

# Barriers to District Level Educational Reform: A State Wide Study of

## Minnesota School Superintendents

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### Abstract

This study attempts to identify and describe Minnesota superintendents' perceptions of barriers to district level reform as well as compare superintendents' perceptions of district reform related characteristics. Despite a wealth of literature about the process of educational change (Elmore, 2000; Fullan, 2010; Hall, 1987; Heifetz, 2005; Hord, 1987; Leithwood, 1999; Linsky, 2005; Seashore, 1996; Senge, 1997) reforming education to resolve serious achievement issues continues to be challenging. Our research strives to identify factors preventing one state's district-level leadership from implementing national reform efforts. A foundational lens for our framework comes from the Public Educational Leadership Project (PELP) Coherence Framework (Childress, Elmore, Grossman, & Johnson, 2007). We utilized a quantitative descriptive approach to survey all acting superintendents in the state of Minnesota. Using a quantitative self-perception survey superintendents' overall perceptions of the barriers to district level educational reforms were compiled. We also surveyed superintendents' overall perceptions of their district's characteristics relating to school-level reform. The study revealed two major findings: superintendents in the state of Minnesota who claimed that their districts had leadership skills to enact school change and knowledge of successful strategies regarding school reform

were unrelated to the identification of barriers to district-level reform; and superintendents who claimed that their districts had passive resistance to change and ingrained patterns of behavior to resist change were related to the identification of barriers to district level reform.

Keywords: reform, policy, achievement, district leadership, barriers

## **Introduction**

Currently, reform efforts across the nation are focused on improving teaching methods in learning with the ultimate goal of increasing student achievement (Leithwood, Seashore-Louis, Anderson & Wahlstrom, 2004). For example, at the national level, reform is being driven by No Child Left Behind (NCLB) striving to impact student achievement through policy, focused on accountability and identification of low performing schools. At the state and local levels reform efforts can be found in such areas as professional learning communities, curricula focus on science, technology engineering and mathematics (STEM) and extending learning opportunities. Yet, as a nation we have an increasing number of schools labeled as “failing” and in the state of Minnesota the achievement gap remains exceptionally large, particularly in racial and low income subgroups (Minncan, 2011). Our study seeks to explore the barriers in Minnesota that are impacting successful school reform and also to explore relationships between district characteristics related to reform.

Despite a wealth of literature about the process of educational change (Elmore, 2000; Fullan, 2010; Hall, 1987; Heifetz, 2005; Hord, 1987; Leithwood, 1999; Linsky, 2005; Seashore, 1996; Senge, 1997) reforming education to resolve serious achievement issues continues to be a challenge. Our research strives to identify factors preventing one state’s district-level leadership from implementing national reform efforts.

Two federal reform initiatives, *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative For Educational Reform* of 1983, and the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2002, have played a significant role in school reform and accountability efforts (Sherman, 2007). NCLB is seen as groundbreaking due to its unequalled attention to the nation's achievement gap and its focus on accountability (Sherman, 2007). Recently, the negative effects of NCLB have been revealed bringing a realization of the nation's inability to promote educational equity and excellence (Manna, 2011). Paul Manna in his book *Collision Course* (2011) states,

Although some exceptions exist, by and large NCLB's implementation tended to produce practices and decreased academic quality and expectation in the nations schools. Further, it expanded bureaucratic rules that often led policy implementers to focus their effort on meeting technical rules. As a result, substantively important outcomes for schools and students suffered (p.17).

Through our research we are striving to understand what barriers are preventing superintendents in the state of Minnesota from enacting these legislative reforms that are intended to ensure increased student achievement for all students. We are focusing on what superintendents in Minnesota identified as barriers and challenges to educational change and reform efforts. Our research also seeks to identify barriers to district reform and the relationships between district characteristics related to reform.

The research questions that guided the study are as follows:

1. What barriers do superintendents in the state of Minnesota identify as the most significant to implementing reform efforts at a district/system level?

2. What district reform characteristics, such as skills, knowledge, behaviors, and structures regarding school reform, do superintendents perceive as present in their districts?
3. Is there a relationship between district reform related characteristics and superintendents' perceived barriers to reform?

