, effectively, and promptly (Konnert & Augenstein, 1995; McCurdy, 1992). The board agenda also provides a framework mechanism for structuring a district's ideology and locus of power as well as providing an important source of coalition building within a district (Carpenter, 1987). Finally, "The power to limit the topics and policy alternatives that will be entertained gives the controller of the agenda considerable power in determining what policies will be adopted" (Zeigler et al., 1977, p. 241). As the 1986 Institute for Educational Leadership study suggests, "Those who control agendas define problems and issues that will receive local district attention" (p. 30).

Empirical findings suggest that a relational dynamic of the superintendent and board president based on respect and trust is essential for effective school governance and progress toward educational reforms (Allison et al., 1995; Carpenter, 1987; Deem et al., 1995; Feuerstein & Opfer, 1998; Goldhammer, 1964). Their collaborative efforts in the development of the board agenda, the board president's role in facilitating and modulating the relationship of the district superintendent with the board of education, and their leadership of the board meetings are foundational elements in the school board's ability to conduct the business of the district. Therefore, it is the school board president's perception of the district superintendent's social influence and social style and its effect on setting the board agenda and voting decisions made by the board of education that we investigated. This exploratory study used school board agendas as a measure of the superintendent's ability to influence board agenda items and board decision making as reflected in board voting for superintendent-recommended items. We were particularly interested in investigating the personal elements of trust, expertness, and social attractiveness as well as the social style of the superintendent related to his or her effectiveness in setting the board agenda and influencing decisions made by the board of education. Specifically, we wanted to know: (a) What is the school board president's perception of the superintendent's social influence on board decision making as represented in board voting? (b) What is the school board president's perception of the superintendent's social style on board decision making as

represented in board voting? and (c) Is there a relationship between the superintendent's perceived social influence and social style on school board decision making?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To understand what makes district leaders effective requires an analysis of the complex web of relationships and influence processes found in all schools (Yukl, 1994). The superintendent as leader builds, motivates, and facilitates groups in collaborative decision making and enables the participatory management of schools (Hoyle, 1989). As the superintendent's role moves from the top of the organizational structure to the center of a complex network of interpersonal relationships, human skills of the district leader become fundamentally more critical (Henkin, 1993). Superintendents generally recognize the importance of interpersonal skills, and boards of education continually confirm the association between human skills and the effectiveness of school executives (Grady & Bryant, 1991; Henkin, 1993). To understand how superintendents are perceived in their interaction with their board presidents in setting the school board agenda and influencing board voting patterns, an analysis of components found in social influence theory and social style was undertaken.

Social Influence Theory

Social influence may be said to take an interactional view of behavior of an individual attempting to persuade another individual. Research on persuasion and attitude change has demonstrated that two general attributes, social attractiveness and credibility, are powerful and effective elements for the communicator to possess (Cooper & Croyle, 1984). The first characteristic, social attractiveness (or referent power), involves the perceived similarity of one person to another based in part on similar experiences and background and the desire of that person to be like the other (Goodyear & Robyak, 1981; Martin, 1978; Strong, 1968). The second characteristic, credibility, has two components, trustworthiness and expertness. Trustworthiness is the perceived motivation of a communicator to use his or her knowledge and skill for the good of the audience (Strong, 1968), whereas expertness is the perception that the communicator possesses specialized knowledge or skills to solve a problem (Martin, 1978; Strong, 1968; Strong & Schmidt, 1970).

Credibility and social attractiveness influence audiences in two ways, both of which may be important to school leadership. First, audiences use a communicator's credibility and

attractiveness as a heuristic to establish the validity of persuasive messages (Chaiken & Stangor, 1987). Second, a communicator's credibility and attractiveness enhance innovation by minimizing opposition to discrepant viewpoints between the change agent and the audience (Strong & Claiborn, 1982). Research conducted by Strong (1968) and Strong and Dixon (1971) applied these findings in examining the dyadic relationship between counselors and clients and the counselor's ability to persuade the client. The association between a superintendent and board president or any other member of the board of education is a dyadic relationship as each attempts to persuade the other in their collaborative leadership of the district. Thus, general principles of persuasion and social influence may have implications for superintendents as they attempt to influence board presidents and/or other members of the school board in the leadership and reform of their organizations.

In addition to dyadic interactions, social influence theory has been used to investigate organizational behavior (Kerr, Olson, Pace, & Claiborn, 1986; Rinehart, Short, Short, & Eckley, 1998). Findings from these studies suggest that communicator persuasion and audience reaction may have implications for restructuring schools. These results also propose that a communicator improves the chances of influencing the audience by being perceived as knowledgeable, altruistic in action, and compatible; however, empirical studies have not been reported that support this supposition.

Social Style

Social style can conceptually be viewed as distinct from other style systems in the communication literature, namely communicator style. Whereas communicator style (R. Norton, 1983) identifies a complex of behavioral indices that are self-referenced by individuals, social style is concerned with observable (other-perceived) communication behaviors (Lashbrook, Snavelly, & Sullivan, 1977; Snavelly & Clatterbuck, 1980; Snavelly & McNeill, 1997; Snavelly & Walters, 1983). Literature in this area defines social style as a concept of behavior denoting a particular pattern of actions that others can observe and agree on for describing a person's behavior (Snavelly & Walters, 1983). Findings from research have resulted in the development of two primary dimensions of social style that may be operationalized as perceived levels of assertiveness and emotiveness (Snavelly, 1981; Snavelly & McNeill, 1997; Snavelly & Walters, 1983).

The first parameter, assertiveness, has been defined as “the observable and measurable effort one makes to control and influence others” (Wenschlag, 1987, p. 22). The assertive person is one “who shows a tendency to state opinions or beliefs with assurance, confidence, or force” (Snively & McNeill, 1997, p. 3). The assertiveness dimension of behavior is often associated with an individual’s orientation toward tasks. Literature in this area demonstrates that highly assertive individuals are perceived to be more confident, active, ambitious, powerful, competent, and versatile than low-assertive individuals (Lashbrook & Lashbrook, 1979; Lashbrook et al., 1977; Snively & Clatterbuck, 1980).

The second dimension, emotiveness, can be defined as “the degree to which a person is perceived as expressing feelings when relating to others” (Wenschlag, 1987, p. 26). Snively (1981) described the emotive person as “someone who appears to express emotional states through verbal and nonverbal behavior” (p. 133). Emotiveness does not indicate the amount of emotion an individual experiences, but rather the amount of emotion one demonstrates during interaction with others (Snively & McNeill, 1997). The research on emotiveness suggests that a number of positive evaluations are associated with styles that are more emotive. Sullivan’s (1977) study of coworker relationships indicated that emotiveness was positively correlated with versatility, trust, sociability, interpersonal solidarity, composure, and social attraction. Research in this area has found positive correlations between the dimension of emotiveness and the perceptions of trust, versatility, and individual responsiveness (Lashbrook & Lashbrook, 1979; Lashbrook et al., 1977; Snively & McNeill, 1997; Snively & Walters, 1983).

