

Summer 6-2014

Strategic Community Engagement as Perceived by Five Superintendents

Judith A. Dymond
National-Louis University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.nl.edu/diss>

Part of the [Educational Administration and Supervision Commons](#), and the [Educational Leadership Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Dymond, Judith A., "Strategic Community Engagement as Perceived by Five Superintendents" (2014). *Dissertations*. 83.
<https://digitalcommons.nl.edu/diss/83>

This Dissertation - Public Access is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons@NLU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons@NLU. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@nl.edu.

STRATEGIC COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT
AS PERCEIVED BY FIVE SUPERINTENDENTS

Judith A. Dymond

Educational Leadership Doctoral Program

Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements of
Doctor of Education
in the Foster G. McGaw Graduate School

National College of Education

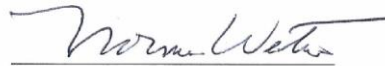
National Louis University

June, 2014

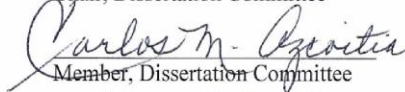
STRATEGIC COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT
AS PERCEIVED BY FIVE SUPERINTENDENTS

Judith A. Dymond
Educational Leadership Doctoral Program

Approved:



Chair, Dissertation Committee



Member, Dissertation Committee



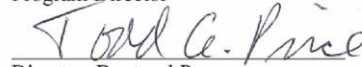
Member, Dissertation Committee

4-28-2014

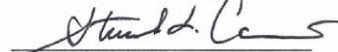
Date Approved



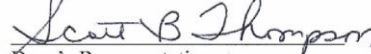
Program Director



Director, Doctoral Programs



Dean, NCE College of Education



Dean's Representative

Copyright by Judith A. Dymond, June 2014

All rights reserved

ABSTRACT

In these challenging times with school districts facing mandates for accountability, they can only accomplish these ambitious long-term mandates by engaging the greater community. Thus, any superintendent who is planning on improving student academic achievement and being employed in the district long-term will find it imperative to engage the community and develop community partnerships. This study utilized interviewing, a qualitative methodology, to gain insight into how five superintendents effectively engaged their communities. Findings revealed five effective strategies and actions for success: embracing community values, partnering with community organizations, building trust internally and externally, developing a systems approach to communication, and engaging the community strategically. While much has been written and said about the need and importance of engaging the community to lift and support student academic achievement, this study provides the “how to” to make it happen.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I want to thank Dr. Norman Weston, my dissertation chair and advisor. His guidance and support made completion of my study possible. He saw in me a passion for engaging the community and encouraged me to pursue this topic. I appreciated his knowledge, insight, and understanding throughout my journey.

I also wish to thank my dissertation committee, Dr. Carlos Azcoitia, Dr. Richard Best, and Dr. Scott Thompson, all knowledgeable and experienced school leaders who know the value of engaging the community for school reform. They have all experienced the power and potential of community engagement first-hand.

I would like to thank the five superintendents who participated in my study. Their willingness to share their personal stories and their process for engaging their communities provided me with very insightful data. It is my hope that future superintendents will appreciate their candor and learn from their experiences.

Finally, I would like to thank my husband, Tom, and my sons, Daryn and Devon, for their encouragement.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	iv
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	v
CHAPTER ONE	1
Introduction.....	1
The Importance of Engaging the Greater Community	1
Statement of the Problem.....	3
Rationale	4
Purpose.....	10
Research Questions	10
CHAPTER TWO	11
Literature Review.....	11
Introduction.....	11
Why Community Partnerships?	13
Effective Collaborative Strategies	19
Building Trust and the Nurturing and Sustaining of Partnerships	23
Identifying Partners.....	26
Roadblocks for Administrators to Overcome	28
Summary	31
CHAPTER THREE	33
Methodology	33
Introduction.....	33
Research Questions	33

Primary research question.....	33
Related questions.....	33
Participants.....	33
Methodology	34
Research Design.....	36
Data collection.	36
Data analysis.	37
CHAPTER FOUR.....	39
Findings.....	39
Introduction.....	39
Theme I: Embracing Community Values	39
Theme II: Partnering with Community Organizations	46
Theme III: Building Trust Internally and Externally	50
Theme IV: Developing a Systems Approach to Communication.....	60
Theme V: Engaging the Community Strategically	70
Summary: Reaping the Benefits of Community Engagement	77
CHAPTER FIVE	83
Conclusion	83
Primary Research Question.....	83
Community Values and Selection of Partners	84
Trust-building for Sustainability of Partnerships.....	86
Systematic Communication	87
Engaging Parents	89
Strategic Engagement	91

Shared decision-making.....	91
Overcoming Roadblocks.....	95
Future Implications	98
Personal Reflections.....	99
References	103
Appendix A: Interview Questions	
Appendix B: Informed Consent – Participant	

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the role of superintendents of schools in engaging the community. I begin with a brief vignette so the reader can understand how I came to be passionate about the importance of the development of community partnerships and the engagement of the community in the development of the child and increasing the achievement of students.

The Importance of Engaging the Greater Community

“I give you full permission to refuse to do anything you are asked to do in this school. I hated this place when I was a student here,” said a parent to her middle school child the night of the child’s orientation to the middle school. I was a new Assistant Principal. This was my first contact with the students and parents! Unbelievable! I thought, “Are there really parents out there who would say that to their child? Aren’t there enough problems with motivating middle school children to do well without parents encouraging them to buck the system?” I made up my mind that I had my work cut out for me, and it was not only with the students! How could I make a difference for the students? If I were going to make a difference, I needed to also connect positively with the parents. I did involve parents on committees at the middle school to get their input, but I kept thinking that something more needed to be done.

A few years later I became a central office administrator. I was visiting an elementary school and asked a kindergarten teacher about her class. She said that she did the best that she could, but parents in that school never showed up or were involved in their child’s education. Few attended the traditional open houses and other parent nights.

Well, maybe we needed to stop attempting to engage parents the same way year after year. Clearly, it wasn't working. What was the problem? Was it that the parents were disinterested? Did they feel alienated? Did they know how to support their children's education?

A few months later, I attended a superintendents' conference and chose a session about engaging the community. The speaker was an administrator from the Detroit School District. She was extremely motivating. The speaker talked about meeting the parents in a neutral site – McDonalds and venues other than the schools. She talked about getting to know the community members in small groups. Since then I have tried to track her down – so far no luck. She needs to know that she changed me as an administrator. So I came back to my district and thought, How can I do this? Who do I need to engage? Who's out there that I haven't contacted and engaged? Who is connecting to our families K-adult? Who is connecting effectively with our K-12 families? How are they connecting? How are these agencies and groups helping families? How could we work together? Maybe we needed to meet parents and partners in their neighborhoods or invite them to a neutral site.

I would need to engage the greater community so students would have the support they needed to achieve. I would need to identify agencies and organizations that were already engaging families. These organizations were potential partners. But how does an administrator engage the community? What does it mean to be a community partner? Partnerships mean two-way interactions. What can we provide for these agencies and groups, and what can they do for us?

I decided to invite the organizations I could immediately identify to a meeting. At the meeting, we pinpointed the age level at which each organization was engaging members of the family. Then we looked at the gaps. Each organization had its own network. Additional partners were invited to the next meeting. I shared the district mission and vision as well as district volunteer needs. The other organizations also communicated their missions and their organization's needs. The community partnership that was developed is still meeting today.

That was one community. How does it work in other districts? Is it done differently depending on the size of the district? Would it help to locate these effective administrators who are using these strategies and could they learn from each other? Would I find common strategies, common threads?

Statement of the Problem

Today, I am serving in the Outreach and Engagement Division of a university. I am responsible for reaching out to the community and engaging school districts in professional development. So I am again thinking, how can we engage the community? How do we develop sustainable partnerships?

The present climate in public schools today with directives to increase achievement has caused a great deal of stress. In these challenging economic times with districts facing mandates for accountability, closing the achievement gaps, and raising the achievement of all students, districts can only accomplish these ambitious long-term goals by reaching out to the greater community. If students are to succeed in these hard times, superintendents, central office, and building administrators need to look at their communities and think about who needs to be engaged and what groups and agencies can

support the schools through their strategic plans. There are agencies and groups that are already connecting with children and parents in every community. To accomplish this long term goal, it is imperative that superintendents and administrators reach out to the greater community.

Districts cannot accomplish these goals alone because schools are faced with increasing numbers of students who come from families challenged by homelessness, poverty, violence, drug abuse, teen pregnancy, and unemployment. In addition to these societal issues, school districts are faced with accountability – ensuring that all students are meeting state and/or Common Core standards on soon-to-be adopted new assessments of math and reading. At the same time, funding for school districts has decreased and grant opportunities have significantly decreased. The amount of money provided by the existing federal and state grants has been cut drastically. Resources have not kept up with the demand (Lueder, 2011). In Illinois and across the country many schools need to be replaced and health services, transportation and technology costs have increased. Smaller districts are greatly in debt and are facing consolidation or dissolution. Some districts face lower taxes and unpassed levy referenda due to a large percentage of unemployment, and the community funding base greatly changed as major businesses are folding, moving, or closing.

Rationale

A 2002 poll conducted by Public Education Network and Education Week revealed that Americans rank education second only to the economy and jobs in terms of national priority (Chadwick, 2004). The poll found the following:

Americans see public schools as a critical community resource. They believe that quality schools help build stronger families, improve local economies and reduce

crime rates. School quality also influences where people choose to live, and education plays a major role in determining their choices in the voting booth. (p. ix)

Therefore, community partnerships are a powerful potential resource. If student achievement were a community goal, then it would make sense that school performance would improve. This poll affirms that a responsible superintendent should engage the community. Superintendents will only involve the community if they are convinced that the time and effort will pay off. Superintendents need to demonstrate that their district is showing improvement in student achievement. All efforts need to lead to that goal. Henderson and Mapp strongly believe that partnering with the public can positively impact student achievement (as cited in Chadwick, 2004). She summarizes with the following:

If the public were truly to become partners with public schools in educating our children, we would ultimately see an improvement in student achievement. A recent review of the education literature confirms that the involvement of family and community members has a significant impact on student achievement. (p. ix)

Most school improvement plans contain a goal for parent involvement, but the meaning of community involvement may be different from one district to another. Some districts may only be counting the number of parents that attend open house and conferences.

Districts need to define what they mean by parent involvement. Chadwick (2004) describes community involvement and an engaged public as

more involved parents and community members mean more adults working together to educate children both within and outside the classroom. An engaged public means more people working together to find the best approaches to the need for adequate funding and school accountability. (p. ix)

Families do value schools, as a good school district raises the value of homes.

Community members look to the school as a resource and often hold community

meetings and activities at the school setting, e.g. scout meetings, bingo. If possible, persons move to areas where the school district is highly rated. Therefore, communities value the schools and are a potential partner. In many communities the school is a unifying source. Henderson and Mapp found that community involvement resulted in upgraded school facilities, improved school leadership and staffing, higher quality learning programs, new resources and programs to improve teaching and curriculum, and new funding for afterschool programs and family supports (as cited by Chadwick, 2004, p. 5). Putnam found that there has been a decline in community involvement due to four factors: pressures of time and money, especially in dual career families; commuting; electronic entertainment; and replacement of a long civic-minded generation by less involved children and grandchildren (as cited by Chadwick p. 3-4).

The terms public engagement and community engagement are one in the same. Community engagement is the newer of the two terms. Chadwick (2004) defines public engagement as a “purposeful effort, starting in either the school system or the community, to build a collaborative constituency for change and improvement in schools” (p. 6). The National School Boards Association defined public engagement as “an on-going, collaborative process during which the school district works with the public to build understanding, guidance, and active support for the education of the children in its community” (p. 6). Wadsworth explained that this engagement needs to be a collaborative process in which “groups think through issues in a struggle to arrive at solutions they can all live with” (as cited in Chadwick, p. 7). It is clear that community engagement is much more than a traditional one-way communication flow from schools to the public (Chadwick). This process of community engagement carries some risk, and

it requires educators to share decision-making power. If effective superintendents choose to take this risk, then the benefits must far outweigh the risk. With any endeavor that carries risk, it is important to have planned strategies.

It is hard work, requiring time, patience and persistence. If educators do not understand the long-term benefits of developing partnerships and engaging the community, some may feel that they cannot afford the time commitment. After having been a central office administrator in school districts, I am convinced that most administrators shy away from engaging the community because they fear that the community members will be too critical of the schools and will not understand the problems that educators face. They are concerned that the public will want to become involved in decisions that, in the administrators' opinion, should be left in the hands of school personnel.

Fullan (2001) advised leaders to heed the advice of Heifetz (1994) "respect those you want to silence" because dissenters and resisters are a "potential source of new ideas and breakthroughs" (p. 74-75). In other words, they may have important information and insight. The American Association of School Administrators in 1997 (as cited in Chadwick, 2004) cautioned administrators that if the public is not brought along in the reform process, it will support ideas that do not support the schools (p. 9). In my opinion, this recently happened in the Governor Scott Walker recall election in Wisconsin. The vote ended up being the state against the teachers, as Walker targeted teachers' unions and associations. Rather than supporting educators and seeing how this trend also eventually impacts other bargaining units, voters were divided statewide. It became the

“educated” versus the rest of the conservative populace. Chadwick shares the American Association of School Administrators’ cautionary statement to educational leaders:

We are going to be dead in the water if we don’t find a better way of dealing with the public... We have lost the public in many of our communities... The public is going to end up supporting a lot of crazy ideas that are going to be disrespectful of the schools if we don’t find more powerful ways of reconnecting the public with the schools. (p. 9)

Superintendents and school districts urgently need to develop partnerships and involve their communities so the public understands the charge that is out there for districts. The school districts are undergoing a major change with the adoption of Common Core Standards whereby students need to demonstrate their proficiency in math and literacy and soon-to-be science standards. If the public does not understand this charge and the additional charge to develop new “common assessments,” the public will be critical of the schools. Only when schools take representative stakeholders along on the journey, do they truly understand what is involved in the decision-making. Look at Wisconsin in 2012, for example, where the governor decided to set the state against the teachers. Only those school districts in which the superintendent brought the constituents along on the journey were behind their teachers and school leaders.

In Illinois, and throughout the country, small school districts are in financial peril. Many are finding that they need to merge with other municipalities or to find creative ways to partner with industry and other organizations to develop solutions that will continue the historical desire to keep the educational system in the hands of local decision-makers. Adsit (2011) completed extensive research on strategies that need to be implemented by small school districts for them to survive, thrive, and sustain. He

concentrated on specific examples of how school districts benefited their communities and how communities benefitted their school districts. Adsit wrote,

Schools can play a significant role in helping to revitalize small rural communities as they remain as one of the last pieces linking the community to the outside. The school provides the community with a sense of identity, source of employment, and a common meeting place. (p. 19)

For this study, I interviewed superintendents to ascertain how they are engaging their communities, what types of partnerships are being developed, how the superintendents are managing their partnerships, and what the superintendent perceives is the gain for the district. I sought to discover how the district partnerships were furthering the school districts' missions and visions? I wanted to know whether the superintendents perceived that students would become higher achievers as a result of these partnerships.

I further decided it would be beneficial to bring together administrators who have been effectively engaging the community and provide them an opportunity to learn from each other. These ideas could then be shared in superintendent meetings and in administrator trainings, so others can learn strategies that will benefit the greater learning community.

This study examined superintendents who are working at engaging their communities and who believe that it is an important task to undertake and will determine whether they continue to be effective and long standing superintendents in their communities. Chadwick (2004) says, "The value of community engagement has been well established, but resources that address the 'how to' questions have unfortunately been more limited in number" (p. ix).

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to explore how effective superintendents engage their communities by developing effective partnerships and how they sustain these partnerships so they can positively impact student achievement. Through this exploration, I identified and examined the strategies utilized by these administrators, so other administrators who are embarking on engaging their communities can learn from these experts.

With this study, I planned to add to the “how to” by finding out how successful superintendents have engaged their communities and how they have sustained those partnerships to benefit the students and families in their districts.

Research Questions

The primary question of this study is: how does a superintendent of schools develop educational partnerships that engage the community? Related questions include the following:

- 1) How does a superintendent identify and engage representatives of all stakeholder groups, including those quiet ones?
- 2) How are these partnerships sustained?
- 3) What are the perceived benefits that are reaped for the partner and for the superintendent’s district?

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

Introduction

School districts increasingly need to enlist community stakeholders in their school improvement efforts. The United States School System is based on the idea that local communities want to control the education for their children. However, in too many school districts today, decisions are being made without providing adequate information to the community, and not all stakeholders are being engaged in the educational process. Only a limited number of community resources are being tapped. Too often administrators and teachers use terminology that is not explained to community organizations and parents, which hinders their supportive efforts and alienates certain stakeholders. School districts talk about a lack of parental and community involvement, but too often school personnel are not specific about ways they could use support.

