How Exemplary Superintendents Rate Their Leadership Competencies   *RESEARCH*

Doris Crawford, Eastern Kentucky University

Abstract

This study examined the characteristics and practices that school superintendents attribute to success as a school district leader for the 21st century. It is important that further research on leadership characteristics and practices be conducted as it applies to AASA public school superintendents, particularly those identified as unusually effective. This study is just one attempt at finding answers to the question: What makes for a successful nationally recognized superintendent? The findings from this study should assist aspiring superintendents, or professors of education to include the identified qualities and practices in professional preparation for district leadership. A secondary goal of this study was to identify the attributes and practices considered necessary by school district superintendents of the AASA superintendents of the year and finalists to meet the demands of leadership in their complex educational environment. The researcher investigated the leadership attributes and practices of AASA superintendents of the year and finalists. This article provides an overview of the significant findings related to how AASA superintendents ranked leadership characteristics and practices as indicators of success as district leaders. These can be incorporated into professional development programs for current superintendents. In addition, they can included in curricula for the preparation of future superintendents

Keywords: exemplary superintendents, school district leadership, leadership characteristics, AASA superintendents

Introduction

Daily newspaper headlines announce the trouble that superintendents are facing in their districts, particularly with cheating on student achievement tests. Other headlines state the sensational accounts of missing money and budget woes. One thing is for certain: there are some troubling times ahead for current superintendents and aspiring superintendents. The overarching question that must be asked is simply this: What are the traits and practices of successful superintendents that all district leaders should be emulating? Who are these leaders of school districts?

Superintendents of public school districts in the United States occupy positions of tremendous authority, importance, and influence (Carter & Cunningham, 1997; Fusarelli, Cooper, & Carella, 2003; Houston, 1998; Glass, 2001a; Glass, 2001b; Goodman & Zimmerman, 2000; Kowalski, 2006; Orr, 2006; Sharp & Walter, 2004). In total, the nation's approximately 14,000 superintendents are responsible for the educational outcomes of nearly 55 million P-12 students (Kirp, 2013). The superintendency is a position that attracts criticisms, and it is a foregone conclusion that exposure to criticism accompanies the job. Goodman and Zimmerman (2000) stated that the superintendency is a position that faces greater challenges than ever before, including increasing demands and pressures backed by little security, greater public attention, and fewer position perks than similar jobs in the private sector (Byrd, Drew, & Johnson, 2005).

Today's superintendents are in very different roles than their predecessors were in a decade ago, according to the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) (2000). Current conditions that surround superintendents' jobs include the persistent pressure from community groups, the never-ending struggle to acquire financial resources to meet educational goals, eliminating the minority-majority achievement gap, and meeting state and federal standards and accountability mandates that add stress and complexity to the job (Glass & Franceschini, 2006). In addition, they have to deal with high-stake

testing and national accountability standards.

As the 2013 recipient of the AASA Education Award, the researcher realized the importance of exemplary leadership in the superintendency. As a condition for receiving the award, the researcher was invited to attend the National Conference on Education. During the conference, it became quite evident that school improvement will depend on excellent leadership. This opportunity revealed that excellence in the superintendency remains under-analyzed. The researcher's participation as a recipient of an AASA award gave the rare opportunity to participate in the program and meet that year's superintendent of the year. This interaction revealed that exemplary qualities need to be investigated to determine how other school leaders can acquire these successful leadership traits. The researcher is convinced that if the qualifications and standards of the AASA superintendent of the year were better understood, the national conversation on school superintendents could be improved. This exposure gave the researcher a desire to further her investigation into the successful characteristics and traits of nationally recognized superintendents.

In a recent study conducted on the practices and attributes of American Association of School Administrators (AASA) Superintendents of the Year and Finalists, the researcher examined factors that guided their districts to successful school improvement and student achievement. The study attempted to answer the above questions and add to the literature by indicating what makes an effective district superintendent and revealing superintendents' perspectives on responsibilities and practices for which they are held accountable. The role of the superintendent has changed from executive leadership to instructional leadership with

knowledge of evidence-based quality learning outcomes. Knowing how to improve learning, teaching, and student performance, generating community support, and building strong leadership capacity are important elements of a superintendent's job (Bjork, 2001).