Commonalities of the Two Constructs

It is now axiomatic that the effectiveness and success of a leader is reliant on the interaction and integration of numerous interpersonal relationships and human skills (Grady & Bryant, 1991; Henkin, 1993). Although research has clearly demonstrated that leadership effectiveness is often reliant on others’ perceptions of the leader’s behavior and communication (Cooper & Croyle, 1984; Dorn, 1986; Johnson & Payne, 1997; Rinehart et al., 1998; Snively & Walters, 1983; Strong, 1968; Yukl, 1994), the search for ways to understand the complexity of the interactive dynamic is an evolving process. An alternative conceptualization of the two constructs used in this investigation—social influence theory and social style—lead to a theoretical understanding of their commonalities. The characteristics of credibility (e.g., expertness and trustworthiness) and social attractiveness (Cooper & Croyle, 1984; Rinehart et al., 1998; Strong, 1968) and

assertiveness and emotiveness (Snaveley, 1978; Snaveley & McNeill, 1997; Snaveley & Walters, 1983; Walters, 1981) have been used to examine dyadic interactions as well as organizational behavior. For example, using the three dimensions found in social influence theory, Rinehart et al. (1998) examined school leaders (principals) from the perspectives of their subordinates (teachers) and concluded that teacher participation can be traced to the relationship between teachers and principals and that attractiveness and trustworthiness were significant predictors of their involvement in decision making. In their study of social style and communication competence of superintendents in Ohio, Snaveley and Walters (1983) found that superintendents who were more emotive and amiable were perceived as more competent than superintendents who did not communicate their emotional states.

Although findings from studies in each of these areas indicate a relationship in the views and concepts of these dimensions, only a limited number of studies have integrated or utilized one or more of these frameworks in the examination of leader/follower behavior (Johnson & Payne, 1997; Rinehart et al., 1998; Snaveley & Walters 1983). In each of these studies, the focus was on followers' perceptions of the leader's behavior and how these perceptions influenced their (the followers') attitudes and compliance. A critical juncture in these conceptualizations lies in the importance of the leader's social style as it portrays his or her trustworthiness and credibility (Snaveley, 1978; Sullivan, 1977), and this in turn determines the acceptability of the communicator (leader) as well as the success of his or her influence attempts (Rinehart et al., 1998; Strong, 1968). In this investigation, we explored the school board president's view of the district superintendent's social influence and social style and its effect on setting the board agenda and voting decisions made by the board of education.

METHOD

Sample and Procedures

This study was conducted in two phases. The first phase consisted of a random selection of 250 school districts in a Midwestern state to participate in the investigation. The second phase was composed of in-depth interviews with key informants regarding their perceptions of the social influence and social style of the district superintendent, the board president and superintendent's relationship, and that relationship's effect on board decision making.

Phase 1. The original sample consisted of 250 randomly selected school districts in a Midwestern state. The investigators contacted each superintendent to explain the focus of the study and to request permission to contact the school board secretary and president. On gaining consent from the superintendent, a letter was mailed to each school board secretary requesting copies of the district's three most recent school board agendas. All action items for individual districts were organized and placed on the Board Action Item Inventory (BAII). The BAII chronicles all board agenda items, who recommended their inclusion on the agenda, and the voting action taken by board members (see the appendix).

The investigators then contacted the school board presidents by letter requesting their participation and explaining the focus of the study as well as the questionnaire and board action item inventory that would be completed. Of the 250 board presidents contacted, 131 useable questionnaires and action item inventories were returned, which yielded a total response rate of 52%. These 131 districts represent 25% of all school districts in this Midwestern state ($N = 524$). The demographic characteristics of the school districts in the sample—including board president's gender, age, educational level, tenure as a member of the school board and as board president; student population of the district; gender of superintendent; and relationship of the board president to the superintendent—are presented in Table 1.

Instruments

School board presidents were asked to respond to two questionnaires: (a) Transactional Style Measurement Scale (TSM) and (b) the Superintendent Rating Form Quick Score (SRQS). They were also instructed to complete the BAII. The TSM is a 38-item instrument that measures two primary dimensions of social style, assertiveness and emotiveness (Snaveley & McNeill, 1997). A Likert-type scale that ranges from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) is used to collect the reactions. The TSM, based on the work of Snaveley (1981), Phelps and Snaveley (1980), Snaveley and Walters (1983), and Snaveley and McNeill (1997), is designed to measure other perceived human interactive behavior. A factor analytic investigation revealed two dimensions that underlie the construct of social style—assertiveness and emotiveness. The dimensions and internal consistency estimates (coefficient alpha) are assertiveness (.86) and emotiveness (.83). As a composite, the 38 items have a reliability estimate of (.88). Representative examples of items on the TSM include (a) “This person is a sociable person,” (b) “This person is willing to relate to others,” (c) “This person usually takes charge,” and (d) “This person seems to want to control situations.”

Insert Table 1

The SRQS is a 36-item semantic differential scale that measures three social influence dimensions: expertness, attractiveness, and trustworthiness. The SRQS was adapted from a rating scale used to study building principals' social influence and teacher empowerment (Rinehart et al., 1998) and a rating scale of social influence (Barak, 1979; Barak & LaCrosse, 1977) based on the work of Strong (1968) that was designed to measure clients' perceptions of their counselors' abilities to persuade. A few examples of the bipolar items on the scale are agreeable-disagreeable, attractive-unattractive, honest-dishonest, and indifferent-enthusiastic. Barak (1979) reported mean reliabilities for expertness, attractiveness, and trustworthiness to be .87, .85, and .91, respectively. He also found moderate intercorrelations between the scales, which indicated convergent and divergent validity. LaCrosse (1980) established predictive validity between persuasiveness and counseling outcomes.

The style of school board agendas takes many forms and is usually organized and individualized according to the preferences of the superintendent and board of education. Therefore, we needed to create a standardized form to gather information on board action items and board voting. To categorize and itemize all action items placed on individual district agendas, we designed the BAI. The BAI permitted us to document the types of agenda items addressed by the participating districts. It also records who recommended each item to be placed on the agenda, the patterns of board voting, and assesses the board's support for superintendent-recommended action items. Additionally, the BAI allowed us to gather demographic data on the age, gender, educational level, term of office of the school board, and year(s) as board president. An example of the BAI is presented in the appendix. Each inventory lists action items that have appeared on the three most recent open meeting agendas in the individual school districts participating in this study. The date of the board meeting and all of the action items for that meeting are listed in a column on the left margin. After each agenda item, the board president was instructed to indicate who requested each of the items to appear on the school board agenda (i.e., superintendent, board president, or other board member) and then indicate whether the board accepted, rejected, or modified the superintendent's recommendation for that item.

Interviews

Phase 2. On completion and collection of the instruments and board action item inventories, a discriminate sample of seven key informants (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Strauss & Corbin, 1990)—five school board presidents and two executive directors at the state school board association—were chosen and participated in in-depth, semistructured interviews that investigated perceptions of social influence and social style of the superintendent, the superintendent and school board president's relationship, and that relationship's effect on school board agenda construction and board decision making. Examples of questions posed to the participants include: (a) How influential is the district superintendent in the decision-making process of the board of education? In what ways is the superintendent influential? (b) Are there characteristics that support the superintendent in leading the school district? What would those characteristics be? (c) What is your (the board president) and the superintendent's role in generating the board agenda? and (d) How important is your (the board president) and the superintendent's relationship in the leadership of the district? In what ways does this relationship influence board decision making?