### **Theoretical Framework**

In situating our work, we draw from research and literature focusing on educational change and federal leadership in relationship to policies and the impact policies and leadership have on student achievement. A foundational lens of our framework comes from the Public Educational Leadership Project (PELP) Coherence Framework (Childress, Elmore, Grossman, and Johnson, 2007). The PELP framework emerged out of Harvard University as a collaborative effort among faculty members at Harvard's graduate schools of business and education in partnerships with a network of urban school districts. According to Childress and his colleagues (2007), the PELP framework has roots in business organizational alignment but incorporates a content knowledge of successful reforms in education. This blend of focus on business, organizational alignment and reform of education provided an established framework from which we could view our study. Utilizing the PELP framework in this study provided us with an additional context in which to review potential reform efforts related to the elements of: instructional core, strategy, culture, structure, system resources, stakeholders and the educational environment.

A major focus of this study is to understand how the larger systemic educational reform efforts that are intended to bring about district-level system change impact the perceived barriers

by superintendents. Superintendents were selected based on their potential to meaningfully enact policy and therefore student achievement.

Since the enactment of NCLB, the expectations regarding the work of superintendents have shifted (Sherman, 2007). Most notably, superintendents must be dedicated to continuous improvement of all schools and diverse populations of students in their districts (Grogan & Sherman, 2003). Since NCLB, superintendents no longer have the choice whether or not to name discrepancies in test scores among students (Sherman, 2007).

### **Review of Literature**

Historically, federal influence over education has been limited, with local and state government maintaining primary impact on K-12 education. Since the 1983 release of *A Nation at Risk* to recent years with the No Child Left Behind (NCLB), federal influence on K-12 education and policy has increased. But this increase has been slow moving. Manna (2011) stated:

It took more than a decade after *A Nation at Risk* appeared for the Elementary and Secondary Education Act to demand states hold all students, advantaged and disadvantaged alike to challenging academic standards. Further, it would take nearly another decade before the ESEA would incorporate specific consequences for schools that failed to make regular academic progress. (p. 6)

Increased federal influence is most noteworthy around issues of a school district's environment. Childress and his colleagues (2007) describe environment in relation to the PELP framework as the external factors that have impact on the strategy, operations, and performance of a district; such factors as regulations, statues, contracts, funding and politics. This review of literature will explore federal leadership in relationship to policies and the impact policies and

leadership have on student achievement. It will further examine how these external factors influence states, state education agencies and the implementation of district reform resulting in increased student achievement.

### **Federal Leadership and Education**

**A nation at risk.** In the late 1970s and early 1980s, there was general concern and public perception that something was significantly wrong with the United States Education system (A Nation at Risk, 1983). This perception and concern led to the federal government initiating steps to examine the quality of education in the United States. Secretary of Education T. H. Bell created the National Commission on Excellence in Education to review the U.S. education system. A report entitled *A Nation at Risk* was the result of this commission. Findings identified four important aspects of the educational process that needed improvement; content, expectations, time and teaching (A Nation at Risk, 1983). Although *A Nation at Risk* report identified findings and recommendations, sweeping reform efforts and influence at the federal level remained lacking; state and local control remained. “*A Nation at Risk* was a report, not a legal mandate; if leaders in states and school districts wanted to implement its recommendations, they could; but they were also free to ignore the report and its recommendations” (Ravitch, 2011, p. 29). It was the reforming of ESEA that ultimately resulted in a shift and increase in federal influence over K-12 education in the U.S.

**Elementary and secondary education act.** ESEA was enacted in 1965 and prior to the reauthorization that resulted in NCLB it maintained minimal federal influence over K-12 education. ESEA throughout the decades remained focused on four goals. Manna noted:

While details have varied from reauthorization to reauthorization, in general four main goals have stood out. They have included: first, to direct federal dollars to impoverished

local school districts to better serve disadvantaged students; second, to meet these students specific academic needs while simultaneously helping them catch up academically with their more advantaged peers; third, to accelerate the development of state standards, testing, and accountability systems; and fourth, to judge and then hold school district accountable for academic performance. (p. 7)

The intentions of ESEA were focused on improving education for disadvantaged students. Although these were good intentions ESEA lacked the ability to hold schools and districts accountable for increased student achievement. According to Peters (2010) "...in the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 the states were to receive their grants merely for participating in the program, without having to do anything in particular to improve education." (p. 136). Peters goes on to note that even if local governments wanted to do what the federal government would have them do, they often lacked the resources to meet the standard (2010). The increased federal influence in K-12 education in the U.S. escalated in 2001. "Three days after his inauguration in 2001, President George W. Bush convened some five hundred educators in the East Room of the White House to reveal his plan to reform American education" (Ravitch, 2010, p. 93). His plan was No Child Left Behind (NCLB).

