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***-EXECUTIVE SUMMARY ONLY-***

## **“An Exploration of School Board-Superintendent Relationships in Minnesota”**

**By**

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***-SPECIAL NOTE-***

ALL QUESTIONS ARE WELCOME! The full Report of Study Findings is accessible on the MASA web site or from the author ([man@q.com](mailto:man@q.com) or 612-836-0120). Survey responses (charts only) are also accessible by pasting in the URL link below into your browser (Password: RESULTS)

<http://www.zoomerang.com/Shared/SharedResultsPasswordPage.aspx?ID=L24EJC29XGAC>

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## An Exploration of School Board-Superintendent Relationships in Minnesota

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*INTRODUCTION: This “Executive Summary” is the first section from the full Report of Study Findings. Study findings are based on a state-wide survey, interviews with superintendents, and concepts from the literature. Surveys were completed by 213 Minnesota superintendents representing 56% of the sample of MASA members--current superintendents and recently retired superintendents (2008-2010). 85% of respondents are currently practicing and 11% are retired. The 28-question survey replicates 19 questions from a 2006 American Association of School Administrators’ study of national superintendents (1338 respondents represented 17% of the sample). The full Report and survey results are accessible via the MASA web site or from the author ([man@q.com](mailto:man@q.com) or 612-836-0120)—Questions are welcomed!*

### Key Findings

To the degree that study respondents are representative of all Minnesota superintendents, their experiences and observations reveal interesting insights about the school board-superintendent relationship. The study’s key findings respond to several guiding questions:

1. How do currently-practicing (and recently retired) Minnesota superintendents view their current (or most recent) school board-superintendent relationships and the factors influencing these relationships? How do Minnesota responses compare to the national survey sample (Glass and Franceschini, 2006) for the AASA 2006 Mid-Decade Study of Superintendents?
2. For follow-up interviews with 10 volunteers: what are the additional perspectives of superintendents about the superintendent-school board relationships?
3. How do the study findings link to relevant concepts in the literature, and what follow-up study is recommended

#### **Finding #1: Minnesota Superintendents Report Positive Ratings for School Board Relationships**

The majority of Minnesota superintendents view their school board relationships as *very good* or *good* by a wide margin of 95%; these ratings are higher than predicted by the group of superintendents interviewed for this study. Eight of ten interviewees predicted most Minnesota superintendent colleagues would rate the school board-superintendent relationship as *good*. (None predicted *very good*.) But, when it came to rating their own current school board relationships, 100% of the interviewees reported *very good* or *good*. This finding is important and noteworthy to the extent that the successful board relationships reported by the sample may be indicative of all school board-superintendent relationships in Minnesota!

#### **Finding #2: Minnesota Superintendents Report High Job Satisfaction and Effectiveness Levels**

Another key finding is that several additional job factors for superintendents are also rated positively by respondents (78-99%). Minnesota superintendents report high levels of job satisfaction. 88% report being *very satisfied* or *satisfied* with their current superintendency. Given that superintendent leaders significantly impact the quality of education and future opportunity for learners, job satisfaction is critically important. Further, 99% of superintendent respondents view themselves to be *very effective*

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or *effective* as superintendents. 96% report their most recent job evaluation rating received from the school board as *excellent* or *good*. 90% indicate their school board evaluates them very *fairly* or *fairly*. 78% view the board's performance expectations of them as *always* or *usually* congruent with the evaluation criteria.