Problem Statement

Leadership is inextricably tied to the success of any school district. To meet the high demands of leading a successful school system, successful superintendents need to lead the charge. The superintendent is a major stakeholder in the implementation of reform. According to Paulu (1988), "If you look at progress, it comes down to the leadership of the superintendent" (p. 6). Buck (1991) also contended that "whatever the future holds for education in America in the 21st Century, the superintendency is the position that will make it happen" (p. 311). Current research has shown specific leadership responsibilities and practices that positively influence student achievement (Marzano & Waters, 2006).

The challenges facing public school administrators are daunting (Thomas, 2002). Public schools in particular face continued budget shortfalls and constraints. Schools and administrators are being asked to do more with less (Selingod, 2001). The best and the brightest teachers are being drawn away to higher-paying school systems in other states. At the same time, governmental accountability in the name of educational reform has greatly increased. Concerns over changing community, higher turnover in the office (Cooper, Fusarelli, & Carella, 2000; Glass, Bjork, & Brunner, 2000; CASE, 2003), school board politics, and federal and state mandates have school systems looking for the ideal candidate during a time when the pool of qualified, available candidates is shrinking (Cooper et al., 2000; Glass et al., 2000). Despite these challenges,

superintendents can be successful in the position, and many have been recognized for their leadership.

The main objective of this study was to evaluate characteristics and practices that school superintendents attribute to a successful foundation of a school district leader for the 21st century. It is important that further research on leadership characteristics and practices be conducted as it applies to AASA public school superintendents, particularly those identified as unusually effective. This study is just one attempt at finding answers to the question: What makes for a successful nationally recognized superintendent? Ideally, the research and resulting findings from this study will aid aspiring superintendents or professors of education to build a framework of study that addresses techniques that develop more effective preparation for the field of school district leadership.

A secondary objective of this study was to identify the attributes and practices considered necessary by school district superintendent of the AASA superintendents of the year and finalists to meet the demands of leadership in their complex educational environment. The author investigated the leadership attributes and practices of AASA superintendents of the year and finalists by developing a set of research questions intended to guide this study and to provide an outline of the knowledgebase on this topic.

Significance of Study

This study is significant because of its relevance in determining the factors that contributed to the success of AASA superintendents of the year and finalists. The author investigated the particular leadership attributes and practices that can be considered as promising. These can be identified and incorporated into training programs for future superintendents.

The practices of the AASA exemplary superintendents can be used as models for other superintendents, especially aspiring superintendents. Ideally, this could help with the rising concern of not having good superintendent candidates for school districts. Oftentimes, educators and researchers have a sense of what set AASA superintendents apart from other superintendents. However, this study listed actual characteristics that successful superintendents identify as their significant characteristics.

The author's reasons for conducting this study corresponds with the literature findings, which expresses deep concern for improving public education. The United States is currently undergoing the most intense, comprehensive, and sustained effort to improve education since 1983 (Bjork, Keedy, & Gurley, 2003). The scope, complexity and rigor of change initiatives promoted by national commissions and the federal government during this period have increased the demands on superintendents (Brunner, Grogan, & Bjork, 2002). National attention to superintendent turnover and shortened tenure has created concern in education. This concern pertaining to the length of superintendent tenure is reflected most notably in cities and large urban areas where mean tenure is reported as 2.75 years (GCS, 2003). The possibility of decreased tenure for superintendents is disconcerting considering that the ultimate success of a school division begins with the leadership and vision of this most-visible individual.

As stated, the school superintendency is a position of tremendous importance and influence, but it is also equally complex. Goodman and Zimmerman (2000) argue that, "The complexities of modern-day education, together with today's political realities, economic constraints, and social problems, make the job of the superintendent one of the most challenging

of all chief executive undertakings" (p. 10). The results of effective leadership practices of exemplary superintendents may provide educators with a set of recommended leadership behaviors needed to lead US schools in the 21st century.