**No child left behind.** NCLB was a reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965. The focus of the plan was to ensure that "no child was left behind" and eliminate the inequities in U.S. education. "NCLB legislation set in place requirements that reached into virtually every public school in America. It expanded the federal role in education and took particular aim at improving the educational lot of disadvantaged students (Education Weekly, 2011, para. 2)

The role of the federal government grew significantly with the NCLB legislation. The NCLB law enacted measures designed to increase student achievement by holding states and schools more accountable for students' progress (Department of Education, 2001). Broadly these changes included: annual testing, bringing all students to a "proficient" level on state generated tests by 2013-2014; adequately yearly progress; report cards outlining student progress by subgroups; teacher quality; expansion of school choice; highly qualified teachers in core content areas; grants for Reading First, a researched based reading program (Department of Education, 2001; Manna, 2011).

Now, over a decade after the implementation of NCLB, school districts are feeling the results of increased federal influence through mandated national testing, with schools that did not improve their test scores on an annual basis termed as "failing schools". Although NCLB was passed as bipartisan legislation, that appeared to have the best interest of all students, a number of significant inherent problems have emerged. Ravitch, (2010) stated:

The most toxic flaw in NCLB was its legislative command that all students in every school must be proficient in reading and mathematics by 2014. By that magical date, every single student must achieve proficiency, includes students with special needs, students whose native language is not English, students who are homeless and lacking in any societal advantage, and students who have every societal advantage but are not interested in their school work (p. 102).

The consequence of mandating an unattainable goal has brought congress to the understanding that there is a need to rewrite the law. But this will be slow in coming and agreement on how the law is shaped will be difficult.

## State Leadership and Education

Karen Seashore Louis, Kenneth Leithwood , Kyla Wahlstrom, and Stephen Anderson (2010) completed a six-year study funded by the Wallace Foundation: *Learning from leadership: Investigating the links to improved student learning*. The broad focus of this study (Seashore Louis, Leithwood, Walhstrom, & Anderson, 2010) was “to identify the nature of successful educational leadership and to better understand how such leadership can improve educational practices and student learning”(p. 7). This body of research provides the most significant foundation of knowledge recently completed with relevance to our study in the area of state leadership and the impact of federal initiatives on state agencies.

**State leadership.** States and state leadership have historically played an increasingly active role in creating and implementing policies and mandates intended to promote change in the U.S. educational system. States charged with implementing the requirements of NCLB created significant changes in policy and mandates at the state level. Seashore-Louis and associates (2010) identified five key findings in their study of state political culture and policy leadership:

1. All states are exercising policy leadership intended to improve teaching and learning.
2. State policy leadership for improved teaching and learning often predates, by a decade or more, the enactment of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act.
3. Across the states, there is strong demand for increased leadership activity at the state level. The common pattern of demand, however, does not translate into similar policies among the states.
4. Policy instruments used to improve teaching and learning vary from state to state.
5. Because few states have adopted comprehensive approaches to reform, state policy

provides agencies and school districts with general directions for improving teaching and learning, but guidance for more specific means of achieving the goals in question is limited (p. 220).

The key findings of the Seashore-Louis and associates study (2010) described how states exercised policy leadership with the intention of improving teaching and learning which aligns with the research on federal focus for school reform efforts (Mann, 2011; Peters, 2010 & Ravitch, 2010). This alignment of federal and state focus on reform for improved teaching and learning further impacted State Education Agencies (SEAs).

**NCLB impact on state education agencies.** Starting in 2001 SEAs were charged with interpreting and implementing NCLB federal education policy. Hamann and Lane (2004) noted “different SEAs interpret the same federal education policy (NCLB) differently.” Seashore-Louis and associates (2010) also provided context into the fundamental issues surrounding SEAs ability to implement federal policy consistently, “The standards and accountability movement has brought about an increase in state monitoring of education. It also has caused SEAs to shift their focus, relatively speaking, away from finances and facilities to factors more directly related to the improvement of teaching and learning” (p. 243).