The most powerful strategy that can be used for school reform is enlisting community support. Schools cannot be solely responsible for preparing students for learning. To succeed academically, students' emotional and physical needs must be met. Learning opportunities need to be expanded outside of the classroom, yet the majority of administrative training programs do not include developing partnerships as part of the coursework for certification. And in most school improvement plans, parent involvement is mentioned in the plan, but the involvement of the community is not. Non-profit agencies and other community groups must become involved and be led by effective school administrators. By connecting to the greater community, families can receive help, which ultimately affects the child who can then come to school ready to learn.

Glanz (2006) once inquired of a school principal why he was spending an exceptional amount of time working with members of the community, “Don’t you think we should be spending *all* our time focusing on student learning *in* the building?” The principal responded,

We must continue to focus our work with one end in mind and that is helping each boy and girl in this school succeed academically and otherwise...we can’t go it alone...If we are able to build strong coalitions with key members of the community that can, for instance, provide us with financial and other resources that help build educational programs in the school, then we will be indeed focusing all our efforts at helping our children learn and, most importantly, succeed in life. (p. viii)

Price (2008) defines community as volunteer civic and social groups; sororities and fraternities; block clubs; parent-teacher groups; churches and faith-based organizations; settlement houses; community centers; youth serving agencies like Boys and Girls Clubs, the YMCA, the YWCA, Kiwanis, Lions, and Head Start centers; social service agencies; and community based organizations like the Urban League; and business groups (p. 17). Every community has a different set of potential partners. Many nonprofit groups make up the community. They make excellent partners, as servicing families and particular age groups is most likely already part of their mission.

Cox-Peterson (2011) defines educational partnerships as “endeavors where one or more people or groups come together to enhance the education of children. When this happens, the effect is greater than the sum of the two parts. These partnerships do not happen instantly, and many times teachers and families face challenges because of time, different priorities, language and cultural barriers” (p. 24). The term “community is used to describe a place such as a city, a neighborhood, or a classroom...it can also be used to describe interactions and relationships among people or groups” (p. 22).

The term parent involvement is used broadly and has varied meanings and expectations for stakeholders. To provide a good example, Burns (1993) cites Flint Community Schools' (1987) definition of community participation that emphasizes the city's commitment to the concept of community education as a process throughout the school district and community.

The Flint Community Schools will encourage and provide opportunities for students, faculty, and other members of the community to interact through open channels of communication in order that they may play an effective role in the planning development, implementations, and evaluation of the school program. (p. 64)

For this study, I searched for research studies and experts who looked at effective administrators to find out how these leaders were engaging their teachers, families, and other community organizations. I wanted to know what strategies superintendents, principals and central office personnel were utilizing to provide support for teachers and students in their efforts to increase achievement. The following topics were explored in the review of the literature: 1) why community partnerships, 2) effective collaborative strategies, 3) building trust and the nurturing and sustaining of partnerships, 4) identifying partners, and finally, 5) roadblocks for administrators to overcome.

Why Community Partnerships?

Engaging the community is imperative, as going it alone has not been an effective approach for boosting academic performance. Teachers, administrators, school support staff and the community need to work together to achieve performance goals. The following statement by Price (2008) reinforces the rationale for conducting my study – learning effective ways to develop partnerships and to engage the community in shared responsibility for increasing student achievement. Prices says,

Most of the energy in the contemporary push to improve K-12 schools, boost performance, and close achievement gaps is concentrated on accountability and testing, governance and management, and curriculum and instruction, strengthening teaching, and school re-design...yet the persistently poor scholastic performance of far too many youngsters confirms that these measures are not sufficient...what's surprising though, is how little attention has been paid to the responsibility and potential role of the community in fostering academic achievement... the success of each learner can be achieved only through a whole child approach, and that teachers, schools, and communities need to forge a new compact based on shared responsibility for the effective education and healthy development of children. (p. 4-8)

One of the strongest reasons for involving the stakeholders in the decision-making and problem-solving is that the community builds trust in the school system and understands why sometimes unpopular decisions need to be made. The community has been brought along in the decision-making process. To illustrate the *why*, I found a study regarding a Wisconsin district that had some hard decisions to make. The district was used to being a high performing district and wanted to continue its high performance despite having to pull in its belts. The district needed a long term plan.

Goodwin et al. (2011) discussed Kettle Moraine School District in Wales, WI, as a school that encountered funding issues in 2005 after many years of outstanding performance. The district needed to cut funds but worried about cutting quality. In the process, the district started to think about what “quality education” meant for the future. In its efforts to take a long term vision of the district, the district formed a Transformation Task Force to “transform itself into a district that was prepared for and preparing its students for the future...the task force gathered input from parents, business owners, students, and others in the community” (p. 129-130).

The taskforce identified four areas of focus for the future of the district: 1) developing leaders in the district who moved their organizations away from traditional,

inflexible, top-down, command and control toward those that were more flexible and adaptable; 2) creating partnerships with a variety of organizations and businesses in the community to ensure that the district remained attuned to changes happening in the world; 3) incorporating 21st century communications in all the district's operations—utilizing networks of people, becoming more open and transparent with information, and relying on electronic and interactive forms of communication; 4) fostering research, development, and innovation, by developing a baseline of accepted practice, by collecting and analyzing data on those practices (p. 129-130). The district believed in the importance of involving organizations and businesses through partnerships and thus included it in their strategic plan.

The Kettle Moraine School District not only thought it important enough to put in the plan, but the district put its beliefs into action. By engaging the community in the planning for the future, the district was able to avoid becoming complacent and assuming that what made the district effective in the past would make it high-performing in the future. By involving the community in a search for answers to its financial problem, the district placed itself in a good position to implement its strategies. Not to say that the district would not run into some roadblocks, but the path would be smoother with an open and transparent plan.

Cox-Petersen (2011) contends that “partnerships are necessary to obtain high educational achievement for all students – regardless of gender, socioeconomic status, family make-up, or ethnic group” (p. 16). Cox-Petersen also cites Berliner and Biddle (1995), who claim that “schools could potentially overcome the effects of poverty and

inequities among students by developing connections to community, their teachers, and their peers” (p. 16).

Cordeiro and Kolek (1996) talk about *partnering* becoming a buzzword in the nineties. They note that in education, partnerships are either school-linked or school-based. They indicate that partnering is not only useful, but it is becoming mandatory in today’s economic and social climate. But sometimes terms can become overused and groups lose track of the true meaning. Partnering must have a clear purpose that results in benefits for students.

Price (2008) cautions us to realize that when it comes to educating youngsters who struggle in school, educators cannot succeed on their own. He believes that to accelerate the pace of improvement for those children who chronically perform below standards, stakeholders need to heighten the desire for achievement on the part of these children, their families and community groups. He states,

In short, what’s missing from the school reform playbook is an emphasis on motivation: sustained and effective encouragement for those underachievers to succeed. And conspicuously missing from teams of reformers that must figure out how to do this is the community- the proverbial village, in its myriad organizational forms. (p. 14-15)

Cordeiro (1996) points out that that there are fewer traditional families and more non-traditional families with stepchildren, dual-earner families, and single-parent families. Additionally, Americans are becoming increasingly transient, causing them to lose informal networks of family and friends. For many, the public schools remain the only system connecting the majority of citizens. According to Cordeiro and Kolek (1996), the question is not if but how, to foster partnerships as part of the school service delivery model (p. 2).

Not everyone sees a need or values parental involvement. De Calvalho (2001) has been accused in certain settings as being against parental involvement. In fact, she talks about how the policy requiring parental involvement for the most part negatively impacts lower class families. She says many upper-class families look upon teachers as inferior to them, and those families have more control because of their financial status. Middle school families for the most part influence the public schools and are involved in a variety of ways: parent organizations, fund raising, room mothers, and parent conferences. Those who are asked to serve on committees may be favoring policies that will benefit their own children rather than those of the underprivileged students. Parents of the underprivileged students may be perceived as uninvolved and unsupportive. They may not be available during the day if they are working second or third shifts, are single parents, or not knowledgeable of the school curriculum, or pedagogy terminology. They may not be available to assist with homework in the evening or have the expertise to help their children. So De Calvalho admonishes the policy makers who, in her opinion, are causing inequality in the U.S. school system. Instead she values opportunities for parents to offer their own culture and learning opportunities for children outside of the school day.

De Calvalho (2001), a Brazilian immigrant, compared U.S. schools to Brazilian schools where the public school day was four hours and parents had to educate their own child for the rest of the day. Private schools in Brazil advertised their schools as opportunities for families to be free of the responsibility to educate their own children – offering an eight hour day. Her beliefs about requiring involvement and its impact on the family can be summarized in the following statement:

I see the separation of family and school, within present conditions as a requirement for individual freedom and cultural pluralism as (more than a functional choice), and as an approach to equity. Assuring that education (as a function of the state) , compulsory schooling (as preparatory for public life)and school culture (as common and necessary knowledge) remain separate from private life means allowing space for other forms of education, responsive to various human needs, to flourish apart from school. (p. 41)

Abrams and Gibbs studied mothers at three different elementary schools (as cited in Cox-Peterson, 2011). Abrams and Gibbs said,

They found that White, middle class mothers felt an entitlement to certain tasks, while Latina mothers were overtly excluded from parent-teacher association committee decisions and meetings because of their translation needs. Therefore, it is the responsibility of the school and teachers to welcome and encourage families as critical partners. The creation of an action plan with specific goals and objectives and strategies to meet the needs of all families is an effective way to get started. (p. 276)

So effective leaders must ensure that policies do not further inequities for underprivileged students. They need to define what involvement means and define family in a broader sense. They need to be creative about strategies to involve all families.

Some families are hesitant to be involved in their child's education because they had negative experiences when they were in school. Schools need to take that into consideration. Petr (2003) stated,

It is important for professionals to try to see the child's situation from the parents' point of view. Almost all families want their children to succeed in school. But many families are wary of the school environment because their own school experiences as children were not pleasant, they feel inferior to teachers, they fear they will be blamed and criticized for their child's poor performance or poor behavior. (p. 31-32)

Administrators and teachers are often worried about involving the parents and community as required in school improvement plans. They worry about criticism and having their decision-making powers taken from them from these stakeholders. Fullan (2001) advises educational leaders with good ideas to present them well while at the same

time seeking and listening to doubters. They must try to build good relationships even with those who may not trust them.

We need to respect resisters for two reasons. First, they sometimes have ideas that we might have missed, especially in situations of diversity or complexity or in the tackling of problems for which the answer is unknown...Second, resisters are crucial when it comes to the politics of implementation...respecting resistance is essential, because if you ignore it, it is only a matter of time before it takes its toll. (p. 42)

Reglin (1993) in his study of African American families concluded, “Real power means that all stakeholders have a better understanding of what is being done to meet the needs of the students, and they will work together to meet their goals” (p. 35).

Effective Collaborative Strategies

It is worthwhile to take a close look at exactly *what* effective leaders *do* to engage their communities in the support of learning. To reinforce the importance of effective leadership, Gerald Tirozzi, Executive Director National Association of Secondary School Principals, said, “Research studies increasingly support the significant impact that effective leaders have on school performance. A skilled leader is an essential component in successful school reform” (Reeves 2004, cover).

Price (2008) says that “communities remain a largely underappreciated and untapped resource” (p. 21). He goes on to say that the reason is probably because mobilizing the community is not a sure or easy thing to do. He suggests that superintendents first ask the question about how to best put volunteer energy to work in ways that are constructive and productive. He says, “When community groups want to pitch in, what strategies will best capitalize on their assets so that their involvement produces better outcomes for school children as opposed to busy work, distractions, and tension for school personnel?” (p. 22).

Districts can learn from others rather than going it alone. Effective leaders have developed systems for reform. Despite negative political reactions to his reform strategies, an urban superintendent created systematic changes through specific reform strategies that included family and community engagement. Salazar (2009) in his dissertation, *An Urban Superintendent's Strategies for Systematic Reform: A Case Study*, described those reform strategies. His purpose was to come to an understanding of how a superintendent utilized reform strategies to create systematic change throughout the district to positively affect student achievement. The case study focused on the quality and level of implementation of ten specific reform strategies by the superintendent to create improvement in the district. In discussing his results, Salazar indicated the following action was taken by the leader:

The superintendent...utilized deliberate reform strategies which formulated a clear and compelling vision and mission for the districts' work of educating students. This led to a...strategic plan which aligned the vision, goals, and resources of the district to influence student achievement. (p. xii)

The strategies utilized by the superintendent were as follows: 1) strategic plan, 2) assessment, 3) curriculum, 4) professional development, 5) human resource system and human capital management; 6) finance and budget, 7) communications; 8) governance/board relations, 9) labor relations/contract negotiations, and 10) family and community engagement. The superintendent had previous experience on all ten reform strategies, but for those strategies in which he had less experience, he built relationships with key stakeholders to leverage his reform efforts. He utilized his team to support him (p. 90). The strategies, particularly the reform strategies of communication and community and family engagement, built open and strong relationships to gain support for his programs, despite challenges from powerful political leaders in the city. The

administrator utilized the strategic plan to align district resources to create quality educational opportunities for students. He believed so strongly in the power of community engagement that he created an administrative position with the responsibility of training and supporting community and families. Thus, it appears that school reform and future strategic plans of effective districts should include a strategy of outreach to community organizations and engage families to achieve strategic goals and increase student achievement.

Bryk and Schneider (2003) discussed the importance of the development of relational trust in school reform efforts. They stated,

Strong relational trust also makes it more likely that reform initiatives will diffuse broadly across the school because trust reduces the sense of risk associated with change. When school professionals trust one another and sense support from parents, they feel safe to experiment with new practices. (p. 43)

Writing a plan and involving the community in writing the plan is certainly an effective strategy, but implementing the strategic plan is also a challenge. Therefore, Lezotte and Snyder (2011) in *What Effective Schools Do* state that

the leader's greatest contribution to the school improvement effort is to articulate a compelling vision and mission, and to convince the followers that the mission is attainable, and a moral and worthy cause. School leaders must keep the mission front and center, and see to it that every program, policy, and strategy is evaluated in light of the mission. (p. 68)

Along these same lines of thought, Darling-Hammond (1995) found that effective superintendents involve all stakeholders in setting goals in pursuit of the mission (p. 70). She stated, "In an effective school, all the people asked will have the same answer to the question... 'What does the school care most about?' ...Research has found repeatedly that leaders of effective schools understand that results are paramount" (p. 72).

Price (2008) offered several strategies for superintendents to mobilize their communities. He suggested that it is a good strategy to begin with a low-key meeting hosted by the superintendent in conjunction with the school board president. A cross-section of business and community leaders should be invited, including the public library system. If the school system is very large, the superintendent should invite leaders in neighborhoods of low achieving students. It is best to invite groups who have a track record of being constructive, a reputation for caring about children, and are already involved in education and youth development. The superintendent needs to explain the purpose of involving the community: 1) the long and short term plans for increasing achievement across the board, and 2) that schools cannot succeed on their own—they need parents and community groups to help persuade children to want to learn and do well in school. Then the superintendent needs to state that the school is interested in developing a strategic partnership with leading community groups. Price goes on to say that the superintendent should share examples of what other communities have done to support the school. The meeting should conclude with the superintendent explaining next steps. The superintendent needs to designate a senior staffer who reports directly to the superintendent to serve on the committee. It is important for the steering committee to ask whether others need to be invited to carry out the initiative. Periodically, the groups should periodically brief the board and the superintendent about goals and accomplishments (p. 91). The community group needs to help remove some of the obstacles that prevent students from coming to school ready to learn. Together the members of these individual organizations need to develop a joint plan for supporting

families and children of particular age groups. They need to lay out a yearly plan, including how they will get information about their action plan out to the community.

Henderson and Mapp (2002), in *A New Wave of Evidence: The Impact of School, Family and Community Connections on Student Achievement*, provided practical strategies that administrators should use to involve parents and community members. They recommend that administrators should use face to face communication as often as possible, as it increases the likelihood that parents will attend. They should also use a variety of ways to communicate – in person, email, written correspondence – and be as specific as possible. They further advise leaders to provide workshops for parents that show techniques for working with their children in reading, math and other subjects. Leaders should involve parents and community members in instructional and curricular matters, but also involve themselves and their teachers in community events (Glanz, 2006).

One of the most comprehensive books addressing strategies for developing and sustaining partnerships is *Educational Partnerships Connecting Schools, Families and the Community*. In her book, Cox-Petersen (2011) addresses educators and mentions teachers and principals, but there is no specific mention of superintendent leadership. However, these strategies cannot sustain partnerships unless an effective leader believes in, articulates the need for sustaining partnership, demonstrates support for the partnership, and articulates the benefits to the community and the school board.

Building Trust and the Nurturing and Sustaining of Partnerships

Much thought needs to be delegated to nurturing and sustaining partnerships, since a great deal of time and energy is devoted to developing partnerships. A

partnership by internet definition is an arrangement in which parties agree to cooperate to advance their mutual interests. Non-profit, religious, and political organizations may partner together to increase the likelihood of each achieving its mission and to extend its reach. Partnerships present the involved parties with special challenges, including overarching goals, areas of responsibility, and how success will be evaluated. In partnerships, all entities share the profits and the losses. In education, accrediting agencies evaluate schools by the level and quality of their partnerships with other schools, higher education, and a variety of other community entities. It is common for information about the partnerships to be made public, such as a press release or newspaper article (Partnerships. n.d.).