A set of common characteristics necessary for a successful superintendent can be derived from a compilation of research-based key characteristics identified by recognized exemplary superintendents. Superintendents set the tone, model leadership behavior, and institute leadership characteristics and practices that contribute to high student academic achievement and prepare children for successful citizenship (Lashway, 2002). There are several reasons why a study of the characteristics and practices of AASA superintendents and finalists warrants close investigation.

Survey Population

The population for this study included superintendents of the year and finalists for the years 1988 to 2013 as identified by the American Association of School Administrators (AASA). AASA contends that State Superintendents of the Year demonstrate leadership for learning, possess strength in communication, seek improvement in professionalism, are actively involved in the community, and are knowledgeable of regional, national and international issues. These educational leaders are identified as exemplary for their experience, knowledge, and expertise in their position as superintendent. This highly effective peer-selected group of superintendents was surveyed to gain their perceptions related to the research questions of this study.

Survey Data Analysis

Of the 86 recruited participants, 55% (N=47) completed and submitted the survey. The quantitative data needed to address each research question were gathered from the completed surveys. These data were compiled and organized using a computerized spreadsheet.

Methodology

The researcher sent an electronic communication to all the superintendents identified as AASA superintendents of the year and finalists. This communication contained an introductory letter from the researcher and a link to the survey on Survey Monkey, a web-based survey administration site. The researcher followed the initial e-mail with a mailing of a letter of introduction and a link to the survey. The mailing occurred in mid-August 2014. In the initial mailing, the study group received information about the purpose of the study, and were told that a non-response after the mailings would indicate they did not want to participate. Two weeks after the initial e-mail message went out, a second electronic communication was sent to all the superintendents, thanking them for their response and encouraging them to return the survey if they had not submitted one. Approximately three weeks after the initial mailing, the survey closed with 47 of the 86 superintendents responding, a 55% rate of return.

Demographic Information

The biographical data explored the personal and professional characteristics of the AASA superintendents of the year and finalists in regard to gender, race/ethnicity, age, size of district, type of district, years of experience, number of districts as superintendent, highest degree earned, and if they were currently serving as a superintendent in a school district. This study consisted of 47 (55 percent) of the

AASA Superintendents of the Year and Finalists from 1988 to 2013.

In examining the gender of the population, the researcher discovered that of the total respondents, 72.3 percent were male and 27.7 percent were female. In terms of race/ethnicity data, 85.1 percent of superintendents indicated White as their ethnicity. Only seven of the 47 respondents identified themselves as a race other than White. Hispanic/Latino, African American, Asian, and Native American superintendents made up 14.9 percent of the total sample.

The data pertaining to the age of the superintendents indicates that the largest reporting group for the survey was over 60 years of age (76.6%). The second largest reporting group was aged 51-60 (17%). Combining the two largest reporting groups, 93.6% of AASA Superintendents of the Year were over 50 (only three were younger than 50 years old).

In this study of the AASA Superintendents of the Year and finalists, the majority of the superintendents (93.6%) reported that they worked in a district with somewhere between 2,500 and over 15,000 students. Only three superintendents in the survey reported being in a district with an enrollment of fewer than 1,000 pupils.

In terms of school district type, 51% of superintendents reported their district to be suburban. Nearly 32% reported their district as urban and 17% indicated rural or small town.

Over half (57.4%) of the superintendents surveyed have 15+ years of service. Those superintendents with 11 to 15 years of service comprised 23.4 % of the respondents. The data reported for "Years as Superintendent" is inclusive of all superintendents, whether they are currently working (12 respondents) in a school district or are retired from the position of superintendent in a district (35).

In terms of number of districts served, 40.4% of respondents are working, or worked in only one district. Twenty-three superintendents (48.9%) have held 2 to 4 positions. Three respondents noted that they have worked in over five districts.

In this study of AASA Superintendents of the Year and finalists, a majority of superintendents (91.5%) indicated that they earned a doctoral degree, while only 8.5% indicated that they had received a superintendent's certification, Specialist or master's degree.

