

Study of the Role of Superintendents and Directors Focus Groups and Surveys

Background

Research confirms that leadership at the system level is a key element in supporting student success and school improvement. Superintendents and directors, therefore, have a crucial role in ensuring that all strategies at the board and school authority level are focused on those elements that truly make the most difference to student achievement.

Superintendents and directors must be equipped with high leadership capacity in their own right while simultaneously supporting and enhancing leadership capacity in leaders at all levels at the district school board. The superintendent and directors roles are considered critical in supervising and supporting principals in leading their schools.

Purpose

The focus group interview process and the responses to the on-line superintendent and director surveys sought to obtain feedback on the role of the superintendent and director and to find out what challenges and opportunities they face in carrying out their important leadership roles.

The focus group questions and the surveys were designed to provide a basis for on-going discussion and activities to support superintendents and directors and to understand what is needed to complement their professional development. The information collected will be used to inform policy, program and resource development to support superintendents and directors who work with Ontario's district school boards and school authorities.

Methodology

The Ministry designed a study using both a focus group approach and distinct surveys for superintendents and directors, which was conducted by the Council of Ontario Directors of Education (CODE) during June/July, 2006 on the role of superintendents and directors.

This study focused on the broad parameters of the role including definition, district leadership, preparation, recruitment and succession planning, on-going professional development, terms and conditions of employment and appraisal systems.

Focus Group Interviews

CODE conducted focus group interviews during the month of June 2006, lasting approximately two hours each with twelve district school boards and the three supervisory officers' provincial executives. Approximately 90 superintendents and directors participated in the focus groups. See Appendix A for the focus group schedule.

Surveys

The surveys were provided in an electronic manner through the website, www.ontariodirectors.ca, to allow for direct input and field tabulation. Directors and superintendents were informed how to access the survey and it was made available to all directors and superintendents for a three-week period in June 2006.

The table below shows survey respondents based on the initial data from Lakeside Information Technologies Inc., the specialists in computerized information systems contracted by CODE for this task.

Number of Respondents

	# of Potential Respondents	# of Actual Respondents		# of Potential Respondents	# of Actual Respondents
Superintendent English	385	129	Director English	60	33
Superintendent French	38	11	Director French	12	6
Total Superintendents	423	140	Total Directors	72	39

One hundred and forty (140) or approximately 30% of superintendents and thirty-nine (39) or approximately 54% of directors completed the survey.

The survey was conducted in both English and French.

The format for the superintendents' and directors' survey is almost the same, but many questions differ in content to address differences in the roles. Most questions contained in both surveys were multiple-choices questions (i.e., participants are allowed to select one or more than one answer from the listed response categories) and frequently gave respondents the opportunity to provide additional comments.

The last section of both surveys utilized one single open-ended question, which provided respondents with the opportunity to include additional concerns and thoughts.

Summary of Key Findings and Recommendations from the CODE Report

1. Academic superintendents see themselves as instructional leaders and they are more focused on instructional leadership than in the past; however, they still find that they are spending less time on those actions they believe best support student achievement than they would like.

Recommendations from the Report:

- Supervisory officers, through the board improvement plan, should clearly demonstrate the link between student achievement and the specific strategies to achieve the stated targets.
 - Superintendents responsible for schools need to ensure that school projects, daily practices and daily academic operations are aligned with strategies aimed at improving student achievement.
 - The superintendent's role should include: monitoring of school improvement plans, supervising how student progress is measured and communicated, supervising and supporting principals, ensuring the sharing of best practices to support underperforming schools, ensuring that performance appraisals, professional development and succession plans are in place at each school, and promoting the use of data in decision making
2. When asked if their organizations could be structured differently to help them achieve their goals, superintendents suggest adding more administrative support to handle routine matters, hiring more superintendents, re-organizing existing board structures to distribute work more evenly, providing more training, and redefining the role of the trustee. (See Recommendations from the Report in #4 below)
 3. Superintendents and directors believe it is very important to be strategic partners with the Ministry and they provide advice for how the partnership can be strengthened including, more cohesion and focus across Ministry initiatives, and more communication and consultation with superintendents and directors on the part of the Ministry.
Recommendations from the Report:
 - Supervisory Officers should illustrate how student achievement measurements are linked to the four provincial educational priorities of meeting the 75% target, closing the achievement gap, reducing the dropout rate and restoring public confidence.
 - There should be a review of the relationship between superintendents and directors and education leaders at the Ministry
 4. Work with trustees and unions is a challenge in boards with respect to senior staff's ability to manage change that supports student achievement, but some boards have found effective approaches to address this challenge. Often, the methods for maintaining positive relations with parents, community and unions are mainly reactive in nature – responding to complaints.
Recommendations from the Report:
 - The Ministry and CODE should initiate discussions to clarify role and responsibilities for trustees, directors and superintendents
 - Relationships between superintendents, directors and union groups, parents, School Councils and community groups need to be reviewed
 5. Superintendents and directors cite a variety of ways in which they build lateral capacity in their boards, across boards and within their own ranks. (See Recommendations from the Report in #1 above)
 6. Superintendents and directors have identified a number of topics that would enhance the Supervisory Officers' Qualification Program (SOQP) including: use of data, developing

leadership in others, change management, and understanding assessment for learning. (No recommendations are provided in the CODE report regarding this finding.)

7. There is strong support for mentorship for each of the roles of superintendent and director.

Recommendation from the Report:

- CODE and the Ministry should collaborate on the development of succession plans in each board

8. Superintendents and directors would like to see provincial professional development targeted especially at their unique roles.

Recommendation from the Report:

- Each superintendent and director in collaboration with the immediate supervisor should agree on a professional development plan that will assist the superintendent or director to develop the skills, knowledge, abilities to perform effectively

9. Superintendents and directors support province-wide standardized guidelines for personal service contracts and for their own appraisal.

Recommendations from the Report:

- It is recommended that CODE develop generic province-wide performance appraisal guidelines for superintendents and directors and develop the process for implementation.
- It is also recommended that the Ministry use these guidelines as the basis for any discussions about developing province-wide guidelines for performance appraisal.
- It is recommended that CODE update present generic province-wide guidelines for personal service agreements for directors and superintendents to include at least: salary and benefits, terms of employment/separation, errors and omissions, performance appraisal measures, and professional development support.

In addition to the key findings in the study other recommendations from the report include:

- There should be a review of the role and responsibilities of the Chief Financial Officer of a board
- The board budget should become a fiscal part of the board's improvement plan
- The Chief Financial Officer of the board should provide an analysis of financial performance by monitoring and comparing expenditures against benchmark financial indicators to assist with strategic planning and decision-making

Key Findings - Detail

Role Definition

Alignment

There is a lack of alignment between the activities superintendents and directors say occupy the most time in their roles compared to what they think should occupy their time in order to ensure that they are supporting student achievement.

Superintendents		Directors	
Top 5 Activities Occupying Time of Superintendents	Top 5 Activities Superintendents Believe <i>Should</i> Occupy Their Time	Top 5 Activities Occupying Time of Directors	Top 5 Activities Directors Believe <i>Should</i> Occupy Their Time
Supporting/supervising principals 43% ¹	Monitoring progress on improving student achievement 50%	Managing board operations 56%	Monitoring progress on improving student achievement 64%
Parent inquiry and concerns 42%	Working with principals on school improvement plans 41%	Supporting/supervising superintendents 49%	Supporting/supervising superintendents 54%
Managing board operations 40%	Supporting/supervising principals 38%	Preparing for, attending and following up on Board meetings 44%	Providing leadership training 36%
Supporting/supervising schools 32%	Leadership Training 31%	Monitoring progress on improving student achievement 33%	Working on board improvement plans 36%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reporting to Ministry • Reports to Board • Working with Principals on School Improvement Plans 17% (for each item)	Working with underperforming and static schools 29%	Trustee requests, inquiries, consultation 21%	Supporting, supervising principals 23%

Administrative Structures

When asked if their organizations could be structured differently to help them achieve their goals, the most commonly reported response by superintendents was to provide more administrative support to handle routine matters. In the open-ended responses to this question a number of other suggestions arose:

- Provide training on things like dispute resolution and governance issues related to working with trustees
- Provide mentoring
- Hire more superintendents
- Restructure within a board so that everyone shares central and school based responsibilities so that there are more people to carry the load
- Clarify governance issues with respect to trustees

¹ Unless otherwise stated, percentages in this report are calculated by dividing the number of respondents who chose the particular answer in the survey item by the number of total respondents for the survey (140 superintendents; 39 directors)

Instructional Leadership

One quarter of superintendents spend more than 50% of their time on instructional leadership while about a third spend 20% or less.