A second finding from Seashore-Louis and associates (2010) study reported that SEAs were found to be the primary agency responsible for translating state and federal policy into workable requirements for districts and schools. Leading to a key conclusion that the movement from a focus on funding and facilities to curricular and instructional improvements created more tension in states, most notably where there was less experience with state accountability. Seashore-Louis and others (2010) further noted, “NCLB appeared to have a limited effect on educational legislative activity... In contrast, it has had a significant direct effect on SEAs” (p.

243).

Paul Manna (2010) refers to NCLB as a “Collision Course” in his new book, *Collision course: Federal education policy meets state and local realities*. As we move through the literature it is evident that this “Collision Course” is where federal policy is enacted at the state level by state agencies not prepared or equipped to implement the policies which collides with local schools districts as they struggle to improve student achievement (Manna, 2010; Seashore-Louis et al., 2010).

### **District Leadership and Student Achievement**

**Principal leadership and student achievement.** Research suggests that schools succeeding against all odds share certain traits and beliefs. Most notably, the schools are led by strong principals who hold students and teachers to the highest standards. These principals believe children of all races and income levels can meet high academic standards (Carter, 2000; McGee, 2004; Seashore-Louis et al., 2010).

In addition to creating a culture of high standards, the successful principal creates a “can do/will do” culture built on a mission, communication, and collaboration (McGee, 2004). Eilers and Camacho (2007) found that if a principal is proactive in developing a culture of change and focused on student learning, the level of learning across the organization also increased. Heck (1992) reaffirmed the importance of the instructional leadership role of the principal in determining student achievement. From observing the characteristics of principals who improved student reading scores, Mackey and associates (2006) established that those who understood their role as instructional leaders had a greater impact on student achievement in reading. Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2005) stated, “The research of the last 35 years provides strong guidance on specific leadership behaviors for school administrators and that

those behaviors have well-documented effects on student achievement” (p. 7). The research and literature on school leadership is well established and clearly points to effective recommendations for educational policies that support principal development.

**District leadership and student achievement.** According to Bjork and Gurley (2005) superintendents cannot achieve school reform and increase achievement for all students alone; they must provide vision of change for stakeholders and serve as political activists. In their working paper, *School District Leadership that Works*, Walters and Marzano (2006) reported that Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL) conducted a meta-analysis of research on the influence on school district leaders on student performance. The meta-analysis included 27 studies “...resulting in what McREL research believe to be the largest-ever quantitative examination of research on superintendent” (p.3). Four major findings emerged from the study: (1) district-level leadership matters; (2) effective superintendent focus their efforts on creating goal-oriented districts; (3) superintendent tenure is positively correlated with student achievement; and (4) they set clear, non-negotiable goals for learning and instruction, yet provide school leadership teams with the responsibility and authority for determining how to meet those goals (Walters & Marzazno, 2006, p. 4). Establishing a clear understanding that district leadership when focused on the right work matters and enhances student achievement.

### **Consequences of NCLB and School Reform**

Ravitch (2010) described how her fundamental view of NCLB has changed. She notes, “When I realized that the remedies were not working, I started to doubt the entire approach to school reform that NCLB represented” (p.102.) This doubt turned to reality, on February 9, 2012 when President Obama granted 10 state waivers to NCLB. A statement released by President Obama announced, “today, we’re giving 10 states the green light to continue

making reforms that are best for them. Because if we're serious about helping our children reach their potential, the best ideas aren't going to come from Washington alone. Our job is to harness those ideas, and to hold states and schools accountable for making them work" (Muskal, 2012).

In our study we strove to identify the barriers superintendents in the state of Minnesota characterize as the most significant to implementing reform efforts at a district/system level. Our review of the literature show that leadership does matter and as Seashore-Louis (2010) and associates noted,

Reform in the U.S educational system is both lively and messy but, as educators grapple with emerging demands, we found that leadership matters at all levels. Leaders in education provide direction for, and exercise influence over, policy and practice. Their contributions are crucial, our evidence shows, to initiatives aimed at improving student learning, and of course ultimately to the future in which we all share (p. 283).