Discussion and Findings

Research Question One

The researcher asked the question: how highly do AASA superintendents of the year and finalists rate various leadership characteristics as attributed to an effective superintendent? The results as outlined in this study were significant in many ways. In Part II of the questionnaire used in this study, the researcher created questionnaire item 12 to collect data on 35 effective leadership characteristics. For each of the characteristics, superintendents indicated the importance of the leadership characteristic used as a superintendent on a Likert-type scale: (1 = not important; 2 = fairly important; 3 = neutral; 4 = important; 5 = very important; 6 = extremely important).

An analysis of these data showed that 45 superintendents most frequently selected the characteristic *Integrity* as extremely important. *Clear Communications* was the second most-frequently selected characteristic as extremely important (37 superintendents). *Effective School Board Relations* was selected by 36 of the superintendents as extremely important. Also, *Vision* and *Inspiring a Shared Vision* (33 superintendentse each) were in the top five characteristics chosen as extremely important. The characteristics ranked in the

bottom five as extremely important included: *Technologically Savvy* (5 superintendents); *Empathy* (9 superintendents); *Holistic Perspective* (10 superintendents); *Knowledgeable about School Law* (11 superintendents); and *Spirituality* (11 superintendents).

Table 1

Mean Importance of Leadership Characteristics in Descending Order

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Integrity	47	5.94	.323
Clear Communication	47	5.74	.530
Effective School Board Relations	47	5.72	.540
Vision	47	5.66	.562
Problem Solver	47	5.64	.568
Inspiring a Shared Vision	47	5.55	.904
Professional Credibility	47	5.51	.804
Politically Astute	47	5.49	.718
Respect	47	5.47	.687
Instructional Leader	47	5.45	.717
Fearlessness	47	5.36	.870
Culturally Sensitive	47	5.28	.800
Collaborative	47	5.26	.765
Managing Resources to Support the Instructional System	47	5.21	.858
Conviction	47	5.17	.816
Civic and Community Relations	47	5.15	.722
Strong Beliefs	47	5.11	.729
Leveraging Team Strengths	47	5.11	.787
Self-confident	47	5.06	.845
Knowledgeable about School Finance	47	5.06	.763
Optimism	47	5.04	.859
Managing Media Relations	47	5.04	.833
Consistency	47	5.04	.955
The Ability to Persuade	47	5.00	.722
Compassion	47	4.98	.821
Focusing on Professional Development	47	4.98	.794
Data Competent	47	4.96	.779
Delegator	47	4.96	.999
School Safety Awareness	47	4.83	1.129
Holistic Perspective	47	4.79	.977
Knowledgeable about School Law	47	4.77	.937
Empathy	47	4.72	.852
Humility	47	4.70	1.121
Spirituality	47	4.45	1.212

Technologically Savvy	47	4.21	1.041

The means for superintendents are presented in Table 1; most items received mean scores between 4.20 and 5.95. The means indicate a general agreement with all the characteristics as being important. Looking at the mean values, the majority of superintendents ranked the following characteristics in the bottom five: Knowledgeable about School Law (M=4.77, SD=.937), Empathy (M=4.72, SD=.852), Humility (M=4.70, SD=1.121), Spirituality (M=4.45, SD=1.212), and Technologically Savvy (M=4.21, SD=1.041). The majority of the superintendents ranked the following characteristics in the top five: Integrity (M=5.94, SD=.323), Clear Communication (M=5.74, SD=.530), Effective School Board Relations (M=5.72, SD=.540), Vision (M=5.66, SD=.562), and Problem Solver (M=5.64, SD=.568). The means provide one glimpse at the characteristics considered to be essential to effective leadership in the superintendency.

Research Question Two

How frequently do AASA superintendents of the year and finalists claim to have implemented the same leadership characteristics?

Superintendents indicated the frequency of the leadership characteristic used as a superintendent (1 = never; 2 = rarely; 3 = occasionally; 4 = often; 5 = very often; 6 = always).

Thirty-eight of the superintendents used the leadership characteristic Integrity almost always, whereas only three superintendents used Knowledgeable about School Law almost always. Additionally, Problem Solver and Respect (both 22 superintendents), Effective Board Relations (25 superintendents), Professional Credibility (26 superintendents), and Clear Communication (32 superintendents) were in the top five characteristics that superintendents use almost always. Conversely, four superintendents almost always used the Technologically Savvy characteristic, 6 superintendents almost always used Humility, and 8 superintendents almost always used the Focusing on Professional Development, Empathy and The Ability to Persuade characteristics.