Analysis

Quantitative data. In this study, the school board president was chosen as the unit of analysis to investigate individual perceptions. School board presidents ($n = 131$) in randomly chosen school districts throughout a Midwestern state responded to the 38 items on the TSM and the 36 items on the SRQS as well as completing the BAI. The TSM and SRQS instruments were developed to measure constructs that contain subscales or components. For example, the TSM yielded an overall measure of social style and the two components of assertiveness and emotiveness. Likewise, the SRQS consisted of an overall composite of persuasiveness and the three factors of social attractiveness, trustworthiness, and credibility. The BAI provided an overall measure of the number, type, and voting patterns of participating school boards. The percentage of affirmative board decisions on superintendent-recommended and superintendent-supported action items was used as the dependent variable for this investigation.

Data from responding board presidents were used to investigate the following three research questions. The first question investigated the relationship between board president perceptions of board decision making as represented by board voting and their superintendent's expertness, trustworthiness, and social attractiveness. The second question investigated the relationship between board president perceptions of board decision making and the superintendent's social style, and the third question examined whether there was a relationship between the superintendent's social influence and social style in school board

decision making. A composite was formed for each of the variables, and they were submitted to a regression analysis with board decision making on superintendent-recommended and superintendent-supported action items as the dependent variable and expertness, trustworthiness, attractiveness, assertiveness, and emotiveness as the independent variables.

Qualitative data. All interviews were conducted by the first author. All but three were conducted in person, and all were audiotaped and transcribed. Data collection and analysis occurred simultaneously and continued throughout this part of the study (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Ongoing analysis influenced the focus and direction of succeeding interviews. Triangulation of findings was achieved by the use of data sources provided by participants as well as by independent data analysis by both authors (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Patton, 1990). To facilitate some form of reciprocity with study participants, transcribed interviews were returned to each individual for clarification, review, and feedback (Marshall & Rossman, 1989; Peshkin, 1993; Seidman, 1991). The process of open and axial coding (Strauss, 1987; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) guided our analytic procedures, resulting in inductively derived explanatory themes. Coding processes included identifying concepts embedded within the data, organizing discrete concepts into categories, defining the properties and dimensions of categories, and linking them according to their properties and dimensions into broad, explanatory themes.

RESULTS

Descriptive statistics that examine board presidents' ratings on the independent variables based on district size, tenure, and educational level of the board president, as well as the gender of the district superintendent, were conducted. Although the overall results revealed some moderate variation in means on each of the independent variables, we did uncover some interesting differences in the board president's perceptions based on a few of the demographic variables. For example, board president tenure seemed to influence their perceptions of the district superintendent on these behavioral measures. Mean scores for the social attractiveness ($M = 73.0, SD = 3.78$), expertise ($M = 78.5, SD = 3.45$), trustworthiness ($M = 76.0, SD = 0.70$), and emotiveness ($M = 32.2, SD = 3.76$) were considerably higher for superintendents who work with experienced board presidents (see Figure 1).

Familiarity of the board president with the superintendent was another area that shaped board president perceptions (see Figure 2). On the questionnaire, board presidents were asked to rate how well they knew the superintendent on a 6-item Likert-type scale. The scale ranged from 1 (*not well at all*) to 6 (*very well*).

Superintendent scores on each subscale were prominently lower when working with board presidents who indicated that they did not know the superintendent well. In fact, on two of the measures, trustworthiness ($M = 61.6, SD = 18.72$) and emotiveness ($M = 22.0, SD = 3.80$), superintendents were rated nearly one standard deviation below the mean. Conversely, board presidents who indicated that they knew the superintendent very well rated them higher in the areas of social attractiveness ($M = 73.0, SD = 7.2$), trustworthiness ($M = 80.2, SD = 5.56$), expertise ($M = 80.0, SD = 3.78$), and emotiveness ($M = 31.0, SD = 4.32$).

Insert Figure 1

Finally, because a growing body of research on women in school administration suggests the characteristics of female administrators may favor leading and sustaining reform initiatives (Brunner, 1986; Glass, Björk, & Brunner, 2000; Grogan, 1996) we compared board presidents' perceptions of female and male administrators on each of the independent variables (see Figure 3), as well as voting patterns (see Figure 4).

Insert Figure 2

Although the overall mean scores were not substantially different, male superintendents ($n = 128$) were rated higher in the area of social attractiveness ($M = 65.2, SD = 10.1$), expertise ($M = 71.3, SD = 8.0$), trustworthiness ($M = 72.3, SD = 10.4$), and emotiveness ($M = 27.4, SD = 5.1$) by the board presidents in this sample. On the other hand, board presidents did perceive female superintendents ($n = 11$) as somewhat more assertive than their male counterparts ($M = 38.5, SD = 6.2$).

In this investigation, we explored superintendents' social influence and social style and its effect on setting the board agenda and voting decisions made by the board of education. When examining voting patterns we did notice a difference along gender lines. Although our sample of female superintendents is relatively small ($n = 11$), we found voting patterns in districts led by women to be different than in districts led by their male counterparts. The average passage rate of superintendent-recommended agenda items in districts led by women was 75.4%, whereas in districts headed by males the average passage rate was 82%, which is slightly higher than the overall passage rate of 81.5% (see Figure 4).

Insert Figures 3 &4

The dependent variable for this study was the percentage of affirmative board decisions on superintendent-recommended and superintendent-supported action items ($M = 81.14$, $SD = 20.27$). Descriptive statistics for the five independent variables, including Pearson product-moment correlations, were conducted and are presented in Table 2. Inspection of these correlation coefficients indicates a significant correlation among the five variables with one exception—assertiveness. For example, there were high correlations between social attractiveness and expertness ($r = .71$, $p < .01$), between social attractiveness and trustworthiness ($r = .78$, $p < .01$), between expertness and trustworthiness ($r = .79$, $p < .01$), and between social attractiveness and emotiveness ($r = .83$, $p < .01$). Moderate correlations existed between trustworthiness and emotiveness ($r = .64$, $p < .01$) and between expertness and emotiveness ($r = .54$, $p < .01$). Assertiveness was inversely related to all the other variables and slightly correlated with trustworthiness ($r = -.29$, $p < .01$). Prior to interpreting the results of the regression analysis, the five independent variables were examined for potential multicollinearity. Although there were several moderate to high bivariate intercorrelations, the tolerance values for all variables exceeded the 0.1 cutoff value. Additionally, all values for variance inflation factors (VIF) were safely below the critical value of 10. These results indicate that multicollinearity was not a problem within this regression analysis (Pedhazur, 1997; Stevens, 1992).

Results of the regression analysis are displayed in Table 3. These findings indicate a nonsignificant predictable relationship, $R^2 = .026$, $F(5, 115) = .618$, $p = .686$, between the five independent variables and the dependent variable. This value for R^2 —along with its associated F test—indicates that the combination of superintendent’s social attractiveness, expertness, trustworthiness, assertiveness, and emotiveness did not significantly predict board decision making as represented by board voting on superintendent-recommended and superintendent-supported action items. Furthermore, the results of individual significance tests for the five predictor variables demonstrate the lack of a significant predictable relationship between each predictor and the dependent variable. In other words, these variables—individually or in combination—are not able to accurately predict board decision making on superintendent-recommended and superintendent-supported action items.

Interview Data

The focus of our investigation was to understand the relationship between the board president perceptions of the superintendent's expertness, social attractiveness, trustworthiness, assertiveness, and emotiveness and their effect on board decision making. Our initial perspective, supported by our administrative experience and previous work in this area, would indicate that these factors are important in superintendent-board relations and particularly in the success of the superintendent in articulating policy recommendations resulting in the board of education's acceptance of those recommendations.