Key words that pop up in several definitions are advancing mutual interests, increasing likelihood of achieving mission, amplifying reach, sharing profits and losses, and making information public. These elements seem to be critical to sustaining these partnerships.

To build trust and sustain community/parent partnerships, Burn (1993) recommended utilizing three elements: 1) commitment; collaboration and communication among key players; 2) staff and parent training; and 3) comprehensive planning. Burns recommends providing school board and district-level support. Shumow (2009) also talked about trust being important to sustaining partnerships. She stated, “trust plays an integral role in the establishment and maintenance of partnerships. A basic level of trust is needed to successfully contact potential partners and to negotiate the goals and collaborative activities of the partnerships” (p. 66).

Cordeiro (1996) identified five elements fundamental for successful and collaborative partnerships:

- a unifying purpose
- a critical number of committed independent members
- voluntary links that form a web of relationships
- participants who assume specific responsibilities and function as multiple leaders
- connections at many interactive levels in the environment. (p. 3)

School districts and partnering agencies want to address the academic, social, emotional, physical, and ethical development of their communities' children. These agencies do not give up their own identities, but by working together, the product is richer than those that would be produced by each agency or person alone.

Communication links are essential and voluntary. Each entity has its own network of relationships, opening an unending opportunity to make connections for students and families. Leadership becomes a part of each participant's role.

Through her studies of successful partnerships, Cordeiro (1996) identified five key factors for sustaining partnerships: leadership, trust, stability, readiness, and a common agenda. In all of the successful sustaining partnerships studied, one person was identified as the person who conceptualized the original idea for the partnership. In many cases, the person identified an unfulfilled need that matched a resource the person came across in the community. That one person shared the idea with others. Secondly, trust was a commonality. The one person who envisioned the idea would not have gone to the original partner if a trust had not already existed.

A third factor in sustainability is stability (Cordeiro, 1996). If a community organization realizes that the persons heading the initiative are very temporary, they are reluctant to become involved. The public entity developing the partnership needs to be

committed long-term to the partnership long-term, rather than one individual in the school committed to this partnership. If a person has long term vision for the partnership, it has to be endorsed by the entire district, so the partnership can be maintained. It is particularly a problem for sustainability if the person leading the initiative is not a part of the community. The person is then thought by others to be temporary.

Readiness is a fourth factor (Cordeiro, 1996). A partnership that was sustainable was nurtured. A lot of pre-work went into making the right connections. The individuals scanned the community for opportunities and partners that could offer services that would match identified needs. Finally, to sustain a partnership it was necessary for all to have a common agenda and to develop a common language.

Identifying Partners

To fulfill the gaps in services to students and families, district superintendents need to expand their repertoire of potential partners. Sanders provided several examples of partners to tap in the community (as cited in Glanz, 2006). Nonprofit health organizations will connect with districts to provide information to families on nutrition and health care issues. Local churches often have after school programs. Sanders found that some also have a parent/volunteer component, whereby the offerings are free if a parent or parent representative volunteers four hours in the month. PTAs will adopt certain school projects and offer students opportunities to compete for awards. He cites a health care agency that provided tutoring and a convenience store sponsored activities for Children's Day (p. 56).

Sadker (2000) categorized community resources into nine categories (as cited in Glanz, 2006). They are as follows:

- Professional associations
- Environmental and conversation organizations
- Museums, galleries and other cultural attractions
- Social and civic groups (e.g., Rotary, YMCA)
- College and universities
- Ethnic and cultural groups
- Health agencies and hospitals
- Senior citizens
- Artists, musicians, and craftspeople. (p. 3)

Glanz stated that the greatest and most available community resource is the parent.

Research demonstrates that “principals of high achieving schools are more involved in outreach to parents and other community members than are less-successful principals” (p. 3).

Cordeiro and Loup (1996) describe a variety of partnerships involving schools, including institutions of higher education, families, school-based health centers, nonprofit agencies, religious organizations, and businesses (p. 115). Every community has organizations and individuals who believe in supporting school programs and families activities. In addition, University Extensions will come out to interact with families on a variety of topics: how to locate a doctor, what is to be expected of parents in a district, how to communicate with your child’s teacher, how to get one’s GED and other topics. YMCAs offer after-school programs and summer camps. Many organizations have mission statements that reflect providing services to families or students; for example, many health organizations provide grants to schools for violence prevention, health education or other related initiatives. Depending on the program and its alignment, they provide student awards and incentives and free pamphlets or other family-related services. The Rotary Club offers grants to schools for educational projects and initiatives; e.g. classroom libraries and dictionaries. Kraft Food employees acted as

reading buddies for elementary students; they participated in training and read with students.

In the past public institutions thought development of partnerships with religious organizations was off limits. However, in certain communities, the church is the best connection with the students and families. For example, Smrekar (1996) found in all of the families that he studied, organized family interactions centered on sports and religious activities. It is not about adopting a belief in their individual mission but about identifying a resource that will fulfill a need for students and families.

Roadblocks for Administrators to Overcome

Potential roadblocks can get in the way of any new initiative or major change in doing business. Administrators need to be aware of these potential barriers or roadblocks so that they can be avoided. Engaging the community in a manner that builds trust and is sustainable takes pre-planning to avoid these pitfalls. Administrators need to be proactive rather than reactive.

According to the Title I: Improving America's Schools Act in 1994, schools must identify barriers to encourage greater parent participation. Cox-Peterson (2011) addresses barriers by cautioning partners to "consider barriers when developing, implementing, and sustaining partnership endeavors. Barriers change at each stage of a partnership, and they never fully go away" (p. 185).

Cox-Peterson (2011) lists management as one of the barriers. Barriers related to management often are due to a lack of leadership to recruit members of community organizations, parents, and teachers. She explains that time for coordination, team planning, and assigning of specific tasks must be set aside. The changing of

administrators, employees in a company, or families in a school can impact a partnership that does not have guidelines for others to step up and sustain the partnership. The school should increase the motivation for collaboration and provide times for partnerships to plan (p. 185). A superintendent who sets this down as a priority or assigns this duty to a central office administrator will enhance the sustainability. The superintendent could also mention this goal at principal meetings, so it is an expectation.

Glanz (2006) brings up several possible roadblocks for consideration: fear of public scrutiny, staff burnout, and negative attitudes about the community. One of the greatest fears is attracting negative media coverage. Media coverage can work in favor of an administrator or turn against an administrator. Even a reporter who has reported positively about the school may put a negative twist on an episode or school occurrence. Unfortunately, this fear can get in the way of developing successful partnerships.

Staff burnout is another obstacle to avoid. Teachers can become stressed by excessive demands on their time beyond their school responsibilities. Staffs often harbor negative attitudes toward the community or the parents in their building. They might characterize them as uncaring, particularly those parents from low socio-economic backgrounds.

Sanders identified additional obstacles to avoid. The first obstacle is “insufficient participation” (as cited in Glanz, 2006, p. 53). Sanders provided a variety of suggestions to overcome this problem, including recruiting volunteers outside of the school, using local media and school newsletters to advertise events, reminder calls, providing prize incentives for participation, changing the time of the event to accommodate interested

individuals, providing transportation, babysitting, and using community facilities for events.

Another obstacle identified by Sanders is “insufficient time” (as cited in Glanz, 2006, p. 54). Some of his suggestions are to involve a wider range of staff and community volunteers, divide tasks into committees, or to hire facilitators to coordinate partnership activities.

A third obstacle cited by Sanders is “resource-poor communities” (as cited in Glanz, 2006, p. 54). Resource-poor communities sometimes have few businesses or community-based organizations. In these communities there is often competition among school and other entities for the same resources. Sanders suggests expanding the district’s vision of potential partners. Districts might partner with surrounding colleges and universities, volunteer organizations, senior citizen groups, faith organizations and agencies outside the geographical neighborhood.

A fourth barrier to partnerships could be “insufficient leadership” to coordinate and sustain the school-community partnerships (Sanders as cited in Glanz, 2006, p. 57). A suggestion was to train a larger pool of leaders, including educators, parents, and community members.

“Inadequate funding” can also be a barrier; however, writing grants and acquiring donations from local businesses and fund raisers can result in additional funding (Sanders as cited in Glanz, 2006, p. 57).

A sixth barrier may be “communication” (Sanders as cited in Glanz, 2006, p. 57). This can especially be a challenge in diverse communities where translators might need to be hired and flyers may need to be in different languages. In some communities it

would be effective to visit homes, use email, radio announcements, and newsletters to publicize activities for families.

A final problem to avoid is “lack of focus” (Sanders as cited in Glanz, 2006, p. 57). Careful planning and aligning activities to the school improvement plan and the goals in district strategic plan will provide focus.

To avoid lack of focus, Constantino (2003) recommended, “A school leader must have a vision for the school or district, and must be able to communicate that vision and convince stakeholders that the vision is worthy of their time, energy, and talent (pp. 1-2).

Cox-Petersen (2011) suggests that one barrier is that of power. “The lack of power or the domination of power within some groups inhibits partnership development between educators, between educators and families, and among administrators, educators, and community members” (p. 191). She also identified time, culture, language and trust barriers and strategies to overcome each of these.

Summary

Preparation programs need to prepare leaders to address the problems facing schools by investing the greater community in the process. It is important to identify who is part of the system. Parents and families are less often thought of as part of the system. The traditional parent involvement in education was thought to be attending open houses, which limit the involvement of family members in a child’s growth and development. Cordeiro (1996) recommends that “expanding the definition of parent involvement to family involvement would be a step in the right direction, as often adults unrelated by blood take part in raising a child. Schools need to recognize the many people who may play a role in a child’s development.” (p. 117).

Shrinking school budgets, increasing racial polarization, scarce economic resources, and increased demands for accountability are requiring educational leaders to rethink how to accomplish their objectives. Educational partnerships hold considerable potential for addressing these challenges. With my study I sought to identify leaders that can give back by sharing their effective techniques with other beginning leaders.

CHAPTER THREE

Methodology

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to examine the role of public school superintendents in engaging their communities. Through this research I identified strategies that were successful for these superintendents so that they can be replicated in other districts.

Research Questions

Primary research question.

The primary question of this study is: how does a superintendent of schools develop educational partnerships that engage the community?

Related questions.

In addition to the primary question, related questions include the following:

1. How does a superintendent identify and engage representatives of all stakeholder groups, including those quiet ones?
2. How are partnerships sustained?
3. What are the perceived benefits that are reaped for the partner and for the superintendent's district?

Participants

Participants in this study were five superintendents, current and retired, from public school districts in the suburbs of a large metropolitan Midwest area. They were from medium to large school districts and represented both unit and elementary school

districts. Two superintendents served in more than one state. All five of the superintendents were male.

Four of the five superintendents had served in at least two districts for multiple years. All of the superintendents had served in their current district for at least five years. According to Pascopella (2011), a 2011 report from the Council of the Great City Schools (CGCS) found that the average tenure for urban superintendents increased from 2.3 years in 1999 to 3.6 years in 2010, an increase of 56%. The CGCS study looked back 15 years at the tenure for men and women who led the 10 largest districts in the nation. According to AASA, The School Superintendent's Association, *2006 State of the Superintendency* study, the mean tenure for a superintendent is five to six years. The annual turnover rate for superintendents is between 14 and 16%.

The superintendents of this study were selected, upon recommendation of renowned superintendents, for being passionate about and noted for engaging their communities. An email was used to introduce the study to the participants, followed by a phone contact asking the superintendents if they would be interested in being interviewed for the study.

All of the participants engaged their communities for the same purpose. The purpose or goal for each superintendent was to utilize the community resources to enhance the educational opportunities for students, so all students are college and career ready.

Methodology

This study utilized interviewing, a qualitative research methodology, to get an in-

depth understanding of the superintendents' perceptions and strategies for engaging the community and to get their stories. I believe there is no one way of engaging communities in the education of the students in their school districts. Each district is different. Therefore, I decided interviewing was the best method for answering my primary research question. Interviews are also a good way to gather information and obtain the insider's insight on the process, as I was most interested in the process by which these successful leaders engage their communities. Interviewing also allowed the researcher to verify what was being said by asking for clarification. Participants were asked to expand their answers (e.g., "That's interesting. Tell me more.").

Questions around several topics (identifying and involving stakeholders, managing the process, risks, etc.) were prepared in advance of the interviews so there was a guide to keep the interviews focused, while still allowing for open-ended responses. (See Appendix A: Interview Questions) The questions were designed so they could be presented in any order depending on where the interview was heading. Brenner (2006) states that the interviewer actually begins the analysis of the data when she in the midst of the interview decides to probe the interviewee deeper or to follow up on a general question with a more specific one and modifies the interview plan to fit the individual being interviewed (p. 366).

In addition to the initial interviews, the five superintendents agreed to a follow-up group interview where they would all come together with the researcher to share their views about community engagement and so strategies could be shared. This second round of interviews served as a "member check" (Merriam, 2002) to verify and clarify themes that emerged from the first round of individual interviews.

Research Design

Data collection.

Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews. Each interviewee was asked the same essential questions, but the interviewer used additional probing questions as tools to draw out the unique information from each superintendent participant. Brenner (2006) recommends that the novice interviewer should utilize a written sequence of interview questions. My semi-structured interview allowed for all individuals to hear the same core questions, but it also allowed the interviewer the freedom to follow-up on individual differences that arose and able to build on the responses. Brenner suggests dividing “the interview into topics that will be covered, with some initial wording of questions and a list of areas to be explored” (p. 362). Thus, I had five topics and suggested questions under each of those topics. Each participant received the essential questions and topics before the scheduled interview. Individual interviews were each an hour long.

Following the individual interviews and before the follow-up group interview with all the participants, each participant was given a transcript of his interview. In that way, participants validated that the researcher had accurately represented what they said or thought they said. The participant was invited to correct any misrepresentations of what she said or further clarify what she intended to say. This is important because, upon reflection, an individual may add further elaboration on a particular idea.

The follow-up group interview was designed to provide an opportunity for the five superintendents to collectively reflect on the topic of engaging community and also to learn strategies from each other. Morgan suggested a group interview as a way to

“produce data and insights that would be less accessible without the interaction found in a group” (as cited in Brenner, 2006, p. 12). Before the group interview, the superintendents were given a copy of their own individual interview transcript along with the researcher’s initial summary of major themes that emerged from her collective examination of the individual interview transcript data. At the group interview, in collective reflective conversation, the superintendents helped the researcher validate and clarify the initial thematic findings. The follow-up group interview was 90 minutes and was recorded. As with the first interview, the interviewees signed an agreement for the use of the information.

Data analysis.

I analyzed these data by looking for themes about enhancing community engagement across all five interviews. The interviews were summarized into three to five themes. I followed the systematic analysis framework of (Brenner 2006) once the data were collected. Brenner recommended the following five phases for analysis: transcription, description, analysis, interpretation, and display (p. 366).

I transcribed the interviews as closely as possible to the actual interview, leaving out the pauses and repetitions. For the transcription, I chose representative quotations from each interviewee that fit the themes I had identified. When appropriate, I summarized some of the experiences that contributed to the themes. For the purpose of anonymity, pseudonyms were used. No identifying information was included.

I used open (emergent) coding rather than closed or (predetermined) coding, as described by Brenner (2006, p. 367). Through open coding, I identified five themes that linked and tied together the individual superintendent’s experiences and knowledge

gained from practice. In the end, I identified purposes and reasons for engaging the community so that current and future superintendents and educational leaders will understand the risks but, more importantly, come to realize the benefits of engaging the community.

CHAPTER FOUR

Findings

Introduction

For this study, I interviewed five superintendents currently serving in the suburbs of a large Midwest metropolitan area. All had been in their current positions for at least five years. All but one superintendent had longevity in other districts. One had been superintendent in a district for eight years, which is considered a relatively long tenure. At least two had been in more than one state as a superintendent.

The superintendents interviewed for the study were recommended for their commitment to community engagement by other leaders in the same geographic area. Two of the interviewees were recommended by two persons. All of the superintendents were male. The districts in which these superintendents served were medium-sized suburban districts.

Common themes began to emerge as I interviewed these tenured superintendents. They strongly believed that any superintendent who desired longevity in the school district needed to embrace the community's values, partner with community organizations, build trust internally and externally, develop a systems approach to communication, and engage the community strategically.

Theme I: Embracing Community Values

All of the superintendents saw engaging the community as a key responsibility of the superintendent, and several actually tied it directly to success or failure of a superintendent. Baker strongly responded to the need to engage the community:

I think it's the key to whether you keep your job as a superintendent or not. I think any superintendent in the country that takes a job and doesn't get actively involved in the community...I would be willing to bet...won't last long. The average life of a superintendent in a community is not long anyway...If you take a job to be a Superintendent of Schools and that's your sole purpose, you will fail. If you take a job as a superintendent to help make the school and community better, you've got a better chance of succeeding. If your attitude as a superintendent is, I'm coming and leave me alone, I'm going to work on the school - you will fail. There's not a separation.

