Conversely, superintendent’s levels of agreement relating to their district’s passive resistance to change were correlated with levels of agreement concerning ingrained patterns of behavior that resist school reform (sig. < 0.01). Superintendents’ levels of agreement relating to their districts ingrained patterns of behavior that resist school reform and/or passive resistance to change were correlated (sig. <0.05) with levels of agreement concerning the following as barriers to district level reform: community expectations, insufficient control over school personnel, school calendar, and tenure (see Table 2).

**Findings**

A number of findings emerged from interpretation and analysis of the results. The most revealing findings provided perspectives of how superintendents’ not only viewed their district characteristics in addressing reform, but what was actually perceived as a barrier to school reform.

Superintendents identified the greatest barriers as mandates, federal requirements, lack of funding, and tenure. Although other barriers were evaluated by the superintendents and additional barriers were provided in the open-ended questions, the four most prominent barriers reveal a perspective that the most pressing barriers appear to be outside of the school district’s scope of control.

The analysis of relationships among the barriers and district characteristics revealed several interesting trends. First, superintendents who characterized their districts as possessing knowledge of school reform also characterized their districts as having leadership skills to enact change. The analysis of results also revealed the opposite; superintendents who claimed that their district did not possess knowledge of school reform also claimed that their district did not have the leadership skills to enact change.
Of the superintendents surveyed, a majority agreed that their district possessed knowledge of successful strategies regarding school reform as well as leadership with the skills to enact change. Superintendents who claimed that their district had both knowledge of successful strategies regarding school reform and the leadership skills to enact change also claimed that their districts had: structures to implement strategies regarding school reform; a systematic plan for change; a sense of urgency to change; and an articulate vision that embraces change. However, a majority also agreed that their districts possessed ingrained patterns of behavior that were resistant to school reform as well as passive resistance to school reform.

Although the relationship between district characteristics relating to knowledge, leadership, passive resistance, and behaviors appear superficially intuitive, when compared with superintendent’s perception of barriers, a much richer description emerged.

Superintendents who claimed that their district had knowledge of school reform strategies and the leadership skills to enact change did not relate to superintendents who identified any single barrier to reform. These superintendents did not perceive barriers as greatly when they agreed that their district had both the skills and knowledge regarding reform. Barriers such as mandates and federal regulations may not appear as challenging when the district has knowledge of successful school reform strategies and leadership skills to enact change.

An alternative trend was evident for superintendents who claimed that their districts had passive resistance to change and ingrained patterns of behavior that resist school reform. This group showed no statistically significant relationship with any systematic measure intended to promote school reform. Further, superintendents who claimed that their districts had passive resistance to change and ingrained patterns of behavior to resist change also claimed all of the
following as barriers to school reform: community expectations, insufficient control over personnel, the school calendar, and tenure.

These additional relationships reveal a deeper possible explanation as to why district superintendents perceive barriers when faced with the pressure to reform their schools. From the results it can be inferred that those districts with knowledge and skills of reform do not perceive barriers in the same manner as those districts that have ingrained patterns and passive resistance to change.

Conclusions

In our research we endeavored to identify the barriers superintendents in the state of Minnesota identified as the most significant to implementing reform efforts at a district/system level. We also compared these perceptions of barriers with the superintendents’ view of their district reform characteristics in hope of revealing what may be impeding change throughout the state’s school systems. Leadership does matter, and specifically at the district level superintendents can have influence over policy and practice (Seashore-Louis, 2010). Although this study is preliminary in that it described and compared the current view of superintendents in mid-western state regarding barriers to reform, it also revealed a number of interesting conclusions.

Although over half of the superintendents viewed all the barriers presented to them in the survey as influential in bringing about change regarding student achievement in their schools, the four greatest barriers were mandates, federal requirements, lack of funding, and tenure. This reveals that the greatest perceived barriers are mainly external in nature and come from outside of the district’s control. The irony in this result is that those national requirements that were
introduced to bring about reform are really perceived by the superintendents as the barriers to bringing about the reform needed for student achievement.