Insert Tables 2 & 3

To clarify the preliminary findings of this investigation, we conducted in-depth, semistructured interviews with seven key informants (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). Five were board presidents who had participated in the first phase of the study. Responses from the board presidents, particularly around the areas of superintendent influence, board agenda setting, and board president and superintendent relationships, were generally consistent. Yet they also indicated the importance and reliance of a relational dynamic with the superintendent in the leadership of the district. Because of their responses, we felt compelled to interview individuals who would be in a position to clarify issues surrounding these leadership issues. Therefore, we decided to triangulate the perceptions of these board presidents with a discriminate sample (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) of two directors from the state school board association. Both of the directors are involved in providing training and professional development for boards throughout the state. As a result of their work with numerous boards, board presidents, and superintendents, we felt that these individuals would be in a position to address whether the perceptions of the board presidents we interviewed were specific to their local districts or resonated of more general board-superintendent practices and perceptions statewide.

DISCUSSION

First, some caveats. The findings and conclusions of this study are limited in their generalizability because they were derived from an exploratory investigation of the perceptions and self-reports of 131 school board presidents and interviews with seven key informants. Participating districts were randomly

chosen and represent various district types (e.g., rural, suburban, and urban) as well as student populations (from less than 1,000 to 10,000 or more), yet they may not be representative of the larger population of districts. Therefore, some error may have been introduced into the findings due to the sampling in the quantitative and qualitative procedures. Additionally, although we indicate as many interpretations of the data in the report as possible, there may be other plausible explanations for the data that are not reported here.

Findings

Quantitative data. The research questions were concerned with the school board president's perception of the superintendent's social influence and social style on board decision making as represented in board voting. This investigation also attempted to determine whether a relationship between the characteristics of social influence and social style had an effect on school board decision making.

The superintendent's reputation and job survival are largely dependent on others' perceptions of his or her credibility as well as his or her ability to influence critical policy decisions. An examination of the means indicates that superintendents in this study were perceived as possessing moderate to strong characteristics of social attractiveness ($M = 65.3, SD = 10.0$), trustworthiness ($M = 72.1, SD = 10.4$), and expertise ($M = 71.2, SD = 8.1$). Means also reveal that superintendents received moderate to high ratings on the subscales of assertiveness ($M = 32.4, SD = 6.2$) and emotiveness ($M = 27.4, SD = 5.1$). Although particular demographic characteristics of the board president and superintendent gender did influence certain perceptions, responses by board presidents were generally positive. This seems to imply that these district leaders possess interpersonal skills necessary in developing and maintaining cooperative working relationships with the board president and other members of the board. Given these findings, the question remains, Do the attributes of social attractiveness, trustworthiness, expertise, assertiveness, and emotiveness influence board decision making as represented by board voting on superintendent-recommended and superintendent-supported action items?

This correlational investigation suggests a moderate to strong relationship among the independent variables of social influence and social style and board decision making as indicated in Table 2. Yet findings from the regression analysis as presented in Table 3 clearly indicate the absence of a linear relationship between the components of social influence and social style and the dependent variable. This seems to suggest that the potential existence of a nonlinear relationship among these variables or perhaps

the inclusion of additional variables in the equation would contribute more to the predictability of the dependent variable. One plausible explanation may be a lack of variance in board voting on superintendent-recommended items. The total number of superintendent-recommended board action items for all districts was 2,772. The overall passage rate for these items was nearly 88%. This relatively high passage rate resulted in a lack of discrepancy in this dependent measure. This lack of variance may have contributed to the impossibility of determining a predictive relationship among these variables.

Although a predictive relationship among the variables was not established, responses by the board presidents provide some insight into the subtleties of the board-superintendent relationship. The interpersonal attributes found in social influence and social style communicate a level of expertise and referent power that enables the development of collaborative relationships and innovation by minimizing opposition (Strong & Claiborn, 1982). Superintendents in these districts received moderate to very high scores in the areas of expertise and referent power (social attractiveness). Descriptive and correlational results indicate a strong association of the attributes found in social influence and social style with the superintendent's ability to define, recommend, and receive board support on a majority of policy issues facing the school district. Subscale measures coupled with the high percentage of affirmative votes by the board on recommended items might also indicate that in the area of board agenda development and articulation, the superintendent-board president dynamic is a collaborative one.

Although we are able to attribute these interpersonal characteristics to the superintendent's influence on local school district governance, these results are limited. To obtain a more thorough understanding of these characteristics and their influence on agenda construction, board decision making, and the board president-superintendent relationship, we employed in-depth interviews with a discriminant sample of key informants.

Qualitative data. Our investigation found some commonalities in perspectives between the informants, but differences were also evident. Using our theoretical framework as a guide, analysis of the data resulted in findings clustered around two central themes: (a) superintendent influence and (b) board president-superintendent relationship.

Superintendent Influence

The board agenda. All of the informants indicated that the superintendent was primarily responsible for setting and controlling the board agenda with little or no input from the board president. This finding is consistent with the responsibilities of the superintendents in small rural districts (Glass, 1992). Yet it diverges from other research that indicates this as a fundamental responsibility of the board president (Allison et al., 1995; Campbell & Greene, 1994; Castilla, 1994; Council, 1994; Lunenburg & Ornstein, 1996). Board presidents indicated that they know of several districts throughout the state that have established annual agendas, and many of the action items found on the monthly agendas are derived from these annual agendas. Responses from board presidents were very candid about this issue and articulated that whereas the superintendent may have control of the construction of the agenda, he or she, along with the board of education, is limited in his or her ability to focus solely on local issues (Nowakowski & First, 1989; Odden, 1995). The words of these board presidents vividly capture this point:

Basically, on our agenda he [the superintendent] controls it. Most things that we vote on are either state mandated or federally mandated things that just have to be done. There is no big discussion about it. (Board President 1)

Do I help set the board agenda? No, not really. He [the superintendent] is basically the one who is going to set it. I don't sit down with him ahead of time and go over the agenda. But as I said he is in tune with the board members, but most of the agenda is his. (Board President 2)

Expertise. Previous work has indicated that expertness (possession of specialized knowledge or skills to solve a problem) demonstrated by leaders creates a heuristic among organizational members and reduces opposition to innovation (Chaiken & Stangor, 1987; Strong & Claiborn, 1982). The literature has also confirmed the association between human skills and the effectiveness of school executives (Grady & Bryant, 1991; Henkin, 1993). In this investigation, the theme of expertise and credibility of the district superintendent as influential of board decision making became readily apparent in a majority of the interviews. Informants consistently articulated that the strength of the superintendent's influence was dependent on two related issues: (a) the scope and type of issue being considered by the school board and (b) personal attributes of the superintendent.