It appears that learning what the community values as quickly as possible is a necessity.

None of the superintendents had grown up in the communities, so essentially they were outsiders coming from, in some cases, very different value systems. A superintendent has a short window to gather information about the community's values and to demonstrate that he/she will deliver on those values. The relationship between the superintendent and the community is very unique. McCabe et al. (2005) advised superintendents to "pay attention to...internal and external audiences during this honeymoon period. This is also the time to give the district the bad news about the problems you diagnosed and the medicine that has to be prescribed (p. 85).

Superintendent Doug Bassett characterized the role of the superintendent as that of a "tourist." He stated that the stakeholders have ownership and longevity in the district, and no matter how competent and effective the superintendent may be, the community will always look at the superintendent as somewhat of a "tourist." Bassett further explained this relationship between the community and the superintendent as "the superintendent is a tourist because more often than not, a superintendent is recruited and may not have been from the community." He clarifies that if a superintendent expects to have longevity in the position, he or she needs to assess the resources in the community and learn the values of the community as quickly and efficiently as possible.

In a follow-up interview with Superintendents Boettcher and Baker, Bassett's comments regarding a superintendent being a "tourist" were shared, and Boettcher had a different twist on it. Boettcher added,

Whatever the community values are... Whatever the power structure is...I guess you are the tourist, but you have to work within those. You don't go about changing those overnight. I have seen some superintendents there 5-7-10 years. They're still treated as a tourist... They're still treated as an outsider. Others break through those barriers and become part of the structure, become part of the community pretty quickly. Others don't ...maybe it's the match thing, I don't know.

Interestingly, he commented above that superintendents need to find a district and community that closely matches their own values.

Baker noted that the learning about the community begins during the interviewing process. The search firms provide an overview of the community, but the candidate cannot rely solely on the search firms to learn the community values. "They don't always have an exact picture; you really have to do your homework. You really have to be an independent thinker...They don't know me...what I have done in my career...the way I perceive myself and the way I feel I can help a community...it's not the same way someone else might do it."

Commenting on learning the community values by exploring the history of the community, Bassett said,

Any new employee...has to learn very quickly how to adapt to this new culture with this other history, with this new set of values. As a superintendent, the first thing I want to learn is what is the history of the community, what are some of the community values?

In fact, sometimes during the interviewing process, the superintendent candidate may determine that the community values are not a fit for the candidate. In one case,

superintendent, Daniel Snyder, decided to pull out of the interviewing process and sought employment in another district. He said,

I was a finalist for Superintendency in Marysville. And didn't really want to be there – the head hunter had asked to put me in – he said you won't make it but I need a good slate of candidates. And the next thing I know I am the finalist. I went out to dinner with the board, and the board said, what is your biggest concern? I said 'you!'...it was my biggest concern because they were fighting with each other, and they still wanted to talk to me...but a position opened up in another district...so I jumped and left Marysville sitting there.

Boettcher and Baker confirmed this in a follow-up conversation. Baker said, "For me it's really important that I do a lot of homework on the community values...I have to go to a certain fit for me to be successful...You just have to know that about yourself or you can really screw up." Boettcher agreed, "That's where I've seen superintendents get in trouble is either they're desperate to jump, or I'll even talk about myself, thought that town was the best place to be and couldn't be a better job around...and it's not!"

In a recent publication, Evert and Van Deuren (2013) interviewed superintendents who had changed positions. The superintendents found their new positions were a much better fit. Evert and Van Deuren explained,

The new position was a much better fit for them in ways that they did not realize until they were in the new position. These superintendents learned the value of working to personal strengths and becoming more candid with themselves and others about their skill sets. This enhanced self-awareness enabled these superintendents to use their strengths as a way to help them find positions where their service would be best utilized. (p. 103)

Deciding whether the district is a good fit for you, appears to be a very important consideration. The values of the community may be very different from the superintendent's values or the values from those of any previous community in which the superintendent served. Baker cautioned,

When you're a superintendent and you walk into a community, it could be completely different than the previous community. All the traditions and all the expectations you had in that other community, may not even exist in the new community – it may be completely different...If you walk in saying, that's not what I'm used to, guess what will happen to you? You're the new guy on the block...you need to respect and value what a community values whether you understand it or not because you won't make it long if you don't...it'll come back to haunt you.

Despite having effectively utilized a Community Advisory Committee in a previous district, Boettcher's current school board did not value the use of community advisory committees. Instead they strongly objected, believing that it would dilute the power of the school board. Boettcher learned to work with his board, but had he insisted, he may have had a much shorter tenure. "Superintendents need to be in tune to the community values," says Boettcher. In the interviewing process, it would be advisable to talk about leadership style because some superintendents may have trouble adjusting their style to mesh with the style valued by the community. Bassett explained that community values lie for the most part in tradition, and the power lies in those who maintain the tradition unless the power structure is evolving with newly developed areas or young people moving into leadership positions.

In the process of learning about the community's values, the new superintendent or superintendent candidate should discover the power structure in the community. The power structure will tell what the community values. "You can't depend on the search firms," said Baker in a follow-up conversation with Baker and Boettcher. He noted that the superintendent candidate might visit some of the local establishments and be a good listener. Once the superintendent takes the position, he or she is no longer able to visit the local places anonymously. The superintendent needs to find the visible and the nonvisible power structure. The nonvisible power structure plays a big role in what

happens in the community and in the school district. “It takes more than a year to find the invisible power structure, but it is very important,” says Bassett. Interestingly, Boettcher added that in his search for community values and the community power structure, he discovered the mayor was related to his wife. It is essentially a small world; you need to be careful because people are connected.

The power structure carries the values forward. In a conversation with Baker and Boettcher, Boettcher commented, “How you climb through the values and the power structure is the key... I like the sailing metaphor; it’s learning how to tack and to jibe on a sailboat...where you want to get is never a straight line.” Baker added,

Sometimes you really have to dive deep into understanding the history and tradition of the community to find the community values...but something that is absolutely critical for the superintendent is to understand the individuals that really have the impact...the people that I got to know and that had respect for me are the people that make things happen in the community.” It can be difficult to identify shifting power structures.

Snyder had a similar experience. It took Snyder over a year to discover the power structure, as it was evolving when he took the reins. In the process, he said he learned the history of the power structure of the community. In the past, one extremely wealthy family had influenced the entire community; if the family approved, it got done. Either the community was comfortable with the family’s decisions, or simply intimidated by the wealth and influence. He said today, there are no specific influences. It is spread out, so the superintendent has to connect with multiple stakeholders. The board represents the community, however, sometimes Snyder says he has to remind people to vote differently if they are not happy.

Engaging the community means knowing what it values. Boettcher observed, “If you don’t have the community engagement, you don’t set the priorities for the community.” To set priorities, you need to know the community and what it values. Even though the school board represents the community, Baker stressed that those seven elected officials “are not the apex of the organization. The apex of the organization is the community values.” He further explains,

If you don’t respect those community values – if you don’t actively engage the people in that community who are key community leaders and respect what they’ve done and what they are doing, you will fail. It’s regardless of all the wonderful things that you do in your school district, you will fail.

Baker shared that he had read about community values being at the center of school policy in Sergiovanni (1994), “We are into authentic community when community becomes embodied in the school’s policy structure itself, when community values are at the center of our thinking (p. xiii).

In a conversation with Baker and Boettcher, Baker added that in his opinion the relationship between the superintendent and those four to five power factions was probably more important than the relationship between the superintendent and the board members. He believed the superintendent needed to gain the respect of individuals who represented those factions because they were the people who made positive changes in the community. Unfortunately, Boettcher observed those five factions could rarely come to consensus. For natural connections to those power individuals, Boettcher observed that it is a good idea to talk to the administrative team, which for the most part has been a part of the community for a number of years.

To validate the community values and to be sure that the superintendent has accurately determined the community values, the superintendent needs to gather data

from the community. Sanders noted that surveys are one way to gather this information. Sanders uses community forums to gather information from his community stakeholders. The community input helps the district “validate the things that we are doing and the direction that we are moving in,” says Sanders, “It keeps us in tune with the community values.”

Based on those community values, the superintendents set the goals for the district. In my conversation with Baker and Boettcher, Boettcher cautioned that those goals should not be set too quickly. The superintendent needs to work with the community and get to know the community before the superintendent can accurately set those goals. “You can set the directions,” says Boettcher, “but not the goals immediately.” He continued, “Where kids are at is where we need to start.”

As the community values are confirmed, the superintendent needs to identify the stakeholders and community organizations that represent those values. These stakeholders may look different in each community, but it is critical to engage and partner with these stakeholders and community organizations to gain support for the school district to increase the opportunities for students.

Theme II: Partnering with Community Organizations

The superintendents talked about the importance of identifying key stakeholders in their districts, not only to demonstrate their willingness to involve themselves in the community but also to enlist support for the school district. Boettcher identified students, staff, union, parents, foundations, business community, and nonparents as stakeholders. Expanding the stakeholder pool, Baker identified the university, key leaders in the community, the YMCA, the park district, the hospital leaders, parents, the Kiwanis, the

Chamber of Commerce, and a multi-cultural organization as stakeholders. Echoing the above, Sanders identified business leaders, industry, local colleges, neighborhoods, parents, the PTO, community leaders (mayor, village presidents), the education foundation, and the administrative team as stakeholders. Inviting stakeholders to come closer is a way to be proactive in engaging the community. Sanders has “Tea with Ted” every month for moms and dads. “You have to know who your audience is to reach your audience, said Sanders.

The superintendents talked about the importance of being seen in the community in a variety of capacities. “You have to be willing to leave your office...and go to someone else’s backyard,” said Baker. The superintendents found it beneficial to be on local committees and to participate in community events (e.g. community walks). Below, Bassett explained the process for engagement that every superintendent needs to follow:

Nothing’s going to happen unless you can engender community support, and the way you engender community support is you look at different ways that you can engage the community in partnerships with the school...You look at the organizations within your community; you look at the governmental leaders within your community; you look at the businesses within your community...you look at the faith leaders in your community, and you reach out to them and start forming relationships...Once you start forming that relationship, you can then use that opportunity to educate about the school district, and from education, you can build partnerships, and from partnerships, you can create engagement.

According to Bassett, engagement is built, in part, on forming partnerships within the community. Snyder learned early that he had to identify where the influences were in the community to direct those political influences into benefits to the community and school district. He explained,

Certainly I recognized early on ...that influence is important and then translating that into an influence that’s also beyond the political process but becomes quite frankly a process of one on one with parents and or community leaders... that can help you in a district as well.

Several of the superintendents described groups and organizations that were important to engage. It was clear that the superintendents understood “engage” to be reciprocal. Not only did the superintendents need to get the message out about the district and its needs, but the only way to do that was to be actively involved in the community—to have a presence on their committees and to be actively involved in the events of the community, to have a physical face, and to have a presence.

Superintendent Sanders described how he is actively engaged with his community,

I work with the mayor, business leaders, community members... the city has one of its strategic goals, improving teaching and learning or improving education...components...I work with the park district and city officials and community leaders for...summer reading programs and community walks...in subdivisions with the police, with the fire department ...out there where people live walking through their community... Another way I engage the community is ...serve on the United Way Board...and I serve on the Educations Foundation ...which includes community and business leaders, so you stay engaged.

Boettcher decided early that developing a relationship with the mayor would be important to his school district, as the mayor had 32 years of longevity. Securing seats on the Chamber of Commerce, National Lab Advisory Board, the City Planning Commission, and the business community were important connections in his district. He was especially pleased that he was able to secure a permanent seat on the Chamber planning commission and on the National Lab Advisory Board for the district. The strategy here was to play a role in existing community committees and organizations rather than developing committees or advisory boards.

Several districts partnered with large institutions in their communities, including large hospitals, colleges, and universities. Boettcher and Snyder enlisted the support of local hospitals to bring in speakers for parents on a variety of topics (e.g. bullying).

Baker developed a partnership with the university in the area to enhance the opportunities for his students and staff. Student teachers were mentored by seasoned teachers in the district; in return the district received extra services and technology support. He also developed a multi-culture committee to develop relationships with his diverse community.

Baker stated that he builds partnerships through his principals and leadership team. At his administrative team meeting each month he keeps his team abreast of opportunities in the community. For example, he shared that the Chamber was interested in developing a teen center and needed input about its potential use by the teens. Community engagement through partnerships is about connecting people that might have needs to others who are interested in that project.

Snyder believes in partnerships with organizations, the Chamber, and universities. However, he has not found as many opportunities in his current district as he did in previous districts. One reason, he believes, is that he does not have a university in his local area. He has minimal engagement with the community college and the university in surrounding communities. In previous districts, Snyder had more success with the Chamber; in this district the Chamber is more interested in social networking than about partnering with the schools to accomplish specific goals. He is discovering in his district, the community is looking to the schools to take the lead, to initiate the partnership. He expressed, "What a wonderful discovery! In this district, we have come full-circle!" After searching to discover the unifying entity in the district (the community leader that everyone values in the community), the superintendent found that the community values

the leadership of the schools. Snyder's district is medium to large. This phenomenon is found more often in smaller districts.

The community values the schools, and it is critical for superintendents to be watchful of maintaining the community trust. Every superintendent needs to work on building and maintaining trust in a very critical society.

Theme III: Building Trust Internally and Externally

Community partners and approaches necessarily varied from one school to the next within the same district. Building trust was critical to successful community engagement. Building trust was important on two fronts: the internal stakeholders and the external stakeholders. If one or the other was not developed, the superintendents were limited in their ability to effectively engage the community. "When at first I arrived, people just naturally don't trust or think you are going to be around. They don't know what you're like," said Baker.

Superintendent Bassett believed that superintendents need to engage first and foremost their own staff, their internal stakeholders. The internal ones are the members of the organization. "A superintendent needs to start on the inside and work toward the outside," said Boettcher. Bassett advised,

If you are superintendent, you better make sure that the principals understand who and what you are and the direction that you have for sharing the vision for the district...Principals are extremely important... if you don't have them as a superintendent, you don't have your internal stakeholders because they're the people that talk to your teachers.

The principals and teachers connect directly back to the community. They are the ones who, through their actions, will implement the vision and mission and communicate to the parents the direction of the district. All of the superintendents trusted and depended

heavily on their principals to engage their parents because the principals were closely connected to their parents and because the school populations were often diverse. In my follow-up conversation with Baker and Boettcher, they both agreed that a superintendent needs to get rid of those administrators who are not on the same page as the superintendent.

If district goals are to be met, a superintendent also has to engage the parents and those segments of the community that have the most vested interest in a quality educational system. Bassett explained, “You have to engage that part of the community that is against implementation of a new idea, e.g. adopting Chicago Math. Until you engage those segments, they will see changes that the district wants to make as a ‘conspiracy.’”

Bassett said he makes a point of getting into every classroom every year to gain the trust of the students and teachers. By making this effort, the teachers realize that the superintendent is in tune with them. Students recognize him on the street and in the schools. It shows that he is connected with learning. Baker, in a follow-up discussion, confirmed this idea. He said it is important for the community to see the superintendent connecting with the students. Baker said,

If you really want to make a dent, if you really want to keep your job as a superintendent, you need to be able to walk into a second or third grade classroom and every kid turns around and ask you how you’re doing. The reason it’s important is because they go home and tell their parents they know me...they have a personal connection with me...their parents see me connecting with their child. It may be the most significant thing I do that has a positive impact.

Finally, the board is both an internal and external stakeholder, as they are elected by the community. If the superintendent has not engaged the board, he/she cannot

accomplish anything. Bassett says that the PTO and PTA parents are very important, as that is where most board members come from.

For external partners, Bassett looked toward his park district, governmental partners (city, township), business community, the banking industry, and organizations such as the Rotary. These external partners were especially helpful when it came to fundraising, and when Bassett needed to get a referendum passed, it was beneficial for him to be on a community development commission. He developed inclusive committees representing all the stakeholders. The district administrative team used its website, TV, and radio to educate the public because education precedes engagement—people need to understand before they create relationships through engagement. “You have to educate, then you have to engage – that’s kind of the way,” said Bassett.

Building trust with teachers and administrators strengthens ties with the community at large. Many of the teachers are also members of the community, so the superintendent can effectively connect to the community by having open communication with district staff and faculty. In a former position, Boettcher said he believed developing strong learning communities would be most important and that connecting with external stakeholders was secondary and definitely not a priority. Boettcher explained,

Mostly, I ...thought my engagement was all internal...it was about being in-house, but we never did the work to engage the community...many of the strategies were great and we built a lot of teacher support...didn’t get a lot of community support.” He explained further, “if you don’t have the community engagement, you don’t set the priorities for the community.

Boettcher trusts his Senior Management Team to answer community inquiries.

