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

By

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Questions Are Welcome!

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REPORT OF 2010 STUDY FINDINGS

An Exploration of School Board-Superintendent Relationships in Minnesota

The Minnesota Association of School Administrators and business partner Cuningham Group Architecture, P.A. sponsor the annual Richard Green Scholar's Award "to honor the scholarly work and professional development of Minnesota school leaders through the award of an annual recognition for the research, writing, and presentation of one paper reflecting the practice of excellent school leadership" (MASA, 2010). The MASA Executive Committee, chaired by Superintendent Jeff Olson, selected this author as the 2010 award recipient based on a submitted proposal.

The full Report of Study Findings is accessible on the MASA web site or from the author (man@q.com). Also, web access to the charted survey results (only) requires the URL link below. Password: RESULTS
<http://www.zoomerang.com/Shared/SharedResultsPasswordPage.aspx?ID=L24EJC29XGAC>

Executive Summary

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

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

The findings for this exploratory study are based on a literature review, survey of current MASA superintendent members and recent retirees, and follow-up interviews with ten survey respondents about the superintendent-school board relationship in Minnesota. The findings are guided by selected concepts from the professional literature, Minnesota-related data, and resources from organizations such as the Minnesota School Boards Association.

213 Minnesota superintendents completed surveys, representing 56% of the sample of MASA members that are current and retired superintendents. 85% of respondents are currently practicing and 11% are retired. The survey replicates several questions from a 2006 American Association of School Administrators study of national superintendents (1338 respondents represented 17% of the sample). Follow-up phone interviews with ten superintendents provide additional insights about the school board-superintendent relationships in Minnesota.

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Executive Summary (continued)

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

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

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

Another key finding is that several additional job factors for superintendents are also rated positively by respondents (78-99%). Minnesota superintendents report high levels of job satisfaction. 88% report being *very satisfied* or *satisfied* with their current superintendency. Given that superintendent leaders significantly impact the quality of education and future opportunity for learners, job satisfaction is critically important. Further, 99% of superintendent respondents view themselves to be *very effective* or *effective* as superintendents. 96% report their most recent job evaluation rating received from the school board as *excellent* or *good*. 90% indicate their school board evaluates them *very fairly* or *fairly*. 78% view the board's performance expectations of them as *always* or *usually* congruent with the evaluation criteria.

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

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

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themselves as *effective*, 53% selected the Board of Education as #1 or #2 in importance to their effectiveness. In fact, those rating themselves as more effective generally report higher school board ratings for their performance, higher board effectiveness in leading the school district, and more positive board relationships.

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

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

Survey responses of Minnesota superintendent compare closely to the national survey sample in the AASA 2006 Mid-Decade Study of Superintendents. Minnesota responses compare closely to AASA responses in all areas except three—views about how well school boards lead the district, board expectations of the superintendent, and congruency of board expectations with evaluation criteria.

Reports showing similarities:

- Superintendents in both studies represent mostly *small-to-average* size districts
- 33% (MASA) and two thirds (AASA) of superintendents are in the *first five years* of the job, and approximately 40% in both studies have been superintendents for ten or more years
- The most important reason for hire by the school board is “Leadership Ability” (44% MN and 49% AASA)
- 88% (MN) and 90% (AASA) report being *very satisfied* or *satisfied* with their current jobs
- Nearly half of respondents (47% MASA, 49% AASA) report spending “three hours or less per week in direct board communications” (phone calls, meetings)
- The top #1 and #2 factors contributing to MN superintendent effectiveness are the “Board of Education” followed in ranking by “Interpersonal Relations Skills.” AASA respondents report the same two factors as their top choice, but in reverse order