Scope and type of issue. The ability of superintendents to be persuasive seemed to be contingent on the type and scope of issues that were being considered by the school board. Responses from informants indicated that a majority of boards in this state view the superintendent as the authority and educational professional; therefore, recommendations from the superintendent had considerable weight when deliberating on issues that required knowledge, judgment, and experiences in line with what informants perceived as educational issues (e.g., curriculum and instruction, hiring of other administrators, or legal issues). Yet when considering broader and more community-tangible issues (e.g., community initiatives, repair of schools, building new schools, or other personnel issues), the superintendent's role was perceived as primarily framing or initiating discussion and allowing the board of education to make the final decision. This resonated in several comments from informants:

The superintendent's influence will depend a little bit from issue to issue. Some of the things brought to us to take action on are issues affected by new state or federal guidelines. We have to defer that to the superintendent because he has a lot more expertise as to what is needed there than we do. On the other hand, when we get into more of the issues that involve the local community, the superintendent will do the general drafting but the board will do the fine-tuning. (Board President 1)

The superintendent has a lot of influence in that he is in the building every day and he knows. If we're talking about changing the curriculum or something, that is what they [the administrators] do in our building and the board, as a general rule, appreciates the fact that they know what they are talking about. (Board President 3)

The responses of participants led us to examine work that had looked at the dynamic of the board and superintendent in performing these roles and presenting these issues. Our findings clearly indicate that board presidents expect superintendents to be educational leaders with good interpersonal skills but only moderate expectations for leadership in community initiatives. In looking at influence of the community and school board influence vis-à-vis the professional educator, Boyd (1976) reported that internal issues (e.g., curriculum and personnel policy) are perceived by the board and community to be matters where the expertise of the professional educator is thought to be the most relevant, whereas external issues (e.g., school construction, facilities, and school finance) have immediate visible and tangible effects on the community; therefore, the opinion of the public tends to carry as much or more weight than the expertise of the professional. In general, comments regarding board behavior and involvement in a majority of these districts could be classified as proactive supportiveness (Tallerico, 1989). Descriptions by board

presidents in this study indicate their and board members' involvement in school affairs, but also heavy reliance on information and interpretation provided by the superintendent before formal decisions are made.

Personal attributes. Our informants emphasized the importance of interpersonal skills such as communication, honesty, and sharing information as greatly facilitating the superintendent's ability to influence decisions of the board. For example, each of the board presidents we interviewed indicated that the manner, sincerity, and frequency of communication (Berg, 1996; G. R. Carter & Cunningham, 1997; Glass, 1992; Holdaway & Genge, 1995; McCurdy, 1992) of the superintendent with the individual board members was critical in his or her success in leading the district.

I've never known him to lie, stretch the truth, prevaricate, or bend. He is just really up front about everything and to my knowledge has been up front to the board about any considerations that the board should be aware of. He is really good about sharing everything that we need to know about. (Board President 2)

He has never done anything to violate my trust in him. I've never seen him say one thing and then do something else. He knows what he is talking about and we [the board] trust him. If he tells us it's true, then it is true. (Board President 4)

Other responses indicated the importance of possessing professional expertise and responsiveness to the board as critical in the superintendent's ability to influence board decision making.

In my opinion he is extremely knowledgeable. He's got the experience. I know that he knows his stuff. He knows the programs, he knows the funding, and what makes him successful is his responsiveness to the board. (Board President 1)

You quickly gather whether somebody has a handle on a situation or whether they're trying to come up with an answer that is pleasing for you. I think when he makes a decision he's really trying to look at the issue and come up with a process that is well thought out and well founded. (Board President 5)

Board President and Superintendent Relationship

In this complex illustration of district leadership, the idea that influence is unidirectional would be unrealistic. Both the superintendent and board president retain formal authority and therefore are a source of influence and direction (Tallerico, 1989; Yukl, 1994). The relationship of the board president and superintendent is a critical component in the effective operations of the school (Allison, 1991; Council, 1994; Feistritz, 1992; Goldhammer, 1964; Grunert, 1994; Stewart, 1991). In our inquiry, responses from informants echoed the significance of this relationship, but in most cases narrowly framed the importance of this relationship within the boundaries of the board meeting. Examples provided by the informants indicated that occasionally discussing the board agenda with the superintendent, leading meetings, and keeping board meetings focused were their primary roles. In general, board presidents saw their influence in the dynamic of their relationship with the superintendent and the manner and efficiency with which they ran the meetings.

My role is kind of narrow. It is to generate the focus from all the noise that may be going on so that we know exactly what we are talking about and maintain a focus and direction at the meetings. (Board President 3)

None of the board presidents perceived themselves as having considerable influence on agenda construction or board decision making. Individually they indicated that they had credibility with the other board members, but most perceived themselves as only one among equals on a board of seven people: "I have influence only as one person who can try and convince." The following responses capture what board presidents thought about this issue:

I think it is very critical, and I think that most board presidents would verify that. If the board president and superintendent have conflict, poor trust, poor communication, then that is going to be seen at the board meetings and how the board as a whole relates to the superintendent. If you don't have a good relationship with the superintendent, teachers feel a lack of security; central office feels a lack of security; and all that will carry over to the community. (Board President 1)

If my relationship with the superintendent deteriorates or other board members see that there is continual conflict among us, it will affect the business of the board and the district. (Board President 5)

When we queried the directors of the state school board association regarding these perceptions, they indicated that board presidents could play an important role in governance of the district. Yet as one director articulated, they are not seen as having a good deal of influence:

The board president.... I see superintendents looking at the board president as facilitating the board meeting, rather than somebody with expertise. I think the superintendent is seen as extremely influential and the board president is seen as primarily responsible for assisting in the formation of the agenda and then running the meetings. (Director, State School Board Association)

The board agenda is the most visible means of publicly presenting policy issues (Shannon, 1992; Zeigler et al., 1974, 1977), and the agenda setting process reveals a school district's locus of power (Carpenter, 1987). Authors have referred to board presidents as "leaders of leaders" (Castilla, 1994). Moreover, a primary responsibility of the board president's leadership is to work with the superintendent in the establishment of the board agenda (Campbell & Greene, 1994; Council, 1994; Lunenburg & Ornstein, 1996). What we found of particular interest was the seeming abdication of agenda construction on the part of the board presidents as well as their perceptions of their limited influence. Comments from our informants indicated that board presidents did not spend significant amounts of time working with the superintendent in preparing the board agenda. They also indicated that their leadership and influence as board president was confined within the context of their relationship with the superintendent and facilitating the board meeting. What they did say was that the district superintendent is primarily or even solely responsible for the articulation and preparation of the formal board agenda. We may conclude that the superintendent's power to facilitate this critical policy process may result largely from board presidents' perceptions of superintendents as competent, truthful, and responsive to the board president, the school board, and community. These characteristics permitted these superintendents to work effectively with individuals and groups in reducing some opposition in school governance issues that previous literature has referred to as a "fulcrum of conflict" (English, 1992). Although not completely surprising, the superintendent's influence on board decision making was limited by the types of issues facing the board. Yet comments from informants indicated that the school board relied heavily on the superintendent before making formal decisions.

These findings raise pertinent issues regarding participatory democratic leadership of the district (McCurdy, 1992) as well as the board president's role and responsibilities in policy formation (M. S. Norton et al., 1996).