### **Finding #3: School Board-Superintendent Relationships Link to Important Job Factors**

Data linkages were found, using cross tabulation comparisons. Superintendent ratings that characterize current board relationships are linked to other important job factors (job satisfaction, superintendent effectiveness, fairness of the board's evaluation of the superintendent, superintendent's most recent rating by the school board, influence of the school board as a support to the superintendent). For example, positive ratings for the board relationships factor are positively linked to ratings for other factors. Superintendents viewing their board relationships as positive also report higher job satisfaction; conversely, lower board relationships are linked to lower job satisfaction. For example, of the *very satisfied* superintendents, 92% report *very good* and 8% report *good* board relationships compared to the *satisfied* superintendents that report *very good* (42%), *good* board relationships (56%) and poor relationships reported by 2%. This linkage extends to the school board's selection as a #1 or #2 most important factor (many options listed) contributing to superintendent effectiveness, too. Of the 37% of respondents rating themselves as *highly effective*, 63% selected the *Board of Education* as their #1 or #2 most important effectiveness factor, with #1 selected by a 3:2 margin. Of the 62% of respondents rating themselves as *effective*, 53% selected the Board of Education as #1 or #2 in importance to their effectiveness. In fact, those rating themselves as more effective generally report higher school board ratings for their performance, higher board effectiveness in leading the school district, and more positive board relationships.

Similarly, of the 42% viewing their school board's evaluations as *very fair*, 99% characterize their board relationship as *very good* (93%) or *good* (6%). Conversely, those viewing school board evaluations of their work as *unfair* (8%) tend to characterize board relationships as *poor* 38% of the time. Those viewing the school board evaluations as very unfair (1%) characterize their school board relationship as either *poor* or *very poor* 66% of the time. Another example: 84% of the respondents reporting excellent ratings from the board also rate their present board relationship as *very good*, another 16% rated excellent rate their board relationship as *good*, and none indicated *poor* or *very poor* evaluation ratings. Conversely, the respondents reporting *average* or *below average* evaluation ratings were more likely to rate their superintendent-school board relationships in the *good* to *poor* ranges. Another example: 98% of the respondents rating board leadership as *very well* characterize their board relationship as *very good*, and the 100% rating board leadership as *well* characterize board relationships as *very good* or *good*.

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### **Finding #4: Superintendents in the Minnesota and the AASA 2006 Study Report Similar Ratings**

Survey responses of Minnesota superintendent compare closely to the national survey sample in the AASA 2006 Mid-Decade Study of Superintendents. It's noteworthy that Minnesota responses compare closely to AASA responses in all areas, except two—views for how well school boards lead the district, and how congruent board expectations are with the criteria for superintendent evaluation.

#### Reports showing similarities:

- Superintendents in both studies represent mostly *small-to-average* size districts
- 33% (MASA) and two thirds (AASA) of superintendents are in the *first five years* of the job, and approximately 40% in both studies have been superintendents for ten or more years
- The most important reason for hire by the school board is “Leadership Ability” (44% MN and 49% AASA)
- 88% (MN) and 90% (AASA) report being *very satisfied* or *satisfied* with their current jobs
- The top #1 and #2 factors contributing to MN superintendent effectiveness are the “Board of Education” followed in ranking by “Interpersonal Relations Skills.” AASA respondents report the same two factors as their top choice, but in reverse order
- The top #1 and #2 factors most inhibiting MN superintendent effectiveness are “Inadequate Financing of Schools” followed in ranking by “State and Federal Mandates”; AASA respondents also report “Inadequate Financing” with “Too Many Insignificant Demands” ranked next
- 99% (MN) and 96% (AASA) report being either *very effective* or *effective* as a superintendent
- 90% (MN) and 89% (AASA) report being *very fairly* or *fairly* evaluated by their school boards
- 86% (MASA) and 90% (AASA) received *excellent* or *good* evaluation ratings from their boards
- Nearly half of respondents (47% MASA, 49% AASA) report spending “three hours or less per week in direct board communications” (phone calls, meetings)
- 15% (MASA) and 16% (AASA) report having been “forced to resign or deciding to leave” a superintendency due to poor board relations
- 95% (MASA) and 93% (AASA) characterize their present board relationship as *very good* or *good*; in MN 59% report *very good* compared to 63% *very good* in the AASA study

#### Reports showing differences:

- 16% (MASA) and 34% (AASA) view their board expectations as *always* congruent with evaluation criteria
- In MN 65% view school boards as doing *very well* or *well* compared to 82% in the AASA study.