We also found that when superintendents viewed their districts as having knowledge of successful reform strategies with the leadership skills to enact change there was no significant relationship with the superintendent’s agreement with barriers to district reform. School districts that emphasize knowledge of successful reform strategies, such as professional learning communities or response to interventions, while simultaneously emphasizing leadership skills to bring about change, may not perceive barriers as threatening.

Another possible conclusion from this study revealed that superintendents who saw their districts as possessing ingrained behaviors that are resistant to reform while having passive resistance to change also had a relationship to agreement with barriers. This is meaningful for districts as they attempt to implement reform initiatives to resolve and address the current behaviors and cultures that exist in schools that may be detrimental to successful school change.

As a result of these findings the following recommendations have been made for district level leadership interested in improving response to barriers to school level reform:

1. District leadership can increase their ability to respond to reform efforts through professional development sessions aimed at increasing knowledge of successful strategies regarding school reform efforts.

2. District leadership can increase their ability to respond to reform efforts through professional development sessions aimed at advocating for leadership with the skills to enact change.

As with many research efforts, it is the aim of the researchers to reduce the number of possible limitations. Despite such efforts, within this study a number of limitations remained.
The greatest limitation to this study is that data collected are based on self-perception, and the view that the superintendents have of their districts. These views may be skewed based on the ability to interact and truly gauge the reality of how their schools are enacting and viewing school change. These perceptions are also limited in the assumption that each superintendent closely knows their leaders and district characteristics related to reform first hand. It is also limited in the assumption that these superintendents have knowledge of what strategies and reform efforts are successful and how to implement them. A final limitation in measuring the perceptions of organizational leaders is the risk of bias by those surveyed in presenting a more favorable reality of their district than what actually occurs.

There is a need for more research in this area, especially in understanding what superintendents and building level leaders see as oppositional to bringing about reform in schools. Another influential group in impacting change in our school systems is the role of the school board. Research is needed to gauge what level of influence the board has in bringing about school reform.
References

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Appendix A

Barriers to school reform survey:

How many years have you been a superintendent?

Would you consider your district to be:

- Rural
- Suburban
- Urban

What is your student enrollment?

Gender
- Male
- Female

Age: In what year were you born?

Highest degree completed
- 6th year certificate
- Specialists
- Doctorate

Ethnicity
- American Indian or Alaska Native
- Asian
- Black or African American
- Hispanic or Latino
- Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
- White

My district has…

1. the knowledge of successful strategies regarding school reform.

   - strongly agree
   - somewhat agree
   - partly disagree
   - strongly disagree
   - Does not apply

2. the structure to implement strategies regarding school reform.

   - strongly agree
   - somewhat agree
   - partly disagree
   - strongly disagree
   - Does not apply

3. ingrained patterns of behavior that are resistant to school reform. (i.e. traditional beliefs, norms, expectations)
Please rate the following statements regarding barriers to change in your district. As the superintendent of schools I view the following as barriers to change regarding improving student achievement in my district…

9. mandates
- strongly agree - somewhat agree - partly disagree - strongly disagree - Does not apply

10. school boards
- strongly agree - somewhat agree - partly disagree - strongly disagree - Does not apply

11. federal requirements
- strongly agree - somewhat agree - partly disagree - strongly disagree - Does not apply

12. community expectations
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Somewhat Agree</th>
<th>Partly Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Does not Apply</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>13. Lack of control over budgets</td>
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<td>14. Insufficient control over personnel</td>
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<td>15. Lack of funding</td>
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<td>16. School calendar</td>
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<td>17. Tenure</td>
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</table>

Please list any additional internal or external barrier to change evident in your organizations.

Does your district have a strategic long-range plan that is used as a road map for school reform?

Yes
No

Please list your top three school reform efforts in your district.