### **Methodology**

A quantitative descriptive approach was used to survey all acting superintendents in the State of Minnesota. The State of Minnesota, located in the Northern Midwest United States, was selected as the focus for this study based on homogeneity of demographics, convenience, and its large number of districts. Using a quantitative self-perception survey, superintendent's overall perceptions of the barriers to district level educational reforms were compiled. We also surveyed superintendent's overall perceptions of their district's characteristics relating to school-level reform.

## **Data Sources**

Quantitative and qualitative data were collected from 212 of the 350 (60.5%) acting superintendents in the state of Minnesota. The respondents were located in rural (78%), suburban (20%), and urban (2%) school districts throughout the state; were predominantly male (86%) and white (98%); and had varying levels of educational attainment.

The survey instrument consisted of 20 questions: 17 Likert scaled, one “yes” or “no”, and two open ended. The first eight Likert scaled questions asked superintendents to express their level of agreement with statements regarding district characteristics related to reform. The remaining nine Likert scaled questions asked superintendents to express their level of agreement with potential barriers (See Appendix A) to district reform, such as tenure and lack of funds. The “yes” or “no” survey question asked superintendents if their districts have a strategic long range plan to be used as a road map for school reform. The remaining two open-ended questions asked respondents to provide a list of additional barriers to school reform within their district and provide a list of the top three reform efforts their district is currently using in an attempt to bring about reform.

## **Survey Analysis**

The data were analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 19. Data were imported to SPSS from Microsoft Excel by a single individual.

Descriptive statistics on sample characteristics and questionnaire items were computed, including means, medians, standard deviations and percentage frequency distributions. Spearman Rho nonparametric correlation analyses were used to compare respondent perceptions of district capacity for reform due to the nature of the ordinal Likert data. An alpha level of 0.05 was considered statistically significant.

## **Preliminary Results**

The data collected from the survey provided preliminary results that helped to address the focus of the research. This section attempts to explain the results of the study within the three research questions:

1. What barriers do superintendents in the state of Minnesota identify as the most significant to implementing reform efforts at a district/system level?
2. What district reform characteristics, such as skills, knowledge, behaviors, and structures regarding school reform, do superintendents perceive as present in their districts?
3. Is there a relationship between district reform related characteristics and superintendent's perceived barriers to reform?

### **Identified Barriers**

Superintendents, when posed with nine different barriers (See Appendix A) to district level reform had the greatest percentage of agreement (strongly agreed and somewhat agreed were combined for all reported results) with: mandates (92.9%), federal requirements (89.0%), lack of funding (87.2%), and tenure (86.2%). The remaining five barriers also had at least 51% or greater agreement. Just over half of the superintendents (51.2%) also stated that they did not have a strategic long range plan to use as a road map for school reform.

Thematic coding of the first open-ended response survey item presented the following nine additional barriers not addressed in the survey questions: resistance from teachers/internal employees, state politics, school culture, lack of time, teachers unions, teacher/leader preparedness, lack of funding, insufficient compensation, a focus on areas other than reform, and the lack of family stability.

## **District Reform Characteristics**

Of the superintendents surveyed, 81.0% agreed that their district had leadership with the skills to enact change. Additionally, 78.7% of superintendents surveyed agreed that their districts had knowledge of successful strategies regarding school reform. However, 80.1% of superintendents surveyed agreed that their district had ingrained patterns of behavior that were resistant to school reform. Similarly, 78.2% of superintendents surveyed agreed that their district had a passive resistance to change.

Responses to the second open ended question relating to additionally implemented reform efforts were categorized as follows: technology integration (43, 20% of respondents), professional learning communities (PLC) (40, 19% of respondents), and response to intervention (RTI) (36, 17% of respondents). Other reforms such as flexible scheduling (27, 13% of respondents) and curriculum changes (23, 11% of respondents) were also listed.

## **Relationships Between Barriers And District Characteristics**

Significant correlations (see Table 1) were observed between superintendent's level of agreement for knowledge of successful strategies regarding school reform efforts and level of agreement as to whether their districts had leadership with the skills to enact change (sig. < 0.01). Additionally, significant correlations (sig. < 0.01) were observed between superintendent's level of agreement for knowledge of school reform efforts and the following four district characteristics relating to reform: systematic plan for enacting school reform; sense of urgency regarding school reform; articulated vision that embraces change; and structure to implement strategies regarding school reform.