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- The top #1 and #2 factors most inhibiting MN superintendent effectiveness are “Inadequate Financing of Schools” followed in ranking by “State and Federal Mandates”; AASA respondents also report “Inadequate Financing” with “Too Many Insignificant Demands” ranked next
- 99% (MN) and 96% (AASA) report being either very *effective* or *effective* as a superintendent
- 90% (MN) and 89% (AASA) report being *very fairly* or *fairly* evaluated by their school boards
- 86% (MASA) and 90% (AASA) received *excellent* or *good* evaluation ratings from their boards
- Nearly half of respondents (47% MASA, 49% AASA) report spending “three hours or less per week in direct board communications” (phone calls, meetings)
- 15% (MASA) and 16% (AASA) report having been “forced to resign or deciding to leave” a superintendency due to poor board relations
- 95% (MASA) and 93% (AASA) characterize their present board relationship as *very good* or *good*; in MN 59% report *very good* compared to 63% *very good* in the AASA study

Reports showing differences:

- Primary board expectations for MN superintendents are *managerial leader* (48%) followed by *educational leader* (19%), while higher numbers of AASA respondents say school boards expect *educational leader* (42%) with slightly fewer reporting *managerial leader* (35%)
- 16% (MASA) and 34% (AASA) view their board expectations as *always* congruent with evaluation criteria
- In MN 65% view school boards as doing *very well* or *well* compared to 82% in the AASA study.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Respondent comments link to concepts in the literature. The behavior of superintendents and school boards influences board conflict (National School Boards Association, 2010, p. 2-3). Problematic school board behaviors cited: overstepping authority and trying to be administrators; making promises; getting involved in labor relations or budget minutia; not preparing for meetings; not keeping executive sessions confidential; failing to act on sensitive issues; not being open/honest with the superintendent; making decisions based on preconceived notions; not supporting the superintendent; springing surprises at meetings; having hidden agendas. Superintendents can cause conflicts with their boards by: not treating board members alike; not informing board members of public concerns; not providing adequate financial or other needed information; using poor public management practices; making public statements before informing the board; not being open/honest with the school board; not providing alternatives in an objective manner; not adjusting to the new reality of an involved board; not supporting the school board; springing surprises at meetings; having hidden agendas. Summers and Wells (2000) recommend superintendent behaviors that promote effective board relationships

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including: work to preserve their inner strength and confidence, keep the board informed, involve the community in district activities, and provide joint training on maintaining an effective relationship.

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

Study Design

This study attempts to answer three categories of questions:

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

In June, the study invitation/link to the 28-question survey was emailed to the MASA members that are currently-practicing superintendents in Minnesota (n=333 superintendent members of MASA) and recently-retired superintendents in 2010, 2009, or 2008 (n=49). 213 responded to the survey about their experiences and observations as superintendents. The 213 respondents represent 56% of the total sample (n=382). Several emails were returned as undeliverable. 85% of respondents represent currently-practicing superintendents, 4% are self-identified as other, and 11% are recently-retired

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Study Design (continued)

superintendents in 2010, 2009, or 2008. 115 or 54% of the 213 respondents volunteered for a confidential phone interview (far more than the 10 volunteers needed per the study design).

The Minnesota survey includes 17 questions duplicated with permission from the American Association of School Administrators' 2006 Mid-Decade Study of Superintendents (Glass & Franceschini, 2006). The 2010 Minnesota survey responses are compared to the 2006 AASA survey results. AASA (2006, p. 11) reports a 17% response rate (1,338 respondents of 7,958 superintendents surveyed). Data reported here for both studies are rounded to the nearest decimal. The five customized survey questions in the Minnesota study collect additional information about school board-superintendent relationships. The Minnesota survey was field tested and edited. Participants (MASA superintendents and follow-up interviewees) were reassured that no respondent will be identified by name or school district. Ten superintendents were interviewed after the survey completion using one script with questions.