### **Finding #5: A Majority of Superintendents Report Their School Boards Have Important Policies in Place That Are Working Well**

A majority of the superintendents (63-78%) in the sample report their school boards have official policies or practices in place for four of the board behaviors surveyed, and individual board member understanding or demonstrated behavior for each is *working well* overall. In which areas are individual

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board behaviors working well? Over three-fourths (78%) of respondents report *all or most* of their individual board members “demonstrate values like collegiality, cooperation, and respectful treatment of others.” Somewhat fewer (70%) report that *all or most* members “respect the board policy-making role as separate from the superintendent’s role,” and 70% report that *all or most* board members “demonstrate understanding of the limits on individual board member authority.” A smaller majority (63%) report that “a board ethics code/practice requires serving the interests of students and the district, and not being conflicted by loyalties to special groups.” While half (50%) report that things are *working well* with current staff communications board policy/practice (clarifying board communication with staff members requires advance superintendent consultation), another 36% have *concerns* about *some* members not demonstrating this, or there is *no* such established board policy/practice.

#### **Finding #6: Superintendents Report Concerns Regarding the Absence Of or Lack of Enforcement for Certain Board Behaviors They Consider Important**

From 22-36% of the superintendent respondents report problems relating to the five board behaviors in that *only some* of the board members follow the particular board policy/practice, or that *no such board policy/practice is in place*. What are the areas of concern involving individual board behaviors? More than a third (36%) report concerns in that *only some* board members “consult with the superintendent in advance of staff communications” or that *no established policy/practice* is in place; another 13% report *no established policy/practice* is in place but this is not of concern to them. Almost a third (30%) of respondents report *concerns* in that the “separation of roles” (i.e., board’s policy-making role and superintendent’s administrative operations role) is observed *only by some* board members or *no clear separation of duties* is observed by the board. Similarly, almost a third (30%) report concerns that the “understanding of the limits upon an individual board member’s authority” is demonstrated by *only some* board members or that this is *not demonstrated by the board*. 28% report concerns in that the “board ethics code/practice requiring serving student/district interests and not being conflicted by loyalties to special groups” is followed by *only some* on the board or is *not an established board policy or practice*. More than one in five respondents (22%) report concerns about members’ “demonstration of board values” (collegiality, cooperation, respect for others) in that either the values are *not demonstrated by the board* or are demonstrated by *only some* of the board.

#### **Finding #7: Two Policies for Board Behaviors Are Identified as “Most Important”**

Superintendent interviewees rated all of the five individual board behaviors in the study as highly important, but they identified two as “the most important to me” by a wide margin. The majority (8 of 10, 80%) of superintendents interviewed said *the most important board policy or practice for me* is “separating the board’s policy role from the superintendent’s administrative role” (40%) or “demonstrating service in the interests of all students and the district and avoiding conflicting loyalties to special groups” (40%).

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Some commented that if the policy-making board role is demonstrated, this will likely result in the board's working well with other areas as well, namely observing legal limits on authority, board's advance consultation with the superintendent prior to communicating with staff, board members avoiding being conflicted by special interest group loyalties, and board members demonstrating values such as collegiality, cooperation and respect. Another interviewee shared that his board's commitment to serving the whole district inspires effective board behaviors across all five areas. Of the 180 survey comments related to what events or factors have a negative impact on board relationships, many addressed these same two board behaviors—the policy-making role and serving the whole district and students' interests. Superintendent comments also addressed board members straying beyond the policy role into micromanaging, the influence of special interest groups on board members, observed board confusion about the community vs. board role or the parent vs. board role.