To keep the whole team abreast of inquiries and responses, team members communicate

in real time about these discussions with the board and community members. The superintendent is only one person, but when he/she trusts his senior management team to directly answer questions, he can then manage community engagement. So, it is important to carefully select those assistant superintendents. It takes time for a superintendent to build that type of trust. Boettcher trusts his building principals to connect with the parents in their school boundaries. Boettcher's principals "work with their PTOs, their boosters, and advisory councils." His principals are primarily about instruction and do not attend board meetings past 9:00 PM to keep them fresh for the school day. Thus, Boettcher has two levels of management: the district level or central office and the regional level which is his building principals. He firmly believes that building principals need to stay out of the politics as much as possible.

Baker builds community trust in a different manner. If he is available, he picks up his own phone. People in the community have his direct number. He believes that listening to a person's concerns and explaining his decision-making diffuses potential problems. He is not necessarily able to change his decisions, but the explaining puts the person in a better frame of mind. Baker explained his way of building trust,

I have people walk in off the street all the time to talk to me about issues...if I am not in a meeting...if I'm not busy...the best thing for me to do is to deal with those angry, frustrated parents with opinions...to deal with them immediately that day...even if I go home at night you know, I'll call off my cell – so I'm very accessible and visible...they're comfortable coming up to me. I suspect that's real critical; if they weren't comfortable, they wouldn't come and share with me their problems.

Baker believes being immediately accessible to community is worth the risk. He said,

You have to be honest with people. Just because someone comes in and complains about something doesn't mean you just agree with them...90% of what

I do when there's a problem is just listening...people tend to respect you when you look at them and say, 'I can't. I can't do that and here's why. I understand how you feel...' Sometimes you can lead them to the right person.

Being honest and up front with people is a way to build trust and respect. Baker found it effective to explain the reasons behind his decision-making rather than to avoid individuals who might confront him in an angry manner. With the matter explained and discussed, both went away from the situation satisfied.

Similarly, Snyder believes in building trust by "having the camel under the tent." He wants people who have strong opinions that often are negative to be a part of the process. By being involved, "almost every time, they come out as being our advocates...so I just go after them," said Snyder. If he sees that someone has written a scathing opinion in the newspaper, he will call them up and invite them to coffee to talk about it. He is usually able to diffuse the situation substantially because they usually have misconceptions. He also learns a lot. He sorts through their opinions and is usually able to deliver on what they want. He uses a strategy he calls "reflective listening." He said, "If I do this, would that be good? – ok, I think I can do that."

Effective management of community engagement goes hand in hand with developing relationships. Baker believes that the "most significant impact...on developing a partnership...is the relationship between the individual ...and the principal/individual responsible for the specific task." Baker is constantly updating people he meets about what the district is doing, but he trusts his school principals to connect with industry, organization, and parents in the school's boundaries. Baker trusts his principals to connect with businesses and leaders in his school boundary who can further the opportunities for his school children. He explained,

Our school principals are very good at connecting with outside industry and elected officials, city government...and the university...to develop their own partnerships to meet the mission of their schools...they have been encouraged to get out in the community...and work with them...My principals are encouraged by me to actively engage the community in their schools. I have two principals I know that work with churches to tutor kids.

He further explained that the district has diverse communities: “Remember that in a lot of the diverse communities, we have their church...church is their main focal point.” He believes that schools and districts need to think out of the box. There are lots of opportunities to work with the churches and organizations in the community. “You just have to connect,” he said. The district formed a partnership with the YMCA to develop an after-school program for students. The program is only as good as the relationship between the people who are partnering. Eventually relationships evolve and eventually these programs can become systematic and district-wide. It all depends on the relationship and the trust that is felt between the partners.

By trusting principals to connect with their parents, the district can meet the needs of diverse populations. For some populations, it means connecting to church groups to which the parents and children have strong ties. It is critical for the superintendent to hire trusted principals who can make these connections. The superintendent needs to trust the administrative team that he/she has selected.

Sanders builds trust and rapport with his administrators by giving them quite a bit of freedom. He does not proofread everything his administrators send out, nor does he have time to proofread all that goes out. The level of trust begins with the hiring. He hires his own principals, and the board is not involved. The board only hires one person, the superintendent, so the board members are not involved in the hiring process for teachers or administrators. If anything goes wrong with the staff, the superintendent is

responsible; therefore, he has the final say in the hiring of the principals, and he does not want the board involved.

Sanders screens the applicants first. However, he is not involved in the initial interviews. A teacher team provides feedback to the superintendent, but the team does not narrow the candidates down to three or four. The teachers' feedback goes to the administrative team, and the team interviews the candidates. Using the feedback provided from the administrative team, Sanders selects the top three or four to be interviewed by him. He uses a vetting process prior to selecting the final three or four to interview.

Snyder learned to trust the experts he hired to advise him. A superintendent cannot be an expert on all facets of education. Snyder says he learned about the importance of trust and engagement from his former superintendents and mentors who had very different leadership styles. He said,

So on one hand I felt like I learned a lot about curriculum and instruction from the one, but learned (from the other) that short of some sort of engagement process with the community, you weren't going to get things done. On the other hand, even with a strong engagement process, as long as you had people around that knew – I mean Tom would listen – Tom would say – ok is that what we need to do? Yes? Ok, go do that – he wouldn't question you. He didn't necessarily know it, but he would trust that the individuals around him did (know it) – so I think that the engagement process was critical to getting the district moving forward and I think that experience for me was something that shaped me.

Baker and Boettcher confirmed the importance of superintendents' listening to their administrators and getting consensus on decision-making. Baker also said that he takes responsibility for any consensus decision-making in his district. "No one's hanging out there alone. Even if I disagree if we build a consensus on an issue and go to the board and it fails... I will take full responsibility. We work as a team." Boettcher agreed.

Snyder also believes that it is key to his district to have competent principals since they learn from each other. He needs to be able to trust those principals to do their jobs, so the district has a very rigorous hiring process for principals. Like Sanders, Snyder does the initial screening with his team to narrow it down to three or four. The process is community-centered, so the community owns it. A team of eight people (parents and teachers) do the final hire. Developing an internal trust is important. Snyder explained,

A teacher talking over the backyard fence can undo everything I've done...I need to make sure that the relationships I have with the staff and their level of trust is more important than any time ever – they need to be able to influence that parent or community member at the grocery store.

The superintendent must be able to trust the principals to deliver on the strategic plan. Snyder's way of ensuring that will happen is to require principals to report on the implementation of the plan as part of their evaluation. Thus, a superintendent must surround him/herself with competent, trusted individuals.

To maintain trust, communication is important. Baker explained that it is his responsibility as a superintendent to maintain communication relationships with the key people involved in partnerships with the district. He tries to maintain communication about changes occurring each year in the school district. He needs to ensure that there are no surprises—that way the partners will feel comfortable letting the district know if there is something they need to be doing. He said, "It is my hope that they have enough trust in me and a comfort level with me that if they have an issue with something happening in our district, they will come and speak with me, so we can work it out."

Another important way to build the trust of the community is to publish and use survey data or community input gained from other engagement strategies. Several superintendents talked about summarizing survey data, forum input, and committee

findings and publishing these data on their websites. “I learned that if you ask for input you need to show in some way that you value the input. If districts don’t do this, the communities will stop responding,” said Boettcher.

Transparency was a strategy that several of the superintendents utilized to build trust. Bassett and Sanders especially talked about building trust in the community through the use of transparency. For example, these two superintendents published their contracts in the media. For Sanders, it helped develop a trusting relationship with the media. For Bassett, it helped him with his Strategic Plan Committee process. His citizens’ finance committee was involved with budget reductions, so by opening up the district finances and publishing his contract, he built trust with the citizens’ committee participants and with the community. Bassett maintained,

There are no secrets – they know my salary benefit; they know everything about me...I believe in something I call radical transparency – it’s not comfortable and it’s not easy, but I in the end no one will question you because you have been honest – radical transparency means we posted everything, so everyone knows now what everyone is getting...all of it.

He is hoping that transparency and engaging the community in strategic planning will help the district down the road when it tackles divisive issues like consolidation of schools into grade centers. The community will trust that there are no secrets behind district messages.

Boettcher also believes in building trust by delivering a consistent message. He challenges his staff to use the mission statement twice a day. He insists the mission statement needs to be short and meaningful. His district’s mission statement is *Always Learning, Always Growing*. Any staff member or student should be able to talk about learning and growing. Boettcher asserted,

There's not a conversation that they can have that's not about "learning" or "growing" or both...I can talk to students, staff...our union...our parents...businesses...about what we are learning and how this organization is growing. We are a learning organization, and we should be able to show growth.

He believes that keeping everyone focused has really helped. He further explains, "The district isn't the biggest organization or the biggest employer in town, but we're a big gorilla."

Snyder, like Bassett, Boettcher, and Sanders, knows that every district has its challenges, whether it is referenda, a staff behavior issue, an injured student, or some other issue. A superintendent has to be strong enough to face these times of crisis, but it surely helps to have built trust and strong partner relationships before those difficult times hit. "I hope that we build enough trust and good will in the community to get through those tough time periods," said Snyder. He is hoping the community will give the district the benefit of a doubt because of the district's trusted track record before forming an opinion.

Sometimes trust is temporarily lost along the way when particular storms arise in the district. "When the storm subsides," said Bassett, "we have to figure out how to get them back."

Hank Rubin (2002) who wrote extensively about collaborative leadership, recommended, "Cultivating partners shouldn't end once they commit to the partnership. Cultivation of partners' attachment to the collaboration requires on-going attention...Effective collaboration happens between people – one person at a time" (p. 106). Fullan and Hargreaves (1996) said, "Trust in process will often lead to trust in people...trust in expertise and processes helps organizations develop and solve problems

on a continuing basis in an environment where problems and challenges are continuous and changing” (p. 74).

In summary, building and sustaining trust is an ongoing task for superintendents. “Boards are constantly changing...it takes a lot of energy to sustain these relationships,” said Boettcher. To sustain trust, all of these superintendents realized that consistent, timely communication was important and needed to be systematic. Fullan and Hargreaves (1996) said, “Trust in process will often lead to trust in people...trust in expertise and processes helps organizations develop and solve problems on a continuing basis in an environment where problems and challenges are continuous and changing” (p. 74).

Theme IV: Developing a Systems Approach to Communication

Another theme that surfaced was a systems approach to communication. Carroll and Carroll (2000) talked about developing a systematic communication plan, “School communications should not be carried out as a disconnected series of events and activities...rather they should be guided by a well-conceived marketing communications plan that incorporates both strategy and execution” (p. 109).

Sanders, from a medium sized district that is a combination of rural and suburban, believed that community engagement was not a separate priority or responsibility, but that it should be integrated throughout everything he and his school district do. “I believe in system’s thinking, so I don’t see community engagement as its own stand-alone entity. It ties in with the overarching job that we have to produce students that are college and career ready,” said Sanders. If school districts are to produce students who are “college or career ready,” they also have to change with the times. The manner in which school

districts communicated even five years ago is not adequate to communicate with a community that is very “connected” technologically. News spreads fast. The district needs to be able to communicate with parents and community members instantaneously in some situations.

Bassett, from an affluent suburban district, realizes that personal one-on-one communication is not enough. He said, “You’ve got to have a website; you’ve got to have an active presence in social media; you have to be visible in the community; you have to be involved in service clubs and organizations, such as the Rotary Club.”

Throughout the interviews, I kept hearing the word “systems.” The superintendents talked about having a specific plan or protocol for communicating, a systematic consistent approach. They talked about changing the way they did business. Boettcher, from a Midwest suburban district of medium size, also talked about systems. He said he had learned that a superintendent needs to have a systems approach to engaging the community and responding to the community. He learned that community engagement was important through success and failure. He divulged, “That was my learning curve. Nobody ever laid it out for me – the importance of community engagement or how to be systematic... it’s more important now that community engagement be systematic rather than just random acts.” In the beginning his approach was pretty random, and then he decided it had to be systematic. Boettcher cautioned, “Superintendencies are not the best place for experiential growth.”

Systematic communication kept surfacing as part of the community engagement systems approach. All of the superintendents realized that using a variety of media approaches was necessary. “Communication is part of the engagement strategy,” said

Boettcher. It was his belief that it is absolutely critical to have a communication person on staff, not an administrator who has that as part of his/her duties. Unfortunately, his board never valued or saw the need for a systematic communication strategy. After at least five years of stating the importance of this position and being faced with situations where a communication person would have been of value, the board of education recently hired a Communications Director.

In most districts, communication is assigned to a central office administrator as an additional duty, but Sanders indicated that his district had just hired a part-time third party communication director to make it more cost effective, but he stressed this person is solely dedicated to that goal, noting “that is key.”

As society has immersed itself in the use of social media, so have school districts increasingly realized they need a social media presence. Snyder realized that his district needed to put together some way to communicate with the community. He found the media quite frustrating in his current district. He compared the way he began his superintendence by reflecting on how he utilized the media in ways that were much more positive. He was able to establish relationships by meeting with the editors of the local newspapers. Communicating through TV was the primary way to transmit information to the public. In past districts, he had the TV media into his schools two or three times a week. Frequently, the media would call him to see if he had a story.

However, today those communication strategies no longer work. Snyder has tried to feed the news media stories, but it has been frustrating. He explained, “Today, the newspaper is dying – so the news industry is completely changing the way they are doing business. Unless there’s a murder in one of our schools, no TV station is going to come

out.” Snyder has had to rethink how he communicates with his district, so Snyder’s administrative team began with an audit to gather data from a focus group of parents about their use of social media (Facebook, blogs, Twitter, Pinterest, and Podcasts). The team asked this focus group what they knew about the district and how they found the information. When asked how often they used social media in a week, all but two were on social media more than three times a week. Only one parent out of 20 did not use social media. “So, if that’s where they’re at, I’ve got to go where they’re at,” said Snyder. The information from the focus group allowed the administrative team to develop a plan that would enable them to do a better job of communicating.

Snyder’s district is now primarily using social media (Facebook, Twitter) to communicate with their parents and community. It allows the district to provide accurate information before the local media is able to alter the information. Social media majorly changed in the six years prior to their plan.

When Boettcher surveyed his district to determine where community members found school district information, results indicated that 80% received information from the teachers and staff. Thus, the district did not send central office newsletters, but newsletters were sent from the individual schools. As a communication strategy the central office team made a decision to first inform all teachers and staff when a timely and important communication needed to go to the community. Immediately following the staff, direct communication needed to go to those parents and students involved. The effort was to get accurate information to the community as soon as possible and before the media alters the information. His district uses a messenger system for crisis mode and can send out 6,000 texts or emails per minute. The system is also used for

information regarding key upcoming events. In a follow-up conversation, Boettcher added to his comments about his use of social media,

Sitter, Twitter, and Facebook and all the social media... It happens so fast, and if someone's not controlling the message, it gets really, really hard to keep all the pieces...85% to 90% of our high school kids had smart phones, so we decided that's how we were going to communicate with our high school kids. You can't register without your cell phone number. You still need to know those 10% that aren't.

Sanders communicates with parents through weekly messages and a monthly newsletter. The district "recently hired a public relations person...we're going to begin having a public presence in social media...we're going to have a Facebook page, a Twitter feed, Pinterest, and a blog...we found that we sent out district newsletters in the past, and we spent a lot of money on the mailing for very little result." The person is contracted hourly. Boettcher worked with his board for six years to hire a communications director and finally had the approval.

Sanders and Boettcher have a communication plan for handling tough issues that may arise, e.g. a staff- discipline issue or a health issue. When Sanders had to discipline one of his staff members, he met with his administrative central office staff to discuss the plan for informing the public. He also contacted the press to provide the story. Basically, the superintendent kept the message short, gave the facts, (but not too many facts and details), reassured the public that he has dealt with the issue appropriately, assured that student safety and their well-being are the primary concerns, and finally assured that any inappropriate behavior has been dealt with appropriately. For non-emergency issues, he says he trusts his central office administrative team to answer simple information questions, but he has an understanding with the board that the protocol for anything big is to go through the superintendent. He does not allow himself to be micromanaged by the

board. He does not want the board digging for information through his staff. He says that the board is “to stay in the balcony. The district is on the dance floor. The superintendent goes back and forth from the balcony to the dance floor.” He wants to deal with the issues and with communication to his staff; if the board is not happy, then they are not happy with him. But the superintendent should keep the board informed, so they are on the same page. “A superintendent should never function outside of the board,” said Sanders.

Boettcher and Baker confirmed that a superintendent needs to have an understanding with the board about protocols for communicating about certain issues. A superintendent has about a six month honeymoon period to work with their boards about communication. It is impossible to control who the board will talk to, but the board needs to have one spokesperson. Baker asked his board to give him a chance to respond to any of its concerns. Baker said,

What’s important to me is that the board has one spokesperson. You can’t control who the board talks to. You have to hope the board will give you a chance to respond - to look into whatever their concern is, even if it’s about you. You have to earn that kind of respect, but if you can get your board to agree that this person is the spokesperson, you can get through just about any crisis.