CONCLUSIONS

As superintendents find themselves at the center of a complex web of interpersonal relationships, their ability to define and receive support for often complex policy issues will result in others' perceptions of their expertise, truthfulness, and referent power. Scholars have emphasized the importance of the superintendent's expertise and ability to communicate with board presidents (Campbell & Greene, 1994; Council, 1994; Feistritzer, 1992; Lunenburg & Ornstein, 1996) and boards of education (Glass, Björk, & Brunner, 2000; Hoyle et al., 1998) in leading the school district, while pointing to the fact that it is difficult to establish precisely its impact on decision making within school districts (Zeigler et al., 1974). Therefore, it was the purpose of this exploratory investigation to examine the relationship between superintendent social influence (expertness, social attractiveness, and trustworthiness) and social style (assertiveness and emotiveness) and their influence on board decision making. Results of this investigation provide some empirical evidence about superintendents that may relate to leadership effectiveness, board president–superintendent relations, and board decision making, at least as perceived by 131 school board presidents and seven key informants in this Midwestern state. Findings from this investigation led to three major conclusions.

Research has demonstrated that a communicator improves his or her chances of influencing the audience by being perceived as knowledgeable and altruistic in action (Chaiken & Stangor, 1987; Strong & Claiborn, 1982). However, very little empirical work has been conducted that supports this supposition. Results from this investigation revealed that the attributes of social attractiveness, expertness, trustworthiness, assertiveness, and emotiveness did not significantly predict board decision making as represented by board voting (see Table 3). However, in our examination of the data we did find that tenure of the board president and gender of the superintendent had some influence on president perceptions. The details of our findings indicated that superintendents in these districts were generally perceived as possessing moderate to strong interpersonal skills. Subscale means coupled with the high percentage of affirmative votes by the school board on superintendent-recommended items point to an association of these attributes and the superintendent's ability to define, recommend, and receive support

on policy issues. What these findings also suggest is that the superintendent–board president dynamic may be more collaborative than contentious.

Results from the correlational investigation reveal a moderate to strong relationship between the two sets of variables that measure social influence and social style. These findings echo previous research that examined dyadic interactions and influence of administrators in affecting participation and involvement in decision making (Rinehart et al., 1998) and perceived competence and effectiveness of district administrators (Snaveley & Walters, 1983). However, a limitation of this investigation is the absence of a linear relationship between the components of social influence, social style, and the dependent variable that prevents us from articulating clearly if and to what degree these factors are able to predict board decision making.

Second, the ability of the district superintendent to be influential (e.g., to have the board decide favorably on superintendent-supported agenda items) was related to his or her personal attributes of expertness, trustworthiness, attractiveness, assertiveness, and emotiveness. In other words, informants articulated that these characteristics were perceived as essential in their relationship with board presidents, board members, and the community in their ability to influence board agenda setting and decision making. Although the participating superintendent's success was tied to his or her personal relationship with the board president in combination with the type of issue being considered by the board (Boyd, 1976), results from this investigation may have implications for leadership theory, especially when most educational and school improvement reforms call for the involvement of various constituents in shared decision-making models (Block, Everson, & Guskey, 1995; G. R. Carter & Cunningham, 1997). Research that has focused on the behavior and relationship of the leader and follower has clearly pointed to the importance of trustworthiness, credibility, and attractiveness in effective organizational leadership and involvement of organizational members in shared decision making (Chaleff, 1995; Johnson & Payne, 1997; Kelly, 1992; Kouzes & Posner, 1995; Rinehart et al., 1998; Snaveley & Walters 1983). Moreover, numerous scholars have articulated that the effectiveness of the superintendent is largely dependent on his or her relationship with the board president (Allison et al., 1995; Blumberg & Blumberg, 1985; Crowson, 1987; Deem et al., 1995; Feuerstein & Opfer, 1998; Goldhammer, 1964) and board of education (Berg, 1996; Bratlein & Walters, 1999; G. R. Carter & Cunningham, 1997; Glass, 1992; Kowalski, 1999; McCurdy, 1992; Tallericco, 1989). Therefore, results of this study suggest that it is important for district leaders who wish to maintain a cooperative working relationship with the board president and members of the board to consider the perceptions that these individuals as well as members of the community have of them. They

must also be aware of how these perceptions affect their ability to be viewed as compatible, empathetic, and trustworthy in their leadership of the district organization.

Finally, our findings suggested a third major conclusion about the relationship of the superintendent, the school board president, and issues of district decision making. Although this exploratory investigation was limited in its generalizability, the results from this investigation add to our understanding of the dynamic of the board president–superintendent relationship and board decision making. Both the board president and superintendent retain formal authority and therefore are a source of influence in the leadership of the district (Deem et al., 1995; Feuerstein & Opfer, 1998; Goldhammer, 1964; Holdaway & Genge, 1995; Lunenburg & Ornstein, 1996; Tallericco, 1989). Yet when board presidents discussed their own role and ability to affect board decisions, they indicated that they had very limited influence. This is unique and particularly germane, given the current reform efforts to involve more people in the school district’s decision-making process (Cunningham & Cordeiro, 2000). Board presidents stated that they had very limited influence, especially in the construction of the formal board agenda. Superintendents in those districts controlled the establishment of the board agenda, and to a large extent the board felt increasingly reliant on their expertise to explain or “make sense” of many of the state and federal issues facing the district. Although informants indicated that board presidents possessed credibility with other board members and the community, they were viewed and viewed themselves primarily as individuals (e.g., one of seven board members). Participants also articulated that any influence the board president had was the direct result of his or her relationship with the superintendent. By and large, board presidents felt that their influence was primarily in the manner and efficiency with which they ran the board meetings. In fact, they viewed their facilitation of the board meeting as more significant in leading the district than their personal influence with the superintendent or other individual board members.

These results revealed perceptions regarding issues of the role and autonomy of the board president and superintendent in governing local schools. Although we know that local control is not a zero-sum game (Cohen, 1982), these findings beg the question about participatory decision making at the local school board level. Findings indicated a conceptually different role of the superintendent and school board president in addressing, presenting, and deciding on issues for board consideration.

America’s future is inextricably linked to the quality of its public schools, its K-12 educators, and the leadership of its superintendents. Despite the crush of competing agendas, superintendents must position themselves to cultivate an ethos that enables teaching and leadership through the connections with the board of education and the community (W. G. Carter & Cunningham, 1997). Given the exploratory nature

of this investigation, the board president– superintendent relationship should be considered a starting point in looking at the study of influence in district leadership. The study of persuasion in school leadership is relatively new, and the process by which superintendents influence board presidents and boards of education in decision making is not clearly understood.

Future Research

The research implications presented here are notable given the unanswered questions generated by this investigation. Although the limited findings of this study suggest a relationship of the interpersonal attributes of social influence and social style on board decision making, further qualitative and quantitative investigations of the superintendent/board president/school board relationship should be undertaken. The social influence of the district superintendent raises issues that require different methods and approaches to gain a clearer insight into the leader-follower relationship and school district decision making. The findings of this study were derived from the self-report data of the board president. Further research should recognize and include other sources of influence when investigating relationships of decision making by boards of education. Means for doing so include the employment of interactive data-gathering methods rather than relying solely on behavior measures. In-depth and long-term investigations of superintendent–board president meetings as well as observations of public and executive session meetings might lead to a better understanding of characteristics that influence policy formation and decision making.

Although research has established that educational governance is complicated and influenced by an array of social, economic, and political influences, the professional and empirical literature also emphasizes the importance of the board president and superintendent relationship in this process. Yet findings from this exploratory investigation suggest that board presidents are much more limited in their ability to influence board decision making than previously reported. This certainly begs the question regarding the critical nature of this relationship in policy issues that may lead to operational changes within the district and progress toward educational reform. Although this investigation did not specifically explore the issue of board president and superintendent communication and its effect on policy and operational changes in the district, we believe that inquiry examining whether and to what degree this relationship results in significant decision making and operational changes in the district would contribute to remedying the critical absence of literature in this area.

