The School Superintendent and the School Board: A Relationship of Trust

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Abstract

Research has consistently shown trust in educational leadership to be a key factor in an effective working relationship. A trust relationship between the school superintendent and school board is central to improved learning. This research focused on the school board-superintendent trust relationship as perceived by superintendents and the school board presidents from Texas school districts. This research was guided by the question: Is there a difference in Texas school board and superintendents' perceptions of trust relationship? A quantitative study, utilizing descriptive design methodologies, was employed to reach an answer to the research question. This research sought survey responses from the school districts: one from the superintendent and one from the school board president. The findings from this study reveal the importance of the superintendent and the school board are to maintain a trust relationship in behaviors and attitude, especially as it relates to honesty, integrity, and openness.

Key Words: Trust, relationship, board-superintendent, public education, board of trustees, superintendent

1. Introduction to the Study

The American public education system expresses confidence in the time-honored words of John Dewey (1916), "What the best and wisest parent wants for his own child, that must the community want for all its children. Any other idea for our schools is narrow and unlovely; acted upon, it destroys our democracy" (p. 7). Accountability of school leadership and governance emerges from a public's concern for the quality of education of all children (Thompson, 2014). The emphasis of high stakes testing places school superintendents and school boards are under gigantic pressure to raise students' scores (Hoyle, 2002; Porch & Protheroe, 2003). Equipped with extraordinary technological, scientific, and education advances, a school board-superintendent relationship that embraces proactive leadership, genuine collaboration, honest and open communication, and unwavering trust is poised to embark on team building that fosters high performing schools (Thompson, 2014). In recent years the working relationship of the board and the superintendent has been characterized as more complex and stressful due to educational reform and high expectations (Thompson et al., 2013).

Kutsyuruba, Walker, & Noonan (2011) state that research supports school boards in high-achieving districts exhibit habits and characteristics that are markedly different from school boards in low-achieving districts. One of these characteristics identified is that effective school board, teamed with the superintendent, serve with strong collaboration and mutual trust (Tschannen-Moran, 2014). Trust is critical to effective, quality governance (Combs et al., 2013). Thompson (2014) asserts that quality governance and leadership is a result of a trusting and collaborative relationship between the school board and superintendent.

2. Trust

Trust is a difficult notion to define because of its complex and multifaceted nature. Though trust has been studied by scholars for many years, there appears to be no consensus on a best definition of trust. What is common across most definitions of trust, either explicitly or implicitly, is the willingness to risk in the face of vulnerability (Tschannen-Moran, 2014). Northfield. (2011) asserts that trust is the extent to which one engages in a reciprocal interaction and a relationship in such a way that there is willingness to be vulnerable to another. Trust assumes the risk that the other party will possess some semblance of benevolence, competence, honesty, openness, reliability (Kutsyurba et al., 2011). Administrator trustworthiness, then, is demonstrated by nurturing and balancing relationships among facets of trust, constituencies of schools, and the functions of leadership(Sheldon et al., 2010).

Furthermore, trust is a function of the nature of the relationship that exists between individuals in an educational organization (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000). Kutsyuruba et al. (2011) advance the notion that trust places confidence in the ability of others to care for something important to the trustor. Individuals have a natural disposition to trust and to evaluate the trustworthiness of exchanges (Gordon & Platek, 2009). Trust is created through relationship exchanges. (Fahy, Wu, & Hoye, 2010). From an organizational standpoint, trust between individuals and groups of individuals is known as relational trust (Bryk & Schneider, 2003). Bryk and Schneider (2003) define relational trust as the interpersonal exchanges taking place in the school community. The exchanges of the school board and the school superintendent are many and reflect respective role expectation. According to Bryk and Schneider, (2003), relational trust is based on four criteria: respect, competence, personal regard for others, and integrity Bryk & Schneider (2003). As such, trust is imperative for student achievement, which in turn promotes school achievement at all levels of the educational organization (Northfield, 2014).

Fullan (2003) captures the essence of mutual trust by asserting the relationship of the school board and school superintendent are dependent upon each other for accountability and inevitable change. Comb et al. (2013) note that when parties are dependent upon each other for something they care about or need, trust is critical.