Table 2
Mean Use of Leadership Characteristics in Descending Order

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Integrity	47	5.72	.649
Clear Communication	47	5.64	.605
Effective School Board Relations	47	5.47	.620
Problem Solver	47	5.38	.644
Respect	47	5.34	.700
Professional Credibility	47	5.26	.988
Politically Astute	47	5.21	.832
Collaborative	47	5.13	.797

Vision	47	5.13	.797
Consistency	47	5.02	1.011
Inspiring a Shared Vision	47	5.02	1.113
Fearlessness	47	5.00	1.022
Strong Beliefs	47	4.98	.821
Conviction	47	4.98	.794
Leveraging Team Strengths	47	4.94	.791
Optimism	47	4.91	.830
Self-confident	47	4.89	.787
Managing Resources to Support the Instructional System	47	4.85	.780
Civic and Community Relations	47	4.85	.859
Knowledgeable about School Finance	47	4.83	.761
Instructional Leader	47	4.81	.900
Culturally Sensitive	47	4.79	.999
Data Competent	47	4.79	.832
Humility	47	4.74	1.073
Delegator	47	4.74	1.031
Focusing on Professional Development	47	4.72	.800
Managing Media Relations	47	4.68	1.002
The Ability to Persuade	47	4.64	.895
Compassion	47	4.60	.851
Holistic Perspective	47	4.60	1.097
Empathy	47	4.57	.903
School Safety Awareness	47	4.51	1.120
Knowledgeable about School Law	47	4.45	.775
Technologically Savvy	47	4.26	.920
Spirituality	47	4.17	1.419

Table 2 displays the descending means of the individual characteristics used by superintendents. From Table 2, Integrity (M=5.72, SD=.649) is the most important characteristic used by the superintendents, while Spirituality (M=4.17, SD=1.419) stands out as the least important characteristics used by the superintendents. The top five characteristics used by superintendents include: Integrity (M=5.72, SD=.649), Clear Communication (M=5.64, SD=.605), Effective School Board Relations (M=5.47, SD=.620), Problem Solver (M=5.38, SD=.644), and Respect (M=5.34, SD= .700). The bottom five characteristics used by superintendents include: Empathy (M=4.57, SD=.903), School Safety Awareness (M=4.51, SD=1.120), Knowledgeable about School Law (M=4.45, SD=.775), Technologically Savvy (M=4.26, SD=.920), and Spiritually (M=4.17, SD=1.419).

Research Question Three
How much success does AASA Superintendents of the Year and finalists claim to have experienced with these leadership characteristics?
Superintendents indicated how much success they have had using each leadership characteristic as a superintendent (1 = none;

2 = very little; 3 = moderate; 4 = average; 5 = above average; 6 = a great deal).

Forty-five superintendents reported that they had a great deal of success with Integrity. A high frequency of superintendents felt that that they also had success a great deal with the following leadership characteristics: Professional Credibility (28 superintendents), Problem Solver (27 superintendents), Clear Communication (26 superintendents), and Inspiring a Shared Vision (26 superintendents). On the contrary, Holistic Perspective characteristic (5 superintendents) was not frequently viewed as successfully used a great deal by the superintendents. The other four characteristics in the bottom five not used a great deal by superintendents included: Technologically Savvy (6 superintendents),

Delegator (8 superintendents), Culturally Sensitive (11 superintendents), and Spirituality (11 superintendents).

Table 3 displays the descending means of individual items in the 'success using leadership characteristics' scale. All the individual item means in this scale fall between the levels of (4) average success and (6) a great deal of success, with a mean range from 4.40 to 5.83. The mean of the highest individual item in this scale is Integrity (M=5.83, SD=.433). The other top-five characteristics: Professional Credibility (M=5.53, SD=.654), Problem Solver (M=5.51, SD=.621), Clear Communication (M=5.45, SD=.717), Effective School Board Relations (M=5.43, SD=.715), and Inspiring a Shared Vision (M=5.43 SD=.827). Relationally, the lowest mean within this scale was Spirituality (M=4.40, SD=1.439).