Limitations to this exploratory study follow. The 333 MASA superintendent members are believed to represent all practicing superintendents, but positions change due to shared districts, retirements, and other changes. The Minnesota Department of Education web site reports 339 Public Operating Elementary and Secondary Independent Districts, 3 Intermediate School Districts, 5 Integration School Districts, 3 special Education School Districts, 13 Education Districts, 18 Miscellaneous Districts, 2 Non-Operating Community School Districts, 2 Special School Districts, 2 State Schools, and 153 Charter Schools (2010). The 213 respondents represent 56% of the 333 MASA members and 49 recently-retired superintendent members. Since school board members are not surveyed, the data is limited to the experiences/observations reported by superintendent respondents only. The study does not collect data about any school board observations of superintendent behaviors. Whether any school board behavior is due to concerns about superintendent performance is beyond the scope of this study. Finally, the data analyses only infer relationships among respondent ratings. Additional analyses would be required to determine if ratings are correlated or found to be statistically significant.

Conceptual Framework

The importance of a successful superintendent-school board relationship is well known. Today's school districts are expected to provide a high quality education for all students. To meet this expectation, school districts strive to demonstrate effective leadership and management focused on student learning, accountability for legal and ethical use of education resources, and a governance system that earns community trust and support.

Superintendents function as the chief executive officer of the school district and report to an elected school board. The most recent AASA study of superintendents (Glass and Franceschini, 2006, p. ix)

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Conceptual Framework (continued)

notes that superintendents have one of the most responsible and complex roles in society, and are “caught between the lay board that makes policy for the district and the professionals that must carry it out.” Elected school board members function as a legal governance unit, balancing diverse community expectations while meeting policy-making obligations and legal and ethical behavior standards. Both superintendents and school boards are accountable to work together to improve school district quality. While school reforms and meeting education standards are currently-debated topics for school improvement, school districts that fail to monitor and improve the superintendent-board relationship will likely risk undermining organizational effectiveness and student learning success.

This study draws on the contributions of the American Association of School Administrators (AASA). The opinions of school superintendents are regularly collected by AASA through a survey administered every ten years to the nation’s superintendents. AASA’s most recent study entitled: “The State of the American School Superintendency: A Mid-Decade Study” (Glass & Franceschini, 2006) includes several questions about superintendent experiences and board relations. Some of the 2006 questions were replicated in this study with AASA permission, to enable making comparisons between the 2010 Minnesota respondents and the 2006 national superintendent sample.

Successful superintendents and school boards collaborate with each other. Board accountability for hiring/firing the superintendent, establishing major policies, maintaining good relationships with the community, and making policy decisions leading to education quality all require effective collaboration with the school superintendent, administrators, and teachers (Reeves, 2010). The superintendent is accountable to promote effective board relationships for the benefit of the school district and for job survival. McAdams (2006) writes that the future success of the district is dependent on the school board-superintendent relationship, and school boards are high on the list of obstacles likely impeding superintendent effectiveness.

The quality of the relationship between the superintendent and school board has a direct impact on the success of a school system through the power of good public relations (Richardson, 2005). Usdan (2010) calls for school boards to invigorate the district’s coordination of assets by adopting targeted policies that promote school achievement. Hansen (2002) states that when superintendent and school board collaboration occurs in a positive atmosphere with mutual respect, these qualities are ultimately reflected in the classroom.

Price (2001) states that while many elements contribute to an effective relationship, the reason most often cited for poor school board-superintendent relationships is the problem of “role confusion” (p.1). The need for clear role understanding is critical to building an effective superintendent-school board relationship. Promulgating policy is generally considered to be the school board’s domain while

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implementing policy is the responsibility of the superintendent and his/her administrative team (Kowalski, 2005). Goodman & Fullbright (1999) caution that the traditional governance culture for school boards tends to focus more on operational concerns than on governance, leading several Colorado boards to apply the Carver Policy Governance Model as a guiding framework (Carver, 1997).

Regarding board roles, Price (2001) cautions that adopting a corporate governance model is unlikely to work well because school board members are politically elected office holders that derive little or no monetary benefit, other than promotion of ideological or political interests, rendering school board decisions as less rational in nature. Price writes, “the more highly politicized and single issue-oriented is the school board election, the more difficult it is to create a governance culture in which the school board operates within a carefully defined and crafted set of role expectations, while maximizing the role of the CEO” (p. 2). Price describes a new breed of board member that may be emerging as part of local political activism; this changing board behavior impacts the school board-superintendent relationship.