Boettcher said, “I handled all the email responses for the board. My board president never wrote an email, which is great because you can never take them back. I made it clear to my principals that I would be doing all the media from the central office. In a crisis, the principal doesn’t have time to respond to the media.”

Like Sanders, Boettcher also had a communication plan in place for dealing with tough issues. When Boettcher had to deal with a health issue in one of his schools, he discussed the plan for communication with his administrative central office staff. He said

It is really important for the staff to receive the message before the media. When the district discovered Legionnaire's Disease in one of the schools, unfortunately the message to staff had to go out simultaneously to the public message. This was due to the timing of the discovery. It was late in the day, and there wasn't enough time to get the message to the teachers first. So everyone received the message at the same time.

Baker gave examples of news media events in his district. He advised that the superintendent needs to control the message that is put out to the community. The board needs to be aware of the message that will be communicated, but the superintendent needs to provide its message repeatedly and clearly, even if the superintendent is not responding to the direct question posed by the media. Both superintendents, Baker and Boettcher, required that all messages come from the central office. They advised that the superintendent needs to figure out what message to communicate and communicate the consistent, short, and to-the-point message to the media. In addition, they said they ask their own principals to have limited email communication because those messages cannot be taken back. Further, they advise that principals refrain from responding or decision-making when they are in an angry state. Boettcher added, "We always had three bullet points for the media, and one was already filled in, 'Everyone is safe; we're doing everything that we can.'"

Superintendents are better prepared to deal with the tough situations if they have a systematic everyday plan for communicating to the public. Communication is a two way process. Districts need to gather satisfaction data if they are to deliver on their promises; in turn they need to publish the results. Several superintendents used annual surveys as part of their systematic approach. They noted that surveys are a way for districts to receive input from those individuals who are uncomfortable speaking in front of small or

large groups. It was also an avenue for those persons who prefer to be anonymous or who might feel pressured to speak one way or another in front of neighbors.

Annually, Boettcher surveyed his staff members regarding satisfaction with the administration (customer satisfaction) and his parents and members of the community through stakeholder surveys regarding satisfaction with the district. In this district, only after several years (five) of using particular questions can a change be made in the question; this allows for comparability and consistency and allows questions to be added based on relevance and whether a question is capturing the necessary information. Surveys allow everyone to have input, not just those who speak “loudly” and expect to be heard over the others. To gain trust, the district posts the results of surveys. If the results are not posted, people will stop responding. The district may not give all the data, but there is a summation of the results. The district uses software that will sort and analyze open-ended comments by key words and concepts. The district pushes information out to the public in this messaging manner, rather than waiting for people to come to the website.

In Boettcher’s district, board minutes are sent out this way, so the district is no longer passive. The district now has a Twitter account for videos of the latest board meetings and pushes board minutes out onto cell phones. The district also has a Facebook page, which is more static without a lot of dialogue. It is being further developed by the communications director; 8,000 people are following the district, with a student population of 6,000, on Facebook. With Facebook, the district is better able to control the message rather than waiting for the news media to put their twist on the story. Today,

the district has a communication matrix and a protocol for delivering the story to the public when an event occurs, and that first step is communicating with the staff.

Similarly, Snyder uses surveys and believes that surveys are one of the best ways to measure district success. He maintained, “Surveys indicating parent satisfaction and whether students get into the college of choice are measures that indicate district success or failure rather than test scores.” Based on these data, principals discuss results and share suggestions for improvements which they in turn take back to their staffs for implementation.

Preferring face to face communication whenever possible, Baker also communicates with key stakeholders through email, and phone calls as relationships are evolving. In my follow-up interview with Baker and Boettcher, Baker shared a polished document that he creates annually to communicate the positive aspects of the school district, which is in the form of an annual report. There are always positive aspects of the district to put forth to the public.

Likewise, Bassett used a unique communication strategy to educate everyone in his district; he used the water bill to connect with the 80% of his community who have no children in the schools. He also sent out 24,000 postcards, one to each voter. The district engaged the churches and synagogues, who put fliers with district information in their bulletins. Because of ongoing relationship development with the city government and the libraries, the district was able to reach the hard-to-reach audience that are not seeing direct benefits, even though there are many indirect benefits to promoting district goals. Through the use of surveys, the district reached another 350 respondents.

In a follow-up discussion with Boettcher and Baker, Baker commented that he did not prefer surveys for communication. He found it much more reliable to use direct communication with key members from the power factions. Baker said,

Surveys become very generic...What's difficult about surveys is trying to read what the general public – the large majority is trying to say...I rely on those people I think run the community. I get a cup of coffee and drive over to those people once or twice a month. I learn what the pulse is from those people I trust. It takes time to learn who those people are – they're there in every town. I use them as a barometer.

Boettcher added, "It's not the same list, is it?"

A communication strategy that Bassett uses is to list the seven strategies that the district adopted on his board agenda every month, so the board and administration can revisit these goals. Every item on the agenda fits within that framework. People see these goals and objectives every month, and through the agenda, the board is reminded about its responsibility to the community and district, which are one and the same. Two accountability reports are made to the board every year. All teams report back to the original core community strategic planning team every other year.

In summary, communication is the key to ensuring a consistent message comes from the superintendent. It also is essential to keeping people on track with the goals and objectives of the district. Communication must be systematic and timely within the district and with its external partners. A social media presence with up-to-date websites, a Facebook page, and Twitter feeds is essential, as the majority of parents are in the habit of accessing information quickly by phone and internet.

Theme V: Engaging the Community Strategically

The final theme addresses specific engagement strategies these superintendents used to engage their communities. All of these superintendents were recommended to the study because they were committed to engaging their stakeholders and demonstrated that they valued the involvement of their district and community stakeholders. These superintendents engaged the community in the decision-making process through forums, summits, strategic planning teams, and surveys.

Several of the superintendents used a strategy they called “forums” to engage the community and build trust externally. These forums looked somewhat different based on the leader and the make-up of the school district. Baker and Boettcher shared that people in their districts generally came out to a forum if there was an issue. Once the board makes a decision on the issue, the issue decreases. If the board delays its decision for three months, the result will be 15 news media articles and someone in the media receives an award. Both superintendents have advised their boards to be decisive or plan on three articles in a short time frame. Boettcher said, “Do you want an article or a series of articles?”

Baker used an open forum to engage the community in a discussion about the development of the new high school and about how the district would partner with the university to “set a very high standard for student learning.” Baker, who took the helm following the passing of the referendum, used forums to gain the trust of key leaders in the community, university, and district.

Sanders also used forums as a strategy for community engagement. However, depending on the issue or purpose, the forum was structured somewhat differently. When

the district made a major decision, as in the case of its decision to turn two middle schools into a sixth-seventh grade center and an eighth grade center, the purpose of the forum was to provide information, to explain why the decision was necessary, and to give the community an opportunity for questions. The administrative team answered questions and the press was invited. On the other hand, for their forums on curriculum topics, e.g. fine arts, student discipline and school improvement, they had smaller groups and utilized break-outs to gather suggestions and to focus the groups on priorities. The forum concept can be used in different ways.

Sanders further discussed the process his administrative team followed to ensure that diverse stakeholders were involved in the forums. Principals invite parents who represent building viewpoints and their PTOs. The forum is also publicized through the newsletter and the district website, so it is open to anyone who would like to attend. For the smaller forums, attendees pre-register and a colored dot on the name tag indicates the table or group, so the participants are mixed up. All groups explore the same questions and come back to identify common themes. Sanders explained,

We have community forums. We have had topics dealing with student discipline issues...district expansion...issues related to curriculum discussion points...how large is too large for a high school. For our State of the District event we report out ...score data, improvement direction...and then we have some break-out sessions to talk about... strengths and ...areas of opportunity for improvement. Principals send out invites, but it's open to anyone in community- it's open to any taxpayer in the community. We look for major themes...we push that out and follow up on it. It helps us validate...what we are doing ...the direction we're moving in – and keeps us in tune with what the community values.

School boards and communities are not always ready for innovative engagement strategies and may need to be groomed or convinced that a particular strategy is good for the district, which may take time. Traditions are hard to change. Boettcher could not

convince his current board to use forums, which he had used successfully in previous districts. His current board thought it would be diluting its power. However, five years later the board did agree to a rather unique strategy for engaging the community “listening posts,” which are a type of open forum used twice a year (October and January) by Boettcher. He explained that it is a “non-agenda board meeting.” One board member called it “the longest evening of his life” because he is only allowed to listen. For each, three questions are raised based on the strategic plan. Sometimes information comes forward that is inaccurate, but the district realizes what information is not getting out to the community correctly. This experience convinced the board that it needed a systematic approach to communication. The board and superintendent took a “risk.” However, to minimize the risk, they limited questions the first year to those related to the strategic plan, so the administrative team would be prepared to respond to those questions and do something about what people were saying. If you open up and ask for community opinion, “you’ve got to be able to do something with it,” asserted Boettcher. It also was easier to keep people on topic.

In addition, the district designated the board meetings as “special board meetings,” “There was no requirement for taping.” Boettcher explained, “It is a form of damage control...it is one thing to have a bad board meeting, but to play it over three times every day on TV for the next month!” They chose October and January because those are months that the community is generally pretty content. In October, school is open and people are settled in, but there is still a newness. In January, it is just after the holiday and not yet time for staff reduction and budget cuts. They collect people’s comments and publish the bullet statements. “We try to value the input of the participants,” said

Boettcher. The district still has the power of the pen, and so they control how it's written. The second year, the board members chose to add, "And anything else you want to talk about." The senior management team prepared the board for what they might hear from the public, as they already knew some of the hot topics or issues the community would raise. It is the outliers that they are really coming to hear, which really is an early warning system. If a community member comes out on a cold January evening, it is probably a pretty important issue for the person. At the special board meeting, the board only listens.

Similarly, Snyder engages his community through summits. He looks at summits as an opportunity for individuals to be heard. Distinct from a forum, there is both a listening component and an educational component to the summits. For example, experts are brought in to talk about a topic (e.g. all day kindergarten). Then the audience is asked what they learned or what surprised them. The district randomly assigns participants tables as they come in the door. The purpose is to obtain a cross section of views to prevent one faction from dominating the meeting. Participants work in groups. In Snyder's district, this strategy was used for specific topics four times in six years. The first one lasted 10 months, with one meeting a month on the same topic, since the district was experiencing a lot of anxiety. "It is a venue for the community to tell you what their concerns are without having it be a free for all...it engaged them in something that was productive. Out of that came several initiatives," said Snyder.

To engage the community further, Snyder has a steering committee of 18-20 people who assist with running the summit process. They are required to follow a specific format; however, they had input in establishing the format. Through the use of a

summit Snyder involved the entire community to help solve a problem. The summit was held in the local mall. Students were involved because it was important to hear from students about what they thought might be causing an increase in suicides. Initially, the superintendent caught some flack about involving students, but their input was eye-opening and critical to finding solutions. Boettcher agreed, “Kids are so articulate today on some of the issues. They can actually bring reason into the conversation; whereas, if you leave it to the adults, they just want to blame. Many times when kids are brought in as part of it, they’ll move to solutions quicker than the adults.”

In recent months, the district held a community summit on mental health in partnership with the hospital and the police. The district is realizing that it is one of the largest employers in the area and that the town actually is looking toward the district as a focal point. The district is feeling good about the results, realizing that hard work does pay off. People who did not attend the summit often call the district to learn what recommendations resulted from the discussion. In a community that previously was not transparent, the summits are becoming part of the culture.

Despite the fact that summits have been highly successful, all parents are not able to attend summits. Many parents are challenged to attend school events due to long commutes, both parents working, and/or lack of sitters. Snyder reflected on parent involvement. It is his belief that we need to revise our definition of “parent involvement.” Many families have two parents working, are being expected to spend more hours on the job, and are under increased stress. Unless the parents have a specific interest in the topic, they probably will not attend, but they probably will check the website, Twitter feed, or Facebook to get information and follow-up on these topics. As

an added strategy, Snyder decided to get into classroom and videotape happenings in the classroom. By blogging this information, he can get 200 more parents involved.

Physically attending is not the only way to have parent involvement. Parents are stretched. They cannot physically be present all of the time. The definition of what constitutes parent involvement needs to be revised according to Snyder.

In an effort to involve representatives from all stakeholder groups (parents and nonparents who make up over 80% of the community), Bassett used a Strategic Planning Process as an engagement strategy. He required potential team members to submit applications. However, an application did not mean that the applicant would be chosen. The superintendent needed a diverse group, “not the same old—same old.” He did ask for input from board members and administrators, but he did not share the list with them because it was the superintendent’s team. He had a process to come up with a diverse group and did not want to be unduly influenced by the board.

Early on, he had to convince his board that this was an effective community engagement strategy; he took a risk because he had to convince his board in public and in front of his new staff that a community-based strategic plan was what the district needed. If the board had not agreed, as a new superintendent he would have looked foolish to his entire administrative team. In addition to two board members, two principals, three or four teachers, and the superintendent, he had representatives from the whole community involved. “Nothing gets done without a team,” said Bassett. The planning team led by a central office strategic plan facilitator developed a mission, objectives, strategies, and parameters for the district strategic plan. This team worked three full days to develop seven strategies for the district. The core planning team (the oversight team) involved

270 persons involved on action teams. Each action team typically had a citizen and an administrator leading the action team. “The team is alive!” said Bassett.

Teams present the mission, objectives, strategies, and parameters as part of a five-year plan to the school board. The board approved these recommendations because they came from community members who had been engaged in the process- they *were* the process. If the board hadn’t accepted the input from the action committees – if the input wasn’t valued - that would not have been a good situation.

The strategic plan is internalized each year as the administrators review their job descriptions to make sure they are implementing the plan. The community strategic planning team and the board hold them accountable. “It’s not the administrator’s plan, not the superintendent’s plan, not the board’s plan. The community believes in it; the staff believes in it; more importantly the board believes in it...an engagement process that really works!” said Bassett. For example, the superintendent’s citizens finance advisory committee made recommendations for cuts in compensation, personnel, and programs. The books were open to these citizens who were not subject to the public meetings act. They reported directly to the superintendent. The superintendent approved the recommendations. The recommendations were posted online and submitted to the board by the superintendent. A strike ensued because the teachers were not happy. Historically, the teachers always had received what they requested, but in this case, the community members had real data and made real recommendations for cuts. In the end, the decisions were upheld because the community resolved the situation by talking to each other using real transparent data. Bassett proudly stated,

That’s the power of engaging the community in an honest dialogue with real data and being radically transparent throughout the process. We now have a superintendent’s citizens’ finance and facilities’ advisory committee. There are 60 people in this group representing every school, parents, non-parents, old,

young, newcomers, minority, religious, ethnicity... working together for a sustainable future.

Bassett's district is now in the fourth year of its five year strategic plan. Being involved in the decision-making is now part of the culture; the process is becoming engrained.

Using key strategies to engage the community builds capacity. When community members are brought along in the decision-making process, they are less critical because they understand the reasoning behind the decision-making. The community members were provided the facts as these superintendents became more transparent. In all of these districts, the superintendent strategies began to change the culture. When something became part of the culture, it was no longer about individuals but about the power of the process. People were willing to accept change when they are part of the solution. There are many smart and capable individuals in any district, they need to be put to work.

Summary: Reaping the Benefits of Community Engagement

Engaging the community can be risk-taking, but all of the superintendents have identified benefits to engaging the community. So, is it worth the risk? You cannot totally control student achievement; there are a lot of variables. However, a superintendent can do everything in his/her power to engage the community, to connect groups, to make people feel good about the schools, to involve organizations in the schools. "I do believe if you reach out...if you engage community groups, if you find out what they value...I believe that has a huge impact on student achievement...there's no question about it," said Baker.

Sanders found that community engagement benefitted the district by the development of sports programs. His district consisted of several communities. Some had park districts in their communities, but the smaller communities did not have access

to park districts. In his district, he partnered with parent groups to offer basketball, football, soccer, cheerleading, baseball, and softball.

On the other hand, Baker partnered with the area university and reaped many benefits from the partnership. The university benefits from an intense mentoring program in the form of a co-teaching model. The student teaching model, unlike the traditional student teaching, is being incorporated throughout the district. The district has benefited through teacher training and in the area of technology. “The (university) has been very generous in terms of the people and the resources, and we’ve tried to do as much as we can financially,” explained Baker. Technology in one of the buildings was paid for by the university. The university developed a tutoring program to help students with math. Through the university partnership with the district, the university sent “some of their best interns, their professors, their cooperating teachers...and provided some technology, some extra art, some extra PE, and extra music into the programs... They also made a ...full day kindergarten at the elementary,” added Baker.

In addition to university partnership benefits, Baker’s students now have after school choices through a YMCA partnership. Some schools had more success than others with the after-school programs based on the relationship the principal developed. Eventually, these relationships will evolve such that the entire district can benefit from after school programs, but the initial relationship is critical to the development of long term benefits. Baker said, “It’ll never become systematic and district-wide if those initial relationships and programs don’t get kicked off.” He monitors development of these principal/community relationships through his leadership team meetings. Opportunities for engagement are discussed at these meetings.