Our final recommendation is that additional research examining the relationship of the superintendent, board president, and board of education using the conceptual framework of attribution theory be considered (Weiner, 1986). Whereas there is no single theory of attribution (Kelley & Michela, 1980), there are a number of attributional perspectives. People have an innate need to understand and explain their own successes and failures (Martinko, 1995). Primary models of attribution theory describe how people who observe events decide whether a certain individual is personally responsible for an outcome or some situational factor outside the control of the individual (Green & Mitchell, 1979; Lord & Smith, 1983). Board presidents indicated that superintendents possess interpersonal characteristics that facilitate their governance of the school district, yet perceive their role as limited and narrowly defined. The application of the conceptual framework of attribution theory to the dynamic of persuasion and influence in district policy conceptualization and support could strengthen our understanding of issues surrounding role perception and conflict as well as issues of power in the participatory governance of the school district.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics: School Board Presidents and School District Size

	<i>n</i>	%
Gender of board president		
Female	31	24
Male	100	76
Age of board president (years)		
31 to 40	22	17
41 to 50	82	63
51 to 60	24	18
61 or older	3	2
Educational level		
High school	51	39
Associate of arts/technical	11	8
Bachelor of arts/science	45	34
Master's degree	14	11
Doctorate	10	8
Tenure as board member (years)		
2 to 5	39	29
6 to 10	58	47
11 to 15	17	13
15 or more	14	11
Tenure as board president (years)		
Less than 1	43	33
2 to 5	71	54
6 to 10	11	8
11 to 15	5	4
15 or more	1	1
Relationship with superintendent		
Coworker	53	42
Social acquaintance	19	15
Friend	47	37
Close friend	7	6
District student population		
Less than 1,000	72	54
1,001 to 3,000	30	23
3,001 to 5,000	14	11
5,001 to 8,000	6	5
8,001 to 10,000	3	2
10,001 or more	6	5
Gender of superintendent		
Female	12	9
Male	119	91

NOTE: *n* = 131 school board presidents.

Table 2

Means, Standard Deviations, Partial Correlation Coefficients, Reliabilities (on the diagonal), and Variance Inflation Factors (VIF) for Social Attractiveness, Expertness, Trustworthiness, Assertiveness, and Emotiveness

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	VIF
1. Social Attractiveness	65.38	10.01	.85	.71**	.78**	-.19*	.83**	5.34
2. Expertness	71.28	8.17		.87	.79**	-.09	.54**	2.92
3. Trustworthiness	72.19	10.40			.91	-.29**	.64**	3.78
4. Assertiveness	32.44	6.22				.86	-.15	1.16
5. Emotiveness	27.40	5.18					.83	3.25

NOTE: The dependent variable was held constant in this procedure.

* $p = .05$. ** $p = .01$.

Table 3

Regression Coefficients and Associated Tests of Significance for the Regression Analysis of Board Decision Making (voting), Social Attractiveness, Expertness, Trustworthiness, Assertiveness, and Emotiveness

Variable	Coefficient	<i>t</i> Test	<i>p</i> Value
Intercept	.729	3.50	<.01
Social attractiveness	.047	0.220	.826
Expertness	.011	0.072	.943
Trustworthiness	.134	0.748	.456
Assertiveness	.001	0.005	.996
Emotiveness	.179	1.07	.284

NOTE: $R^2 = .026$, $F = .618$, $p = .686$.

Figure 1

Mean Scores of Board President Ratings of Superintendent on Independent Variables by Board President Tenure

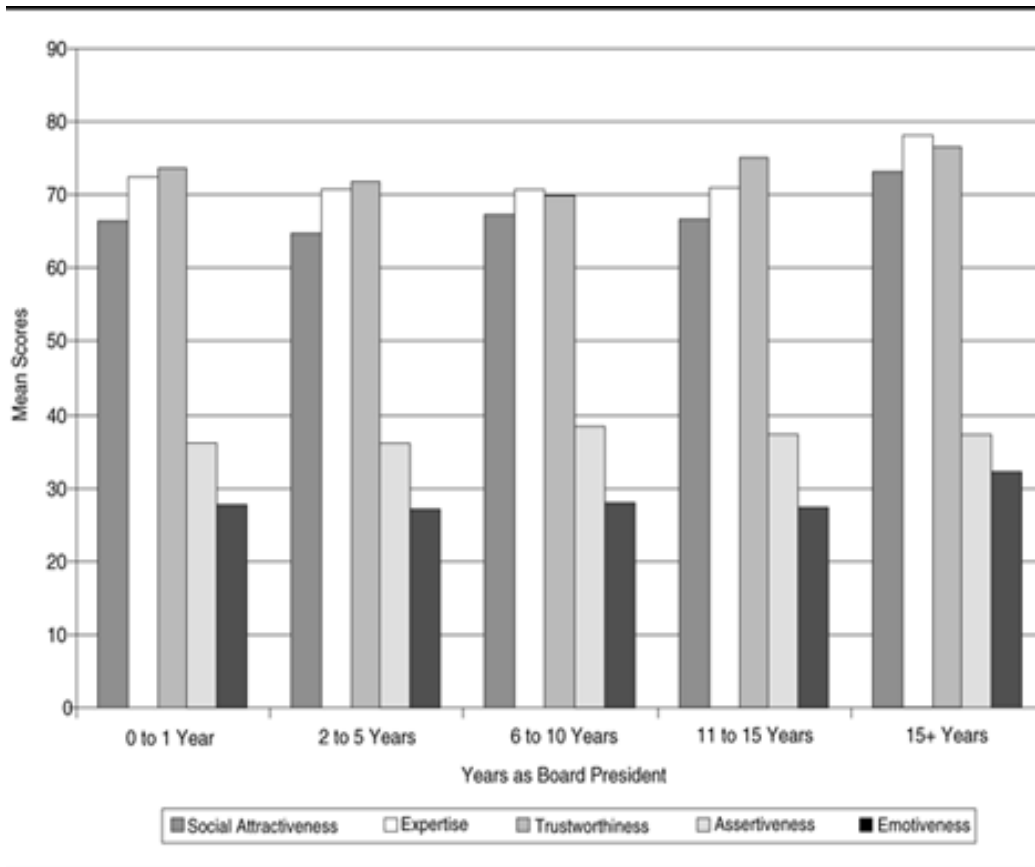


Figure 2

Mean Scores of Subscales on Independent Variables by Board President Familiarity With the Superintendent