Table 3
Mean Success Using Leadership Characteristics in Descending Order

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Integrity	47	5.83	.433
Professional Credibility	47	5.53	.654
Problem Solver	47	5.51	.621
Clear Communication	47	5.45	.717
Effective School Board Relations	47	5.43	.715
Inspiring a Shared Vision	47	5.43	.827
Collaborative	47	5.38	.644
Respect	47	5.36	.735
Strong Beliefs	47	5.34	.600
Instructional Leader	47	5.32	.663
Vision	47	5.32	.629
Politically Astute	47	5.30	.805
Fearlessness	47	5.28	.743
Conviction	47	5.23	.729
Self-confident	47	5.23	.698
Optimism	47	5.21	.690
Data Competent	47	5.17	.842
Civic and Community Relations	47	5.17	.789

Knowledgeable about School Finance	47	5.17	.702
Consistency	47	5.13	.769
Managing Resources to Support the Instructional System	47	5.13	.711
Leveraging Team Strengths	47	5.13	.769
Empathy	47	5.11	.787
The Ability to Persuade	47	5.09	.747
Managing Media Relations	47	5.09	.855
Humility	47	5.06	.845
Culturally Sensitive	47	5.04	.690
Compassion	47	5.02	.737
School Safety Awareness	47	4.96	.932
Knowledgeable about School Law	47	4.96	.690
Focusing on Professional Development	47	4.87	.924
Holistic Perspective	47	4.81	.825
Delegator	47	4.77	.983
Technologically Savvy	47	4.60	.851
Spirituality	47	4.40	1.439

Research Question Four

What professional leadership practices are perceived by AASA Superintendents of the Year and finalists to be crucial for superintendent effectiveness?

The Leadership Practices Inventory (LPI) consists of 30 statements describing various leadership actions and behaviors. First, respondents indicate *to what extent* they engage in the noted actions and behaviors. A ten-point Likert scale is used to record their answer: 1 = almost never, 2 = rarely, 3 = seldom, 4 = once in a while, 5 = occasionally, 6 = sometimes, 7 = fairly often, 8 = usually, 9 = very frequently, 10 = almost always. A rating scale of 1 to 10 was assigned to the descriptors. For example, the *almost never* response equaled 1and the *almost always* response was a 10. Second, respondents indicated to what *degree of importance* they perceive each of the thirty behaviors to influence principals to school-based improvement. The LPI (Kouzes & Posner, 1997) contained five subscales for each of The Five Practices of Exemplary

Leadership regarding leadership behaviors. The subscales included: modeling the way, inspiring a shared vision, challenging the process, enabling others to act, and encouraging the heart.

The data in this section of the study represents the leadership practices by AASA Superintendents of the Year and finalists, as indicated in section three of the questionnaire. More specifically, descriptive statistics were used to present summaries of questions in section three of the questionnaire in an attempt to offer evidence relating to the research question.

Of the five leadership practice categories, the most commonly used by superintendents that were identified by the forty-seven exemplary superintendents came from the category "enabling others to act." The mean scores from the Likert scale are included here and in Table 4. The highest-ranking behavior statements in the enabling practice are as follows: "I treat others with dignity and respect" (M=9.85) and "I develop cooperative relationships among the

people I work with" (M=9.53). According to Kouzes and Posner (1999), "Exemplary leaders enlist the support and assistance of all those who make the project work. Leaders involve, in some way, all those who must live with the results, and they make it possible for others to do good work. They enable others to act" (p. 27).