Related concepts from the literature include: role confusion and new breed of board member (Price, 2001), increasing political nature of elected school boards (Kowalski, 2006), "trustee role" vs. "delegate role" (McGurdy in Kowalski, 2006, p. 126), "Lone Ranger" role (Caruso, 2005, p. 8), politics of the job along with limits on executives' authority (Archer, 2003), teamwork in an atmosphere of mutual respect (Hanson, 2002), zone of acceptance (Glass, 2010), "power over others" vs. power with others" (Mountford, 2004, p. 704), and the need for strong superintendent leadership to ensure high student achievement in collaboration with the school board as a high performing team (McAdams, 2006).

#### **Finding #8: Superintendents Offer Tips for Building Effective Board Relationships**

Survey feedback cited effective superintendent communications to avoid conflicts and improve board relationships, along with several tips also reported in professional literature. Communications is the most-cited theme in the survey. Glass (2010, p. 2) writes that "communication is the critical element of superintendent and board relations." Comments addressed how successful communication helps to avoid conflict, clarifies the respective roles of the board and superintendent, demonstrates respect, and promotes discussion of issues and shared understanding. Samples of interviewees' tips: working through difficult experiences usually improves a board, especially if the board chair is effective; remember the role of the board chair is critical to board effectiveness; involve the board on committees with the superintendent (plus community and staff members), take advantage of MSBA training and national conference attendance by the board and the superintendent; get to know each board member, learn from the board's group dynamics, and help the board to be more effective.

Respondent comments link to concepts in the literature. The behavior of superintendents and school boards influences board conflict (National School Boards Association, 2010, p. 2-3). Problematic school board behaviors cited: overstepping authority and trying to be administrators; making promises; getting involved in labor relations or budget minutia; not preparing for meetings; not keeping executive sessions confidential; failing to act on sensitive issues; not being open/honest with the superintendent; making

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decisions based on preconceived notions; not supporting the superintendent; springing surprises at meetings; having hidden agendas. Superintendents can cause conflicts with their boards by: not treating board members alike; not informing board members of public concerns; not providing adequate financial or other needed information; using poor public management practices; making public statements before informing the board; not being open/honest with the school board; not providing alternatives in an objective manner; not adjusting to the new reality of an involved board; not supporting the school board; springing surprises at meetings; having hidden agendas. Summers and Wells (2000) recommend superintendent behaviors that promote effective board relationships including: work to preserve their inner strength and confidence, keep the board informed, involve the community in district activities, and provide joint training on maintaining an effective relationship.

### Conclusion

**While Superintendents Rate School Board-Superintendent Relationships Positively in Minnesota, They Also Report Problems Involving Missing Board Policies and Lack of Enforcement Among Boards.** School board-superintendent relationships are working well in general, but individual board member behaviors represent a threat to established board practices and relationships with the superintendent. As stated by Kowalski (2006, p. 145), “Probably no other relationship in a school district has a greater effect on successful education than that between a board and its superintendent.” Building and maintaining this relationship is challenging, and circumstances can change quickly. As stated by one superintendent, “you’re always an election away from effective and/or non-effective relationships.” McAdams (2006) emphasizes the need for strong superintendent leadership to ensure high student achievement, working together with school board members in a high performing team. This study presents an opportunity for school board to consider their own board policies and whether all individuals on the board are in full support of established board practice and policy. When board members work well as a team, demonstrating a successful working relationship with the superintendent, the school district is well positioned to improve student learning and achieve performance excellence in service to the community. Greater awareness and understanding about how and when things can go wrong in the relationship will likely improve the performance of superintendents and board members. Implications for Practice, Recommended Follow-up Study, and a List of References are included in the full Report of Study Findings.

***SPECIAL NOTE:** The full Report of Study Findings was presented to the Minnesota Association of School Administrators (MASA) and business partner Cuningham Group Architecture, sponsors of the annual Richard Green Scholar Award “to honor the scholarly work and professional development of Minnesota school leaders through the award of an annual recognition for the research, writing, and presentation of one paper reflecting the practice of excellent school leadership” (MASA, 2010).*