Consequently, the school board must trust the superintendent, demonstrating respect for his professionalism, experience, and ability to administer the school. In like manner, the superintendent gives the school board his loyalty, studied guidance and advice on matters under discussion, and provides the most competent management of the school (Thompson, 2014). Duffy (2003) viewed trust as the "foundation for respect. Respect is considered to be the corner stone of professional influence. Influence is considered to be the essence of leadership" (p. 21). Conversely, Duffy observes that if there is no trust, then there is not respect and subsequently, no influence. Mutual trust between the superintendent and the board are viewed as key and central to successful relations (Thompson, 2014). Succinctly, Nielsen and Newton (1997) state that the superintendent must trust the board of trustees to provide guidance and policy development and the board must trust the superintendent to operate the school district on a daily basis. Trust, then, is built over time and is maintained with interactions between participants involved (Combs et al., 2013). Duffy (1997), asserts that the acid test of trust is the difference between what a leader says he believes and how he behaves. Consequently, trust is earned by actions and is not mandated. When participants' have a favorable view of leadership, they tend to have a feeling of trust (Thompson, 2014). Trust is clearly established to be the foundation upon which working and effective relationships are built.

3. Theoretical Foundation

Since the superintendent and the school board are spotlighted as key players in the implementation educational progress and reform, each entity is challenged to demonstrate transformation in their roles and relations. Texas educational institutions have implemented numerous changes that have challenged the potential of all participants, including the key roles of school boards and superintendents. What makes it possible for some boards and superintendents to work well together and to achieve goals that result in high student achievement? An examination of leadership, framed in a transformative context, will show how the school board -superintendent trust relationships are evolving to meet the expectations for a quality education system. Transformational leadership, which is entity based, focuses on individual in explaining behavior (Marion & Gonzales, 2014). Transformational leadership influences and shapes trust relationship of the school superintendent and the school board.

4. Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study is to explore the perceptions of Texas school board presidents and school superintendents within the context of their trust relationship. An understanding of the school board-superintendent trust relationship allows them to better serve their students and community at large.

5. Research Questions

This research focused on the school board-superintendent trust relationship as perceived by superintendents and the school board presidents from Texas school districts. This research was guided by the question: Is there a difference in Texas school board and superintendents' perceptions of trust relationship? The trust relationship is evidenced by responding to the following statements, which are listed in the Board Self-Assessment Questionnaire (BSAQ).

1. The school board works to reach consensus on important matters.
2. The school board will often persuade the superintendent to change his mind about recommendation.
3. The school board president and superintendent confer so that differences of opinion are identified.
4. The school board often acts independent of the superintendent's recommendations.
5. All school board members support majority decisions.

6.   Research Methodology

A quantitative study, utilizing descriptive design methodologies, was employed to reach an answer to the research question. A detailed description and analysis of the population sample produced a list of paired school board presidents and superintendents from a listing of all Texas public school districts, grade levels kindergarten through 12, who received a 2005 accountability rating. This research sought from the school districts: one from the superintendent and one from the school board president. Participation was entirely voluntary (Thompson, 2007).

6.1. Instrumentation, data collection, and analysis

After obtaining permission from the designer of the Board Self-Assessment Questionnaire (BSAQ) (Smoley, 1999) the questionnaire was completed and data was gather for the school board-superintendent relations. The BSAQ is a 73 question instrument, self-assessment tool. Question responses were ordinal-scaled into four categories consisting of strongly agree, agree, disagree, and strongly disagree. Superintendent and school board president questionnaires were tabulated separately with the results used for comparisons (Thompson, 2007).

Data from returned surveys was entered into the Microsoft Office Excel (2003) software program and then transferred to the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS, 2003) software for tabulation. A combination of descriptive and inferential statistics, regression analysis, was utilized in this study. The combination of these two statistical treatments enabled the researcher to describe the data in full detail, while addressing the specific statistical significance of the influences of certain dependent variables on the resulting equity measures (Thompson 2007).

Responses were arranged on a Likert scale (Carroll & Carroll, 2002) with replies consisting of strongly agree, agree, disagree, and strongly disagree. The questions will be scored as follows: Strongly Agree – 4; Agree – 3; Disagree – 2; Strongly Disagree – 1. Measures of central tendency were performed on the results to determine the distribution of the scores. Lastly, additional analysis of the scores was accomplished through the use of SPSS (Thompson, 2007).