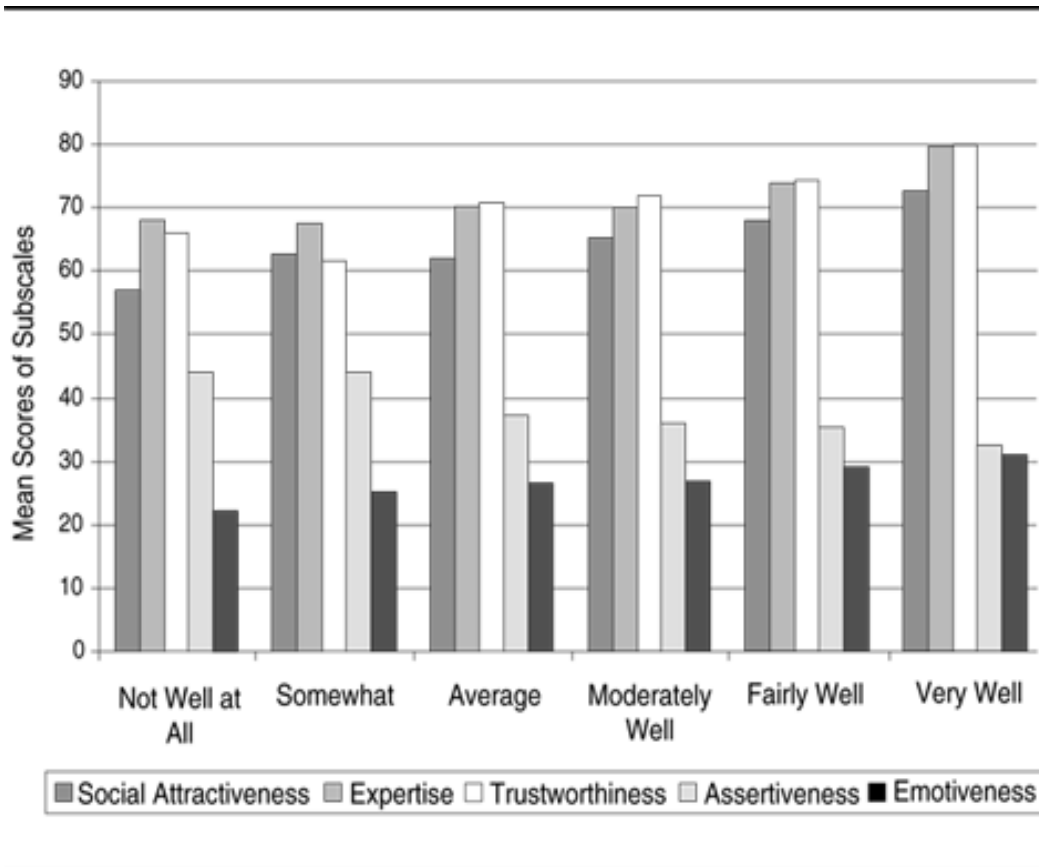


Table 3

Mean Scores of Board President Ratings on Independent Variables by Gender

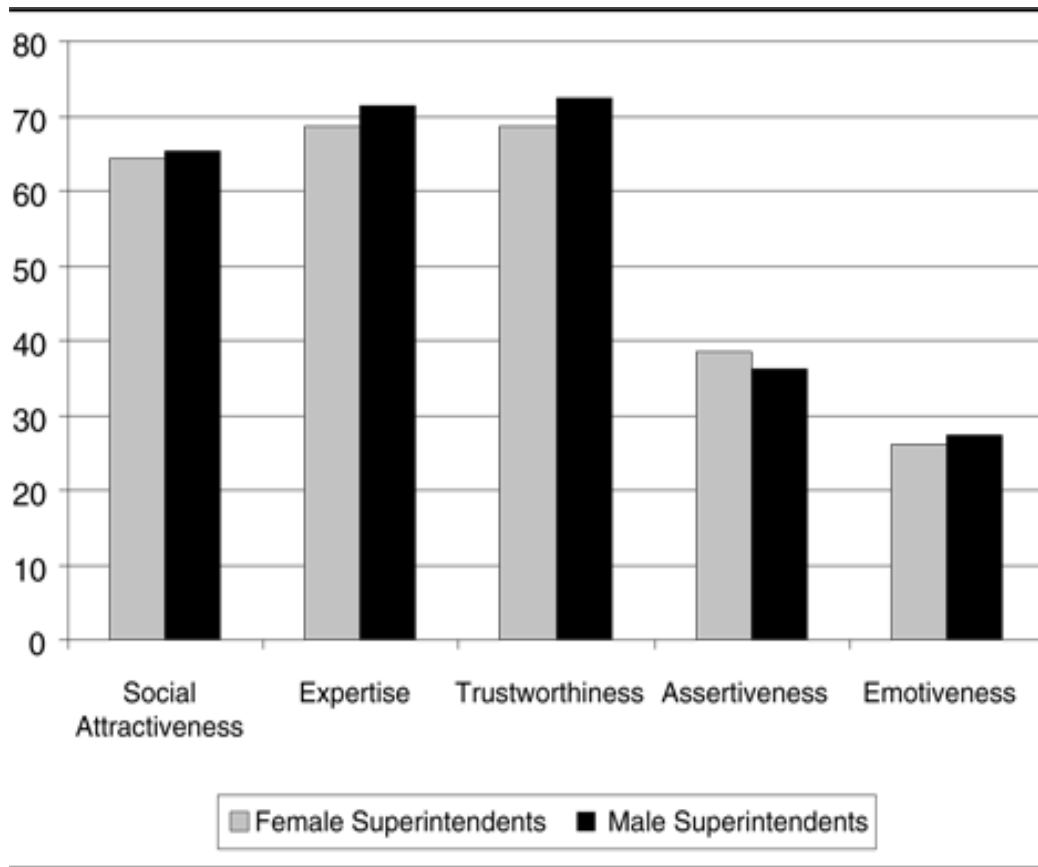
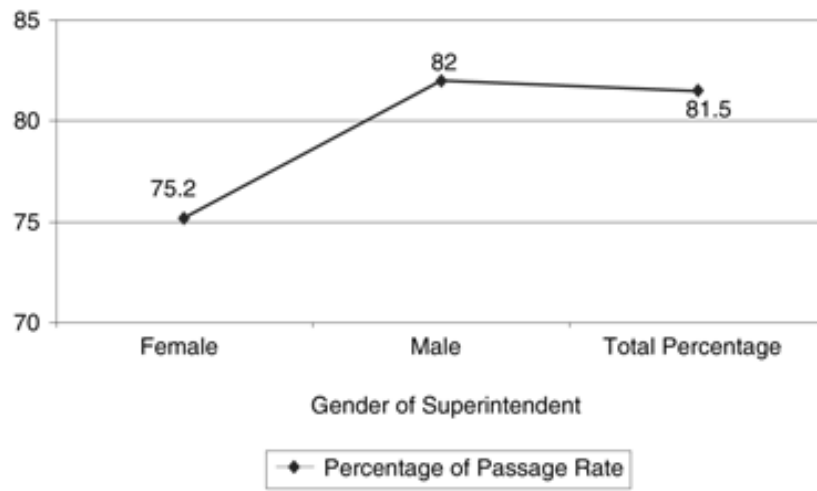


Figure 4

Percentage of Superintendent-Recommended and Board-Supported Action Items



APPENDIX

Example of Board Action Item Inventory

(NAME OF DISTRICT) BOARD AGENDA VOTING INVENTORY

Section 1: General Information

1. Your gender: Female ____ Male ____

2. Highest degree obtained: High school ____ Associate of arts/technical ____
Bachelor of arts/science ____ Master's degree ____ Doctorate ____

3. How long have you been a member of the school board? _____ months/years

4. How long have you been president? _____ months/years

Section 2: Board Agenda Items

Directions: Below are “open meeting” items that have appeared on recent agendas in your school district. After each agenda item indicate who requested that the item appear on the board agenda and then indicate whether the board accepted, rejected, or modified the superintendent’s recommendation for each item. Please complete all the items on this inventory. Thank you.

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