Through partnerships with community colleges and universities in the area, the transition to college and careers is enhanced by engaging business leaders and professionals at the college and high school level to discuss transition from high school to college and careers. For example, Sanders found it beneficial for his district to partner with the local community college. He enthusiastically talked about why it was good for district students,

We are currently involved with the local community college – in what’s called the Alliance for College Readiness. And there we engage the community – in this case the community college community with other feeder districts ... And there we facilitate meetings with business leaders and education professionals both at the high school and college level – including the middle school – to talk about the whole transition to college.

Sanders said students were able to benefit through business partner internships. Through community engagement, the district worked with the Alliance for College Readiness to develop a class for seniors, which was transitional math for those who would prefer not to take a math class. The Alliance for College Readiness is a collaborative partnership between the local community college and the feeder public school districts to ensure that students are ready for college-level courses and can experience success after high school. The findings indicated that students who did not take a fourth year math course struggled in college and often needed a non-credit remedial math course.

In Baker’s community, the Chamber of Commerce partnered with the district to develop a leadership academy. Through leadership projects, funds were garnered to purchase backpacks for low income students to begin the school year and to develop a vegetable/fruit bar at the schools for healthier eating. Principals engaged with local churches to provide tutoring for their students.

In turn students volunteered in the community. These sustainable partnerships brought benefits for both parties. Engaging the community also brought benefits for the community. In Baker's district, community partners worked together to bring in funds for a family experiencing hardship due to multiple heart surgeries for a young child. Several communities, including the university, pooled resources and volunteers to collect food and package it to send to children in countries throughout the world.

Community engagement not only helped the school district, but it was good for the community. Several of the superintendents talked about their joy in realizing that developing partnerships and engaging the community truly benefitted the community as well as the school. For example, Bassett referred to partnering with community organizations for equipment purchases and for community services. By cooperating with each other for consolidation of services, partnering organizations saved a considerable amount of money. Bassett shares in a banking partnership among the neighboring school district, the park district, and the city, which has resulted in significant savings for all parties. In collaboration, the neighboring school district, the city, and Bassett's school district also make procurement purchases in large scale (e.g., salt).

Another example of partnerships mutually benefitting the school district and the community entity is Baker's collaborative effort in a previous district. He worked out a deal with a builder of a Ronald McDonald House. The unused school property was rented to the Ronald McDonald organization; in return students were able to provide community service by working with these families. The school foundation continues to receive "money...to put in our foundation...eight years later they had to give...money, and then in 25 years they can renew the lease or the district owns the 14 million dollar

building,” proudly states Baker. In yet another district, Bassett formed a partnership with the park district to swap a piece of land for a building. The park district received a 25 year lease on about 60 acres of land to be used for a soccer field. It benefitted young people, and it saved the city money. In his current district, he shares large equipment with the park district and another local school district. It is good to think out of the box and find creative ways to partner. It builds you “cash” for the future.

Partnering with other organizations makes sense. All superintendents found that it was critical aspect to their continued success in the district. Developing relationships with the community in general and partnering with organizations and key persons in the community was definitely a part of these superintendents’ responsibilities—in fact, it was critical to accomplishing district goals. Engaging the community paid off, and when the community knew their engagement was valued, they were willing to do it. “They know that you value their engagement; you value their opinion; you value their contribution to the community and their role in the school district. And when you do it, it has to be real authentic – they’re willing to do a lot for you,” said Bassett.

When meaningful engagement becomes part of the culture, it is no longer about the individual. It becomes the expectation. Bassett maintains the biggest benefit to engaging the community, he stated, ‘When you are dealing with issues that have potential to be controversial, like budget reductions...you got a built-in support...they’re supporters in the community who have been involved, so they understand the difficult decisions that need to be made.’”

In summary, when the community supports the district, the payoffs for students are huge! It is important to communicate successes; others are more likely to repeat

those successes (Schmoker, 1999). Districts reap the benefits of passed referendums for better facilities, lower class sizes, and no shortage of materials and resources to help them grow. To successfully engage the community, the superintendent needs to believe that it is essential to integrate engagement in everything the district initiates. Engagement needs to be systematic beginning with embracing of community values, partnering with community organizations, building trust internally and externally, developing a systems approach to communication, and developing strategies that work with the district culture.

. CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusion

In this final chapter, I will address the primary research question, provide my personal reflections on the information gathered from my research, and discuss future implications for follow-up research and recommended applications for current and future superintendents.

The superintendents in my study represented medium sized districts of 6,000 to 13,000 students. Although they differed in many respects, they also were similar in many respects. These superintendents believed that community engagement was one of their major responsibilities and that it should be integrated into everything they do.

Primary Research Question

The primary question of this study was as follows: how does a superintendent of schools develop educational partnerships that engage the community?

Through the interviews, I primarily discovered that there is not one set procedure or way to engage the community. Chosen strategies depend on the specific community, since every community is at a different place. When the superintendents in this study talked about community engagement, they included university partnerships, parent involvement, and engaging specific community entities under the same umbrella. Cox-Peterson (2011) suggests that community does not just refer to the physical place, but to the relationship among the people involved in the partnership. This idea proved to be true in my study.

In my research, I explored the following themes: embracing community values, partnering with community organizations, building trust internally and externally,

developing a systems approach to communication, and engaging the community strategically. From my findings I have concluded that superintendents who successfully engage their community focus on

- Community values and selection of partners
- Trust-building for sustainability of partnerships
- Systematic communication
- Parent engagement
- Strategic engagement

Community Values and Selection of Partners

All of the superintendents were on committees and boards in the community; however, the type of organizations varied. Identifying the community values and those stakeholders and organizations that represent those values begins during the application and interviewing process. Four of the five superintendents talked about visiting the community and talking to others about the community during the interviewing process. At least two of the superintendents decided not to take a position because the community values did not match their own. They noted that the superintendent has a very small window to learn about the internal and external power structure of the community. If the superintendent is going to have longevity and be able to accomplish goals set for the district, he or she will need to identify those partners, which may be organizations or individuals depending on the school district. These partnering organizations may also be faith-based organizations depending on the diversity of the community. Faith-based organizations were engaged in at least two districts. The stakeholder groups varied from

district to district; however, all superintendents talked about the necessity to engage parents and community officials.

Sanders said, "Community engagement is too large for one person. There is no magic bullet... You have to look at the needs of your district. You have to be in tune." Superintendents need to identify how the people in the district want to be engaged. Through a needs assessment, the superintendent can find out what is needed in the community. All of the superintendents agreed that they had to identify stakeholders and community values very early in their superintendencies and that the window is very short.

Every community has organizations and community leaders who are potential partners with the local school district. These organizations and individuals varied from one district to another. Sadler (2000) mentioned several community resources, which he divided into nine categories: professional associations, environmental organizations, museums and cultural institutions, social and civic groups, ethnic and cultural groups, health agencies and hospitals, senior citizens, and artists and musicians. This proved true in my discussions with the superintendents. At least three of the superintendents mentioned making connections to professional organizations as a resource. All of the superintendents were members of civic groups, (e.g., Chamber and Rotary). Three mentioned partnering with colleges and universities. One mentioned connecting with an ethnic group, which was extremely important in this community area. Three mentioned partnerships with hospitals and health agencies that were significant to their districts. Only one mentioned having made a connection to senior citizens, who were extremely important to his district that has 80% of the residents without children in the schools; another mentioned that if he were superintendent in a neighboring district with a large

senior subdivision, he would definitely make an effort to connect with those residents. Only one mentioned a benefit to his school children resulting from his connection to a musical cultural group. At least two mentioned connecting to religious organizations, which I would consider cultural. All of the superintendents discussed partnering with nonprofit agencies, particularly for after-school programming; at least one was on the board of a major federal institution that was a major employer in the area. Again, based on my research a superintendent needs to assess the potential partners in his/her district and sustain those partnerships by building trust.

Trust-building for Sustainability of Partnerships

Sustaining partnerships is dependent on trusted relationships. Through the interviews with these superintendents, I concluded that the most successful long standing partnerships were those that involved trusted relationships. Both parties were committed to the partnership and both entities had something to gain from being in the partnership. Depending on their location, universities were either very engaged with the district or minimally engaged. To engage the university and to sustain partnerships, it was necessary to build relationships.

These superintendents identified that they need to depend on their administrative teams to develop and sustain those relationships. Superintendents are successful when they hire principals they can trust to engage the school's community. For example, a faith community in the neighborhood near the school might be a focal point for many of the parents and children in the school. A central office administrator or the superintendent may hold a seat on a local community board to maintain the link between that community

organization and the school district. The superintendent needs to be able to trust that the administrator will develop a strong relationship with that organization.

Transparency is a way to gain trust. Some of the superintendents used the word “transparency” in their discussions, but the others demonstrated the necessity for transparency in the ways in which they operated. These superintendents had consensus on the importance of showing the community they valued their input, stating “basically, don’t ask for input unless you are going to publish the input and show that you value it by using it. Part of trust-building is being transparent in one’s communication.”

Systematic Communication

All of the superintendents saw the need for engaging internally as well as externally. It was impossible to be successful without engaging both. The way to sustain relationships and partnerships was to have timely communication with internal and external partners. To sustain partnerships, there should be no surprises. For example, when one district was planning a reduction in administrative staff, the superintendent informed key partners before making the cuts. To sustain internal and external relationships, the district superintendent must develop a systems approach to communication.

All of the superintendents found it essential to have a trusted administrative team and a protocol for communication at all times, including those times of crisis. In dealing with the media, one superintendent told his administrators they needed to deal with the crisis in the building and that all media would be directed to him. Superintendents allowed their team members to answer questions related to their expertise when dealing with board members, but the superintendent needed to be kept informed in real time.

All of the superintendents realized they could maintain trust with the staff and buildings by informing them about situations before any information would reach the media. Often the first person consulted about a situation in the schools is the teacher in the grocery store. The superintendents learned that they needed to keep the messages to the media short and to the point, deciding before-hand the message that needed to be communicated, that students were safe and that the district was dealing with the situation. Contacting the media immediately prevented the media from putting their own twist on the story before the district relayed the message.

All of the superintendents learned that they had to grow with the times. Strategies for communication needed to evolve. Often school districts are slow to change, but all of these superintendents realized it was important to have a staff member solely responsible for communication. For the most part, in a time when budgets are tight and cuts are being made, it was difficult to convince the community that a communication person was worth the cost. Some districts learned the hard way when they were faced with serious issues in the district and a need to communicate their positions to the community. Challenging times arise in all districts, but often the district does not realize the need for a communication plan until it is too late. Today, districts and schools are not always held in high esteem. As Sanders said, “What other profession has to have their unions making commercials to engender them to the community at large?” All of these superintendents had developed a communication plan and had encountered tough issues to communicate to the community.

Based on survey data, all of the superintendents concluded that it is necessary for school systems to use social media. Survey data revealed that the majority of the

stakeholders use social media. It is important for districts to stay updated. Henderson and Mapp (2002) talked about using a variety of ways to communicate to the community. Certainly, that was a topic of conversation for all superintendents in the study. They all have adopted social media as a means of communication, but also use one-on-one communication. As recommended by Henderson and Mapp, they also involve themselves in community events, as any partnership has to be beneficial to both parties to sustain the relationship. Physically visiting classroom and athletic events was really important to communicating that students were at the center of all the superintendent's decisions.

All of these superintendents discussed having to communicate to the public in new and different ways. They all had endorsed use of social media and either had already instituted its use or were in the process of integrating it. Social media facilitates communication with even the busiest parents.

Engaging Parents

Based on this research, I believe there is a need to re-define "parent involvement." For the purpose of reporting parental involvement to the state, districts often use a number representing parents who attended parent conferences. While this number is an indicator, since most districts have day and evening conferences, it does not provide a complete picture. Some parents may be raising children in single-parent homes, may be working third shift, or may be lacking transportation. There are other ways to engage parents. Parents may attend parent/child mini-workshops, may engage through email with the child's teacher, or may contact the teacher by phone. The parent in all likelihood is providing some support through assisting with homework and making sure the child is

rested and fed and ready to engage in learning when they arrive at school. Parents are very busy – transporting their children to after school activities, commuting to work, and sharing duties with a partner because they are both working outside the home. Some might be caregivers for elderly in the home setting. Too often school staffs are too quick to judge whether a parent is involved, especially if they are not involved in a traditional manner. If there is a major curriculum change at the school, there needs to be a way to engage the families so they can better understand how they can support their children. Many times parents are not supportive because they have not been taken along in the process.

School improvement plans all include a “parent component,” but they look very different from one district to another. It would be an interesting study to look at non-traditional ways of engaging families to see the impact on students. This type of community engagement was mentioned in my study, but it was not the major trust. As was mentioned in Chapter Four, superintendents typically delegate parent engagement to their trusted building principals, who have the ability to draw on resources in their school boundaries, e.g. faith-based organizations. Cox-Petersen (2011) cautioned that these relationships cannot be sustained unless an effective leader believes in them, articulates the need, shows support, and talks about the benefits of these relationships to the school and the community. Glanz (2006) talked about parents being the greatest and most available community resource. One superintendent cautioned that superintendents needed to pay attention to parent groups because more often than not board members come from parent groups.

Strategic Engagement

Superintendents with experience must not assume that they can engage stakeholders in a new district in the same manner as a previous district. Boards of Education can hinder community engagement or enhance community support. Depending on the make-up of the board, an initiative or an engagement strategy may take longer to implement. Superintendents with longevity realize that boards they have cultivated to support district goals may suddenly change after an election. For this reason, it is important for superintendents to engage other organizations and individuals in the community who may be able to influence board members. For example, a superintendent had utilized forums in a previous district but could not convince his board to allow him to hold forums in his current district. It took him several years to convince his board to use engagement strategies. Superintendents need to engage their school boards or their tenure will be a short one. A superintendent needs to make sure that he/she has a good working relationship with the board and can work without micromanagement. It appeared that this understanding had to be communicated in the interviewing process. One superintendent realized that he would not have a board that would work with him, so he withdrew from the interviewing process. Once the board is engaged, then the superintendent can develop a strategic plan for engagement. Development and implementation of the strategic plan should include shared leadership.

Shared decision-making.

Shared leadership is key to the success of programs and initiatives. When community members are engaged in shared decision-making, programs and initiatives are sustained even when the administrator moves to another district. Engaging the

community in decision-making may take time, as some school boards may perceive allowing community members to be a part of the decision-making process as taking away some of their power. A community that has a culture of being involved in decision-making and strategic planning will expect future superintendents to engage them.

From meeting with these successful superintendents, it was clear to me that they were successful because they came into the district with a philosophy about community engagement. Most had experiences in other districts and had learned strategies on the job. However, no matter what strategies these superintendents learned in previous districts, they found that they could not necessarily execute these strategies in the same manner or necessarily with the same success.

Snyder provided advice for future superintendents about adjusting for change. He said, “The strategies that we use today won’t work tomorrow. We need to be continually upgrading and changing what we do because the parents that we’re dealing with today are consuming information and seeking out information in much different ways.” Sanders agreed, “The job of the superintendency is changing all the time. It is a lot harder now than it was five years ago.”

As of 2014, the state and federal recommendations for District Improvement Plans still do not include a strategy to involve the community in decision-making. It only talks about parents, district staff and outside experts as stakeholders to be consulted in developing district improvement plans. It does not require that a district show how it has involved the community in providing support for the district. However, after interviewing these superintendents, it is clear that excellent superintendents are involving their communities on a variety of levels and can document engagement of the community

in the decision-making process. They unanimously believed that it was beneficial to devote time to engaging the community.

In fact, one who had experience in several districts believed early in his career that engaging of his staff and exclusion of the community was not one of his best choices. Glanz (2006) had questioned a principal about spending time engaging the community, suggesting that he should be about learning in the building. The principal disagreed and stated that connecting the school to resources outside of the school to help build educational programs was indeed focusing on helping students succeed in life. The superintendents I interviewed trusted their principals to engage their community members to enlist support and to keep members of the community informed about their school.

One challenge that arose in the discussions with the superintendents was a need to consolidate schools and resources to meet reductions in funding. This is a very unpopular venture for most districts, but a necessary task to ensure that all students have equal opportunity in the same district. Because it has such an emotional impact on families, they need to be prepared for the decision through presentation of facts and forums to voice their concerns, be represented in the decision-making process, and be taken along in the journey. These are hard decisions. Too often the superintendent becomes the scapegoat when these hard decision need to be made. True, superintendents need to be ready to make the hard decisions, but communication and community involvement go a long way in easing the stress on everyone involved. This actually goes back to the National School Boards Association (2000), which stated that engagement of the community needed to be an ongoing, collaborative process (as cited in Chadwick, 2004, p. 6). Chadwick (2004) suggested that groups need to think through issues to

arrive at solutions they can all live with. Chadwick cautioned that if the public is not brought along in the reform process, they will support ideas that do not support the schools. Bassett used this strategy by involving community members in his strategic plan process.