The top three activities that comprise this instructional leadership time include:

- supporting professional learning communities across groups of schools
- working with and supervising principals with respect to school improvement plans
- supporting the sharing of effective instructional practice across schools

Ten percent of directors spend more than 50% of their time on instructional leadership while just under 30% spend 20% or less.

The top three activities that comprise this instructional leadership time include:

- supporting professional learning communities within the board
- working/supervising superintendents with respect to school improvement plans
- reporting to the board and/or system staff on progress towards meeting goals in the board improvement plan

Comments from the focus groups on this topic include:

The role has changed in my almost 20 years as a supervisory officer. There is now more focus on student achievement and accountability for student outcomes; my challenge is to match my calendar with all of the demands.²

We need a common understanding of our jobs as part of learning communities. We need to know what the common vision is, what the proper role of the supervisory officer is and what shared leadership looks like across the province.

Strategic Partnerships with the Ministry

Superintendents and directors indicate strong support for strategic partnerships with the Ministry in furthering Ministry goals, but there are impediments to bringing about change.

- Over 70% of superintendents and 77% of directors report that it is very important to be strategic partners with the Ministry
- Impediments most commonly identified to being strategic partners include:
 - lack of resources (over 40% cited this factor)
 - some Ministry goals are not tailored to local needs (38% of superintendents, 31% of directors)
 - lack of clarity about how to be a strategic partner (32% of superintendents, 10% of directors)

Advice for enhancing the strategic partnerships between superintendents and directors and the Ministry were identified in the open-ended responses:

- Provide more cohesion and focus in Ministry initiatives
- Strengthen communication and consultation between Ministry and senior staff in boards
- Attend to ensuring reasonable timelines for Ministry initiatives

² Quotes in the text are from focus groups or from the open-ended responses to the survey questions.

One superintendent commented:

We have an opportunity because we see what the Ministry is doing; they are sharpening the focus causing us to ensure our projects are aligned; next year is key – there needs to be a commonality of ‘what we are taking out there’ because schools look for this.

Another superintendent, representing a commonly expressed view, said:

One of the greatest problems is timing – if we knew in the spring what the initiatives for the fall would be, we could plan for it to start in September. We understand the Ministry has a March 31 fiscal year end but we still need a spring announcement of at least what may be coming.

- The majority of superintendents and directors (74%) indicate only mild or no conflict between their responsibilities as employees of the board and their responsibilities under the Education Act:

One director explains the absence of conflict in his/her board as follows:

...I have the good fortune to work in a board where vision and resources are all aligned. This reduces tension. It is easy for trustees to become distracted from student achievement because they know little about cause and effect and make some erroneous assumptions. Over time, our trustees have built a strong, trusting relationship that permits initiatives to move forward.

Just over 20% of directors report moderate to severe conflict between their responsibilities as employees of the board and their responsibilities under the Education Act.

In a related question participants were asked about challenges in their work as change agents in their boards and those most often cited were:

- Working with federations/unions and collective agreements (almost 75% of both superintendents and directors cited this challenge)
- distracters that reduce time available to bring about change (69% of superintendents, 44% of directors)
- demographics³ of the board (29% of superintendents, 31% of directors)
- staff resistance (28% of superintendents, 8% of directors, mainly English language)

Partnerships with Others

Lateral Capacity Building

- Superintendents indicate that the primary way in which they build capacity across schools is by providing support and time for sharing of effective practice among groups of schools (78%). Directors cite three approaches with about the same frequency (almost 80%): providing support for collaboration among school based superintendents; reviewing achievement data across schools; providing support for sharing of effective practice across schools
- About 60% of superintendents and about two thirds of directors partner with other boards by seeking advice on common initiatives and sharing effective practice.
- 72% of superintendents and 85% of directors say that they work together as academic and business superintendents at least fairly often
- Both groups identify their professional associations as effective forums for networking

³ The survey identified demographics as “too large, too spread out, too small, etc.”