Table 4

Descriptive Statistics

Leadership Action and Behavior	Practice	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
I treat others with dignity and respect.	Enable	47	9.85	.36
I follow through on the promises and commitments that I make.	Model	47	9.70	.66
I develop cooperative relationships among the people I work with.	Enable	47	9.53	.78
I am clear about my philosophy of leadership.	Model	47	9.51	.88
I set a personal example of what I expect of others.	Model	47	9.40	.85
I praise people for a job well done.	Encourage	47	9.30	1.02
I speak with genuine conviction about the higher meaning and purpose of our work.	Inspire	47	9.28	.99
I paint the "big picture" of what we aspire to accomplish.	Inspire	47	9.21	.86
I publicly recognize people who exemplify commitment to shared values.	Encourage	47	9.19	.99
I make certain that we set achievable goals, make concrete plans, and establish measurable milestones for the projects and programs that we work on.	Challenge	47	9.17	1.48
Enable		47	9.12	.51
I give the members of the team lots of appreciation and support for their contributions.	Encourage	47	9.11	1.01
I actively listen to diverse points of view.	Enable	47	9.06	1.07
I ensure that people grow in their jobs by learning new skills and developing themselves.	Enable	47	9.06	.94
Model		47	9.01	.75
I ask "What can we learn?" when things do not go as expected.	Encourage	47	8.96	1.23
Encourage		47	8.92	.84
I build consensus around a common set of values for running our organization.	Model	47	8.91	1.69
I find ways to celebrate accomplishments.	Encourage	47	8.81	.95
I search outside the formal boundaries of my organization for innovative ways to improve what we do.	Challenge	47	8.81	1.15
I make it a point to let people know about my confidence in their.	Encourage	47	8.79	1.21

		47	8.71	.90
Inspire		47	8.71	.90
I support the decisions that people make on their own.	Enable	47	8.64	1.01
I talk about future trends that will influence how our work gets done.	Inspire	47	8.62	1.05
I give people a great deal of freedom and choice in deciding how to do their work.	Enable	47	8.60	1.04
I show others how their long-term interests can be realized by enlisting in a common vision.	Inspire	47	8.60	1.12
Challenge		47	8.57	.80
I describe a compelling image of what our future could be like.	Inspire	47	8.53	1.28
I spend time and energy making certain that the people I work with adhere to the principles and standards that we have agreed on.	Model	47	8.45	1.32
I make sure that people are creatively rewarded for their contributions to the success of our projects.	Encourage	47	8.34	1.42
I challenge people to try out new and innovative ways to do their work.	Challenge	47	8.26	1.58
I experiment and take risks, even when there is a chance of failure.	Challenge	47	8.23	1.31
I ask for feedback on how my actions affect other people's performance.	Model	47	8.11	1.80
I appeal to others to share an exciting dream of the future.	Inspire	47	8.04	1.97
I seek out challenging opportunities that test my own skills and abilities.	Challenge	47	8.02	1.29

The second set of behaviors rated most commonly used by superintendents was the practice of "modeling the way." The modeling behaviors rated among the top ten behaviors identified by the superintendents were: "I follow through on the promises and commitments that I make" (M=9.90); "I am clear about my philosophy of leadership" (M=9.51); and "I set a personal example of what I expect of others" (M=9.40) (Table 4). Kouzes and Posner (1999) state that leaders go first: They set an example and build commitment through simple daily acts that create progress and momentum. Leaders are clear about their principles. "Leaders model the way through personal example and dedicated execution" (p. 39).

Another leadership practice that superintendents rated high was "encouraging the heart." Superintendents perceived themselves as encouraging through the following behaviors: "I praise people for a job well done" (M=9.30) and "I publicly recognize people who exemplify commitment to share values" (M=9.19) (Table 4). Kouzes and Posner (1999) recommend,

Encouragement is a curiously serious business. It's how leaders visibly and behaviorally link rewards with performance. As people strive to raise quality, recover from disaster, start up a new service, or make dramatic change of any kind, leaders make sure constituents benefit whenever behavior is aligned with cherished values. (p. 51)

The leadership practice of "inspiring a shared vision" had two behaviors rated among the most commonly used. The inspiring behaviors were, "I speak with genuine conviction about the higher meaning and purpose of work" (M=9.28) and "I paint the 'big picture' of what we aspire to accomplish" (M=9.21). Kouzes and Posner (1999) state that inspiring a shared vision means that leaders have a desire to change how things are and to create something new. Leaders cannot command commitment; they can only inspire it. "Leaders had absolute and total personal belief that the dream could be realized. The dream or vision is the force that invents the future" (Kouzes & Posner, 1999, p. 17).