The need to involve the public in major decision-making was discussed by all of the superintendents. Two in particular discussed curriculum, boundary line, reduction in teacher compensation, and building changes that supported a need for involving the public in decision-making. At least three of the superintendents talked about ways to include the dissenter. They said they gained from learning the person's viewpoint, and for the most part were able to win these persons over. Fullan (2001) talked about respecting the resisters because they may have ideas that were missed. Two of the superintendents talked at length about their efforts to invite the dissenter in for coffee or to chat about their concerns. For the most part, these superintendents learned from the doubters but also had an opportunity to explain the reason for district decision-making. These superintendents were not always able to deliver exactly what the dissenter wanted, but frequently the person went away with a better understanding and became a supporter of the district.

Lezotte and Snyder (2011) talked about involving the community in the writing and implementation of the strategic plan and keeping the district mission and goals front and center. One of the superintendents involved the community in the strategic plan development and had a report to the board by strategic plan committee members periodically. Each board agenda had the specific strategic goals listed on the board agenda, and board items were listed under each one of those goals. That certainly kept

the strategic plan alive and front and center, rather than having the strategic plan gathering dust on a shelf. By involving the community in the plan, it is sustainable since the superintendent's time in the district generally is limited to five years, and for the most part administrators, superintendents in particular, are thought of as a "visitor," not truly a part of the district.

Overcoming roadblocks.

All of these superintendents had experienced tough times and snags when implementing initiatives and major changes in their districts. All of the superintendents talked about learning from their experiences. To eliminate roadblocks to curriculum changes, one superintendent mentioned holding parent small group informational meetings to explain the need for the changes and potential gains for students. Forums were a strategy to inform the community about the need for changes to grade centers. Those who took their community stakeholders on the journey and involved them in the decision-making process found these major changes much easier to implement, but certainly not every community person was on board nonetheless. Certainly, the superintendent was in a better place when he made the best possible effort to communicate and to involve the community because there was shared responsibility for the decision-making. In working with large organizations such as colleges and universities, communication was the key, so no one had surprises.

Another factor in implementing initiatives that involved large organizations was choosing competent and reliable players from the district – someone the superintendent could count on to be passionate about the project. One superintendent eliminated a player when he began not showing up for key meetings with business leaders. Too often

when there is a personnel change or reassignment of duties, initiatives lose their thrust. One superintendent mentioned having community members involved in the decision-making process was a way to sustain the initiative since those members have long-term buy-in to the district, whereas administrators may only be around for three to five years.

Another way to prevent roadblocks to implementation, discussed by at least one superintendent, was to include responsibility for certain initiatives and for the strategic plan in job descriptions. In that way, the administrator needs to report what he/she has done to support the initiative or strategic goal. Some of the superintendents required that they give reports directly to the school board.

One of the roadblocks discussed by Glanz (2006) was the media. At least one superintendent specifically mentioned informing the public through social media before the local media could put their twist on the story. All of the superintendents saw a need to communicate differently to the public than they did five years ago. Several had specific plans and a protocol for communicating during critical issues facing the district. All of the superintendents faced public crises in the district, which are clearly part of the job.

Another way to fend off roadblocks was to develop a good relationship with the staff by keeping them informed, being in the classrooms, and providing professional development. However, at least one superintendent found that working with the staff and excluding those outside of the school was detrimental. The superintendent realized he needed to have external and internal engagement on major changes.

Building trust was one way to ensure that initiatives would be successful. The superintendents found that if they continued to build trust among the staff and the

community, people would sometimes give the superintendent a pass when he or she might make a mistake. Consistent transparency was an effective strategy for at least two of the superintendents.

Power seemed to be an important aspect of avoiding roadblocks. Each of the superintendents addressed this differently. At least one was very protective of his power and had communication with his board up front about his duties for hiring and firing, for example. He felt that in the end what his staff did was his responsibility and would affect his tenure, so he should be able to select his own personnel without input from the board and community. All of the superintendents talked about who would answer to the board, who he trusted to answer questions voiced by the board. Also all of the superintendents talked about protocol: that it was the board's responsibility to police its own. Board members should come to the superintendent rather than probing staff on issues. Knowing that some board members will speak directly to employees and community members, most superintendents asked for an opportunity to respond to the concern of the board member.

Those superintendents who kept goals in front of the community and staff were most successful in implementing goals. At least two had the goals in front of the board and community on the board agenda each month. Others talked about reminding staff of the mission statement and asking administrators to report on district goals. In the end, success depended on these superintendents keeping others on track by verbalizing the strategic goals rather than allowing them to gather dust. One way to keep all on track was the annual surveys and the posting of the survey data on the websites.

Future Implications

Further research on community engagement might focus on gathering data to demonstrate that community engagement impacts student achievement, specifically performance on newly designed national assessments based on Common Core and the latest Next Generation Science Standards.

All of the superintendents in my study were white males. If I were to conduct further study of community engagement, I would include woman superintendents in the mix. This was a consideration of mine; however, I did not have any women superintendents who had at least five years of tenure recommended to me in the geographic area I had chosen. One woman superintendent's name surfaced at least twice, but she was new in her position. She had previously been an assistant superintendent in the same district.

Another demographic that I would like to include is a superintendent of a diverse population. One of the administrators who influenced my interest, my passion for community engagement, was an African American. He influenced me to look beyond my district to improve student achievement. He expanded my ideas about organizations that could positively contribute to school districts – the churches. The importance of the church in the lives of particular demographics puts these institutions in a position to inspire many opportunities for partnerships with the districts. Holding a meeting in a church building increases the chances of connecting with certain student and parent groups who might not attend an activity if it were held at the school.

It would be interesting to pursue discussions with superintendents of large school districts. In my experience of connecting the university to the districts, I have found the

larger the district, the more difficult it is to develop a partnership and to connect with the right people. I found that many of the administrators are hesitant to make decisions because they are not sure of the boundaries of their authority. Some are not quite sure of their job descriptions. Thus, talking to superintendents about managing community engagement in a larger district might be quite informative.

Future research studies might look at the development of a course for superintendents on community engagement. From this study, it was apparent to me that the superintendency is not the place for experiential growth. Since superintendents generally have a relatively short tenure with a district, averaging five years, it appears they need to have a repertoire of strategies to draw from depending on the unique characteristics of the district. Because no district is exactly like a previous district or like the district next door, administrators in training could learn best from a panel of superintendents about engaging the community. However, these five superintendents learned community engagement strategies on the job from experience, trial and error, or from mentors. The need for a course on community engagement in educational leadership programs is apparent. One of the strengths of these superintendents is their willingness to network with each other. It can be quite lonely out there when you are at the helm.

Personal Reflections

When I began this journey, I pondered what more could be done to engage the community so students and families are supported and students can come to school ready to learn. I questioned just how superintendents go to the greater community to find the resources needed to ensure that all students are college or career ready. This study

confirmed my conviction that school districts cannot go it alone. There are too many concerns for educators in this time of economic challenge and school reform. Successful superintendents connect to the greater community. Engaging the community is an ongoing process, and partnerships are a two-way street.

I discovered that superintendents need to be seen in the community at events, participating on boards, and lending support to other organizations. Superintendents need to visit classrooms and attend school events to be recognized by students and families as the number one person overseeing the education of the child. Parents are also one of the school's greatest resources.

I learned that the primary way in which the superintendent connects with students and families is through the principals because they are able to identify resources in their school community. A superintendent must select principals and an administrative team that he/she can trust to connect with families and nearby organizations, including faith-based organizations. The success and sustainability of partnerships is dependent on the individual who is the school representative and how committed he/she is to the partnership. Consistent and clear communication builds trust and develops relationships with these internal and external partners. Expecting results and accountability assures that partnerships will be sustained.

In my discussions, I learned that superintendents and educators measure their successes with community engagement in a variety of ways. Numbers in attendance at school events is only one measure. Surveys data, one-on-one communication, quality programs for students and families in partnership with universities, YMCAs, church

organizations, and health organizations also contribute to the picture. Superintendents and district personnel need to expand their thinking about potential community partners.

After my research, I understand the challenges that superintendent's face far better. First and foremost, they must enlist the support of their internal stakeholders, the teachers and building administrators, and earn the trust of the school board. The board can also be external because it consists of elected representatives of the greater community but also is directly responsible for supporting teachers and administrators who are delivering the education.

The challenges faced by superintendents are far more challenging than I expected, but they are not insurmountable and certainly not optional. These superintendents have shown that fruits of the efforts are well worth the effort. The superintendent and district need to engage the right people and be in the right place. This is an ongoing effort - boards and power structures are continually changing and evolving.

I thought I had considered most of the ways that schools can partner with the greater community, as I had developed a community partnership organization myself in another community. However, I found there are many additional partners that I had not considered. I learned that superintendents can be quite creative. Superintendents can reduce expenses by partnering for snow removal equipment, banking, and land swaps, just to name a few. Superintendents cannot be afraid to take risks and should not bail on new ideas too soon. It takes time to make lasting changes. The superintendent must be ready to make hard decisions and have people skills. Most importantly, superintendents are able to engage others when they come off as genuine and transparent. Part of transparency is planned consistent, clear, and timely communication to both external and

internal stakeholders. These superintendents agreed that without the board and key power players on the superintendent's side, nothing could get done. Being a good listener and being someone able to communicate to others is extremely important.

Despite differences, these superintendents had much in common. The best part of this experience was the group interview with two superintendents. Despite my concerns about how this experience would work, I found that the superintendents respected my findings. As I discussed the common themes I had identified, it was reassuring to listen to them add to, clarify, and agree about these ideas on community engagement. It made it all the more important and worthwhile. As the evening evolved, they became more open as they found they had common experiences and power groups in their respective districts. They agreed about identifying community values, finding the right fit, and how to build trust. They agreed that community engagement was a part of all their decisions—from the students, teachers, administrators, board members, to the greater community. They felt that transparency, communicating clearly and consistently, and involving the community in the hard decision-making were the most important strategies for engaging others.

References

- AASA. (2006).
- Adsit, T.L. (2011). *Small schools, education and the importance of community*.
Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc.
- Brenner, M.E. (2006). *Handbook of Complementary Methods in Education Research*.
Santa Barbara, CA: AERA.
- Bryk, A. & Schneider, B. (2003). Trust in Schools: A Core Resource for School
Reform. (60.6), 40-44.
- Burns, R. (Ed) (1993). *Parents and schools: From visitors to partners*.
Washington D.C.: NEA Professional Library.
- Cambron-McCabe, N., Cunningham, L., Harvey, J., & Koff, R. (2005). *The
superintendent's fieldbook: A guide for leaders of learning*. Thousand
Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Chadwick, K.G. (2004). *Improving schools through community engagement*.
Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Constantino, S. (2003). *Engaging all families*. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow
Education.
- Cordeiro, P.A. (1996). *Boundary crossings: Educational partnerships and
school leaders*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Inc., Publishers.
- Cox-Petersen, A. (2011). *Educational partnerships: Connecting schools,
families, and the community*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications,
Inc.

- De Carvalho, M. (2001). *Rethinking family-school relations: A critique of parental involvement in schooling*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.
- Evert, T. F. & Van Deuren, A.E. (2013). *Thriving as a superintendent: How to recognize and survive an unanticipated departure*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Education.
- Fullan, M. (2001). *Leading in a culture of change*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Fullan, M. & Hargreaves, A. (1996). *What's worth fighting for in your school?* New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Glanz, G. (2006). *What every principal should know about school-community leadership*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Goodwin, B., Lefkowitz, L., Woempner, C., & Hubbell, E. (2011). *The future of schooling: Educating America in 2020*. Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree Press.
- Henderson, T., & Mapp, K. (2002). *A new wave of evidence: The impact of school family and community connections on student achievement*. Austin, TX: Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL).
- Lezotte L. & Synder K. (2011). *What effective schools do: Re-envisioning the correlates*. Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree Press.
- Lueder, D. (2011). *Involving hard-to-reach parents: Creating family/school partnerships*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Education.

- Merriam, S. B. (2002). *Assessing and evaluating qualitative research*. In S. B. Merriam and Associates (Eds.), *Qualitative research in practice* (pp. 18-36). San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass.
- Partnerships. (n.d.) Retrieved from <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/>
- Pascopella, A. (2011). Superintendent staying power. *District Administration*. Retrieved from <http://districtadministration.com/article/superintenden-staying...>
- Petr, C. (2003). *Building family-school partnerships to improve student outcomes: A primer for educators*. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press.
- Price, H. (2008). *Mobilizing the community to help students succeed*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision & Curriculum Development.
- Reeves, D. (2004). *Assessing educational leaders: Evaluating performance for improved individual and organizational results*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Reglin, G. (1993). *At-risk "parents and family" school involvement: For low income families and African-American families of unmotivated and underachieving students*. Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas Publisher.
- Rovezzi-Carroll, S., & Carroll, D. (2000). *EdMarketing: How smart schools get and keep community support*. Bloomington, IN: National Educational Service.
- Rubin, H. (2002). *Collaborative leadership*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, Inc.

- Salazar, R. (2009). Superintendent's leverage: A case study of strategies utilized by an urban school district superintendent to improve student achievement. (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from *ProQuest, UMI Dissertations Publishing*. (3355434)
- Sergiovanni, T. J. (1994). *Building community in schools*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Inc., Publishers.
- Schmoker, M. (1999). *Results: The key to continuous school improvement*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Shumow, L. (Ed.). (2009). *Promising practices for family and community involvement during high school*. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, Inc.
- Smrekar, C. (1996). *The impact of school choice and community: In the interest of families and schools*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press

APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Introduction

1. Take me back to the beginning and tell me how you became involved with partnerships and community engagement.
2. At what point in your career in administration did you realize it was important to connect to community? What experiences led you to think that it is important?
3. Have community partnerships and community engagement always been a part of your goals or has that changed?
4. Was there a defining moment, event, or discovery?
5. What motivates you to pursue community engagement?

Stakeholders

6. Who are the community stakeholders with whom you are connected?
7. How do you make sure that you are connecting to all stakeholders and not just those who try to get your attention or are influential in the community?
8. How do you engage those with the “quiet voices?”
9. How did you get to know community stakeholders? Did someone introduce you? Did they come forward? What about the quiet ones...were there any that you pursued?
10. What venues are you using to make the connections?
11. Please describe the partnerships that the district has developed.

Managing the Community Engagement Process

12. How do you monitor involvement, and how do you manage the process? Do you delegate involvement to your staff?
13. How do you connect with the stakeholders?
 - a. Are you the principal contact person or do you delegate this to others?
 - b. Do others in your district take an active role in community relations?
 - c. Who is involved on your staff and do you have a process for your staff to report their progress?
 - d. How do you manage it and monitor what is being accomplished?

Specifics of engagement– The what and how

14. Please discuss specific programs that may have been developed as a result of your commitment to community engagement.
15. What current programs do you have that connect to community groups?
16. What partnerships exist between the district and community groups?
17. What types of support do community groups provide?
18. What programs are offered by agencies, organizations and the district to train volunteers or community groups to support families, children, or the school district?
19. How do you educate community groups or outside providers about the district's needs and offerings?
20. How can individuals or groups get information or help?

21. Can you give an example of a time when you stuck your neck out and took a risk as a leader?

22. What is something special that happened?

Community Engagement – Risk and Gain

23. How does community engagement work for you? How does it work against you?

24. You seem to ask for others' opinions and get input from the public. Isn't using stakeholder's opinions dangerous?

25. Do you believe school districts can achieve more by bringing together all community stakeholders?

APPENDIX B: INFORMED CONSENT-PARTICIPANT

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research study. This form outlines the purposes of the study and provides a description of your involvement and rights as a participant.

I consent to participate in a research project conducted by Judith Dymond, a doctoral student at National Louis University located in Wheeling, Illinois.

I understand that this study is entitled: Strategic Community Engagement as Perceived by Five Superintendents. The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore how effective superintendents engage their communities and how they have sustained those partnerships in order to benefit the students and families in their districts.

I understand that my participation will consist of one individual interview lasting one hour in length with a second group interview lasting approximately one hour. I understand that I will receive a copy of my transcribed interview at which time I will have the opportunity to clarify information.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and can be discontinued at any time.

I understand that only the researcher, Judith Dymond, will have access to the tape recordings and that the transcripts will be maintained in a secure file.

I understand that the results of this study may be published or otherwise reported to scientific bodies, but my identity will in no way be revealed.

I understand that in the event I have questions or require additional information I may contact the researcher: Judith Dymond, 861 Edgewood Drive, Sugar Grove, IL 60554, 614-738-9864, Email address: jaedymond@aol.com.

If you have any concerns or questions before or during participation that you feel have not been addressed by me, you may contact my Primary Advisor and Dissertation Chair: Dr. Norman Weston, National Louis University, Wheeling Campus 1000 Capital Drive, Wheeling, IL, 60603, (224) 233-2287; E-mail address: NWeston@nl.edu.

Participant Name (Print)

Participant Signature

Date

Researcher (Print) Judith A. Dymond

Researcher Signature

Date