Positive Relations

- The primary way in which superintendents maintain positive relations with parents and community is by responding to complaints and mediating discussions (76%). Directors say they attend meetings with parents and community on a regular basis (62%) and they provide training and support to principals and superintendents to work with parents and community (62%). Less than half of directors cite “responding to complaints” as their method for maintaining positive relations.
- Responding to complaints and mediating discussions is cited by 72% of superintendents for maintaining positive relations with unions; whereas directors cite “ensuring that collective agreements are clearly communicated and understood” more often than other methods (56%).

Leadership Development

Preparation

45% of superintendents identified the principalship as the best preparation for the role and 62% of directors identified the superintendency as the best preparation for their role.

Of those who answered the question about the usefulness of the SOQP, 53% of superintendents and 60% directors found the SOQP very useful; another 39% of superintendents and 36% of directors found the SOQP to be somewhat useful. Both groups indicated support for a number of topics to be strengthened or added to the program as shown below:

Superintendents

Topic	Support
Using data to inform decision making	51%
Developing leadership in others	43%
Understanding assessment for learning	35%
Change management	31%
Collaborative decision making	19%
No change	8%

Directors

Topic	Support
Using data to inform decision making	44%
Change management	33%
Developing leadership in others	31%
Developing board improvement plans	31%
Understanding assessment for learning	23%
Collaborative decision making	8%
No change	15%

Of the 31 superintendents who answered the question about the usefulness of the business supervisory officer training program, almost half (45%) did not find it useful.

Mentoring

Over 60% of superintendents indicated that they had a mentor at the beginning of their current role; however, less than half of directors indicated that they had a mentor at the beginning of their current role. Both groups indicated very strong support for mentoring; for example, 95% of both superintendents and directors who answered the question about the helpfulness of a mentor agreed that it was helpful and they would recommend it to others; 90% of both superintendents and directors who said they didn't have a mentor would have appreciated having one.

On-going Professional Development

The top three ways in which superintendents engage in on-going professional development include: attending conferences (90%), professional reading (89%), and professional dialogue at district meetings (78%).

Directors cite the same three professional development activities as superintendents: attending conferences (77%), professional reading (77%), and professional dialogue at district meetings (69%).

Superintendents are interested in a variety of additional staff development opportunities including, in order: PD offered provincially that targets issues specific to the role (69%); opportunities to engage in inter-board visits with exemplary superintendents (56%); opportunities within their own boards to engage in PD with colleagues (36%).

Directors are interested in provincial PD targeted for directors (72%) and orientation/induction programs for newly appointed directors (54%).

Principal Leadership

When asked about what qualities they seek when hiring new principals, superintendents answered as follows:

Top 5 qualities selected from the multiple choice list	Percentage
The ability to involve partners in development of shared vision for school	71
Strong decision-making skills and judgment	66
Commitment to student learning and diverse programming	64
Creating shared accountability with staff and partners for achieving results	59
Strong communication and networking skills	59

Much less frequently selected were knowledge and adherence to board policies (12%) and ability to deal with unions in a positive way (10%).

Directors answered as follows:

Top 6 qualities selected from the multiple choice list	Percentage
Strong decision-making skills and judgment	72
Creating shared accountability with staff and partners for achieving results	59
Commitment to student learning and diverse programming	56
Strong communication and networking skills	56
Commitment to ongoing learning for self and staff & ability to involve staff, parents, and others in the development of shared vision	49 (for each item)

Much less frequently selected were the ability to deal with unions in a positive way (5%) and knowledge and adherence to board policies (3%).

Terms and Conditions

Personal Service Contracts

Of the participants who responded to this question (128 superintendents and 29 directors) concerning personal service contracts, almost all superintendents (89%) and directors (97%) indicate that they have a personal service contract with their boards. Most contracts cover salary and benefits, but only 26% of superintendent contracts and 36% of director contracts include performance measures.