Of the five practices, "challenging the process" was the least commonly used leadership practice. Moreover, only one behavior ranked in the top 10 leadership behaviors: "I make certain we set achievable goals, make concrete plans, and establish measurable milestones for the projects and programs that we work on" (M=9.17). With regard to challenging the process, Kouzes and Posner (1999) state, "The key that unlocks the door to opportunity is learning. The leader's primary contribution is in recognizing good ideas, supporting them, and willing to challenge the system to get new products, processes, services, and systems adopted" (p. 7).

The superintendents' perceptions of the importance of the five leadership practices are expressed as thirty leadership behaviors. The superintendents rated all the leadership practices and all thirty corresponding behaviors as important. Fifteen of the thirty behaviors received a mean score of 9.01 or above on the Likert scale and the remaining fifteen behaviors were rated between 8.01 and 8.99 (mean scores). Table 4 illustrates the most commonly used leadership behaviors employed by superintendents. Challenging the process behaviors were the least used and thus received the lowest ratings by the superintendents.

Conclusion

At the onset of this study, this writer thought that characteristics such as politically astute, instructional leader, spirituality, humility, and data competence would be most significant regarding the leadership attributes. However, an analysis of these data showed that the majority of the superintendents most frequently selected the characteristic integrity as extremely important. Clear communications was the second most frequently characteristic selected as extremely important. Effective school board relations was also selected by the superintendents as extremely important. Lastly, vision and inspiring a shared vision were in the top five characteristics chosen by superintendents as extremely important.

The majority of the superintendents ranked the following characteristics in the top five for importance: integrity, clear communication, effective school board relations, vision, and problem solver. Scholars identify credibility, articulation, and the ability to see the bigger picture as some of the critical leadership characteristics of a successful leader. Critical qualities and skills that individuals already possessed included vision, commitment, ability to build relationships, a strong work ethic, genuine concern for their work for other people, and courage.

The top five characteristics mostly used by superintendents include: integrity, clear communication, effective school board relations, problem solver, and respect. To be a successful school superintendent, one must have an understanding of what it means to be an effective school leader and put that understanding into practice. This requires continuous preparation and study, sound decision-making, a wide range of expertise,

an understanding of cultural and political implications, good communication skills, and being competent to carry out various administrative duties (Wilmore, 2008). Kowalski (2005) stated that the current role of the superintendent is that of communicator. This study confirmed the research findings.

Knowledge of curriculum and instruction were seen as important to the participants, but not as critical as skilled communication with all constituents, especially the board of education. All respondents in this study recognized the importance of collaborative leadership.

Clear communication is essential for a superintendent to practice successful school leadership. In this study, every participant reported of the importance of communication. Not only is communication considered important by the participating superintendents, but it is also important because it is needed to implement other leadership practices such as vision, inspiring others, ethical behavior, and building relationships. In other words, if the school superintendent can effectively communicate, then he or she can promote a vision for the school district, inspire and encourage others, and make sure those in the school district are aware of the moral and ethical obligation to do what is best for the students.

Superintendents reported that they had a great deal of success with integrity. A large number of superintendents felt that they also had a great deal of success with the following leadership characteristics: professional credibility, problem solver, clear communication, and inspiring a shared vision.

Of the five leadership practice categories, the most commonly used by superintendents that were identified by the 47 exemplary superintendents came from the category "enabling others to act." The second set of behaviors rated most commonly used by superintendents was the practice of "modeling the way." Another leadership practice that superintendents rated high was "encouraging the heart."

These revealing characteristics and practices represent high-priority leadership qualities of successful district superintendents. Aspiring and current superintendents can compare their characteristics and practices with the aforementioned ones by the AASA Superintendents of the Year and finalists to determine their levels of success in the areas of leadership qualities. The author recommends further research on leadership characteristics and practices of effective AASA public school superintendents.

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Doris Crawford is a doctoral student in Educational Leadership, Eastern Kentucky University.