6.2. Descriptive Statistics

The first step in data analysis was to describe or summarize the data, using descriptive statistics (Gay & Airasian, 2000). Measures of central tendency, measures of relationships, measures of variability, and measures of relative position are among the most common descriptive statistics. Measures of variability include variance, while the relationship between variables was evaluated using correlation statistics (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996). Central tendency was evaluated utilizing mean, median, and mode. Gay and Airasian (2000) defined mean as the arithmetic average, while mode is a frequency statistic that defines the value that is most common among the sample being evaluated.

6.3. Exploring differences

Descriptive statistical analysis involved the determination of any difference of five percent or greater that existed between the school board presidents and the superintendent responses for each of the 73 questions. All ratings of the respondents were sorted into the two major groups: 1) school board president and 2) superintendent. Within each group, ratings for each question were sorted into two categories. One category included the strongly disagree and disagree (SD-D) and the other category included ratings strongly agree and agree (SA-A). The sum of the SD-D ratings was divided by the total number of school board presidents. This same procedure was applied to the SA-A ratings. This process was repeated for the group of superintendents. Once percentages were determined for the SD-D and the SA-A categories for the school board president group and the superintendent group on each question, the mathematical process of subtraction was applied to determine if any difference of five percent or greater existed. The stated difference represented a noteworthy perspective.

7. Findings

The purpose of this study is to explore the perceptions of Texas school board presidents and school superintendents within the context of their trust relationship. An understanding of the school board-superintendent trust relationship allows them to better serve their students and community at large. This research was guided by the following question: Is there a difference in Texas school board and superintendents' perceptions of trust relationship?

7.1. Descriptive Survey Response Analysis: Factor Analysis

Factor analysis, a statistical technique that may be used to explain variability among variables in terms of fewer variables known as factors, was conducted on the BSAQ for the purpose of determining if the questions factored together to measure what the inventory and the sub-sections within the BSAQ intended to measure for the study. Surveys were scored to assess the actions of effective school boards. Questions revealing the status of a Relationship of Trust were 1, 35, 51, 63, and 69.

Each question was treated as an individual variable and each question was treated in the same fashion. Responses are presented as percent and are grouped into categories of strongly agree-agree and strongly disagree-disagree. This grouping was purposefully decided for clarity of distinguishing the response differences. A five percent difference of statistical analysis was considered worthy of notation. Of the 5 questions for modeling trust, three or 60 percent of the questions met the criteria establishing a difference between the school board presidents' and superintendents' perceptions. The questions reflecting a difference were 1, 35, and 69. Question 1 received a 7.69 difference. This question stated; "This board works to reach consensus on important matters." Question 35 received a 7.00 percent difference. This questions stated; "The board will often persuade the superintendent to change his mind about." The greatest difference, which was 10.7 percent, in school board presidents' and superintendents' perceptions were in question 69, which stated: "All school board members support majority decisions". The results of this study indicated that data suggests that there was a difference in Texas school board and superintendents' perceptions regarding the school board-superintendent trust relationship.

8. Conclusions

The results of this study suggest that a difference in Texas school board and superintendents' perceptions regarding the school board-superintendent trust relationship exists. As indicated in the 60% percent difference between the school board president and superintendent responses, the findings imply that there is a difference in the perception of the school board president and the superintendent in their trust relationship. I conclude that inconsistent actions by board members create a degree of uncertainty and trust in the working relationship of the school board and superintendent.

Specifically, I conclude that influences, external and internal, impact the trust relations of the school board president and the school superintendent. Second, while the trust relationship is a complex construct for educational leadership, this relationship is transformative and is subject to improvement.

Third, if the superintendent and the school board are to maintain a trust relationship, an examination of behaviors and attitudes relate to trust building. This suggests that facets of trust relationship, such as honesty, integrity, and openness, are significant and should be modeled consistently. Fourth, these findings suggest a need to examine and upgrade the team building training for the superintendent and the school board.

Fifth, although this study did not investigate student achievement, a solid case can be formulated that educational leadership with a strong trust relationship facilitates high student achievement. The trust relationship should be viewed as a process to ultimately improved student learning. Therefore, a definite need exists for future research to understand the role of a trust relationship development to the effectiveness of student learning.

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