For participants who responded to this question (128 superintendents and 31 directors), 73% of superintendents and over 80% of directors support the idea of province-wide standardized guidelines for terms and conditions and transfer and dismissal conditions.

Appraisal

Superintendents

- Just over 40% percent are appraised annually, while 31% have a different appraisal cycle and 17% are never appraised.
- Over 60% are appraised by the director with 20% reporting trustee involvement in appraisal, 18% peer involvement, and 13% principal involvement.
- Over 40% report that the appraisal criteria are developed between the superintendent and the director while almost 25% indicate that superintendents as a group are consulted on appraisal criteria.
- Of the participants who answered this question (126), 65% are supportive of a province-wide appraisal scheme for superintendents.

Directors

- Almost 60% of directors report annual appraisal.
- 72% report that trustees carry out the appraisal with 18% reporting superintendent involvement in the appraisal and 15% reporting principal involvement.
- The majority of directors (56%) report that appraisal criteria are developed with trustees.
- Of the directors answering this question (31), 77% support a province-wide appraisal scheme for directors.

Demographics

(percentages in this section are calculated based on the number of respondents to the questions)

The majority of superintendents (71%) have less than 6 years experience in the role and 60% had more than 10 years teaching experience prior to taking on a leadership role (based on 127 responses).

Years as a superintendent (based on 127 responses)

Years	Percentage
1 – 2	36%
3 – 5	35%
6 – 10	17%
More than 10	12%

Years of teaching before entering leadership positions (based on 112 responses)

Years	Percentage
Less than 5	4%
5 – 10	38%
More than 10	59%

Almost half of directors have between 3 and 5 years experience in the role and 54% had 10 years or less experience in teaching prior to taking on leadership roles.

Years as a director (based on 31 responses)

Years	Percentage
1 – 2	35%
3 – 5	48%
6 – 10	12%
More than 10	3%

Years of teaching before entering leadership positions (based on 31 responses)

Years	Percentage
Less than 5	6%
5 – 10	48%
More than 10	45%

Appendix A

Focus Group Schedule

English Public:

Limestone DSB	Monday, June 19, 2006	10:00 a.m.	Board Office, Kingston
Thames Valley DSB	Monday, June 12, 2006	1:30 p.m.	Board Office, London
Toronto DSB	Thursday, June 8, 2006	9:00 a.m.	Board Office, Toronto
Rainbow DSB	Friday, June 9, 2006	1:30 p.m.	Teleconference (Sudbury)
Upper Grand DSB	Tuesday, June 13, 2006	8:30 a.m.	Board Office, Guelph
OPSOA Provincial Executive	Friday, June 16, 2006	10:30 a.m.	OPSOA Office, Oakville

English Catholic:

Niagara CDSB	Monday, June 12, 2006	9:00 a.m.	Board Office, Welland
Renfrew CDSB	Thursday, June 8, 2006	10:00 a.m.	Board Office, Pembroke
Thunder Bay CDSB	Thursday, June 8, 2006	2:00 p.m.	Teleconference (Thunder Bay)
Windsor-Essex CDSB	Monday, June 19, 2006	3:00 p.m.	Board Office, Windsor
York Region CDSB	Thursday, June 22, 2006	9:00 a.m.	Board Office, Aurora
OCSOA Provincial Executive	Wednesday, June 14, 2006	9:00 a.m.	OCSOA Office, Toronto

French Public:

Conseil Public du Grand Nord	Friday, June 16, 2006	3:00 p.m.	Board Office, Sudbury
------------------------------	-----------------------	-----------	-----------------------

French Catholic:

Conseil scolaire de district des écoles catholiques du Sud-Ouest	Monday, June 5, 2006	11:30 a.m.	Board Office, Windsor
--	----------------------	------------	-----------------------

AGÉFO Governing Council:

AGÉFO Governing Council	Tuesday, June 20, 2006	9:00 a.m.	French Catholic Board Office, Toronto
-------------------------	------------------------	-----------	---------------------------------------