Guiding principles for school board behavior are provided by the one state association that serves all Minnesota school boards—the Minnesota School Boards Association. MSBA supports the work of the state’s school boards and public education by providing training and resources to educate board members. An MSBA brochure “Becoming a School Board Member” (p. 2) states: “The major function of the school board is to provide leadership, policy development, policy oversight, and communication. This is usually accomplished by adopting policies which the administrators and staff carry out.” Differences between the board member and administrative roles are clarified during MSBA training, using tools such as a National School Public Relations Association brochure entitled, “16 Tenets of the Effective Board-Administrative Leadership Team.” These resources emphasize the need for board members to respect the executive function of the superintendent, to understand the authority of the whole board in official meetings only, to refer staff issues to appropriate administrators, to keep the superintendent and other board members informed, to display respectful treatment of others, and to make decisions in the best interest of all students and all citizens. These recommended school board practices guided development of five survey questions about individual board behaviors in Minnesota.

Kowalski (2006) states that role confusion may be a symptom of the increasing political nature of elected school boards, rather than being the cause of a problem. The traditional view of the school board calls for the exercise of board authority to benefit the whole community, and for board members to function as statespersons, able to consider all sides of issues as they guide the district with effective policy decisions. Community pressures or personal motivations may influence individual board members to stray into administrative roles, exceeding board member role boundaries, or communicating with staff without notifying the superintendent, to display lack of courtesy or respect toward administrators or staff, or to seek the approval of vocal special interest groups. Board members

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Conceptual Framework (continued)

may be unduly influenced by special interest groups seeking to secure board member loyalty. Televised school board meetings have influenced board member's motivations to behave in a manner that earns audience approval. Special interest groups often expect board members to listen to and support their single issues, demanding board member time.

McGurdy (in Kowalski, 2006, p. 126) identified two competing school board roles--the "trustee role" vs. the "delegate role." Trustees act rationally to serve broad public interests as opposed to delegates that protect their personal interests and the interests of groups supporting them. "Trustees tend to make independent judgments regarding a superintendent's policy recommendations and their decisions reflect a concern for the entire community. Delegates tend to make political judgments regarding a superintendent's policy recommendations and their decisions reflect personal and special interest group concerns" (Kowalski, 2006, p. 126). Unpredictable board members may be adapting both roles depending on circumstances.

A school board's ability to govern and the superintendent's ability to lead are undermined when an individual board member assumes the role of the "Lone Ranger" (Caruso, 2005, p.8), characterized by common styles of behavior that are counter to school board-sanctioned behaviors, such as becoming involved in day-to-day operations or personnel issues by working around the superintendent, bullying others to agree with him/her, meeting secretly with staff members. Caruso warns: "If you have a school board member (or more than one) who exhibits behaviors like these, you could be in for a rough ride. His or her behavior will interfere with your ability to operate the district and will more than likely shorten your tenure in your superintendency if you do not deal with it quickly" (p. 8). For example, a board member who shows up in a teacher's classroom unannounced to investigate a personnel complaint has exceeded legal limits to his/her board authority. Outlier behavior of individuals requires the attention of other school board members (especially the chair) and the superintendent.

Archer (2003) studied the responses of 100 urban school superintendents collected through surveys and interviews, and concludes "the politics of the job, along with the limits on those executives' authority, make it almost impossible for district leaders to significantly improve their school systems." It is not clear to what degree politics may have similarly limited superintendent effectiveness in smaller school systems, such as those in the Minnesota study; therefore, open-ended questions are included in the survey to collect respondent insights as part of exploring school board-superintendent relationships.

Superintendents and school board members are expected to collaborate while in their respective roles for the good of the whole. The diverse school board should function as a team, with a trusting, positive atmosphere of mutual respect (Hanson, 2002). Glass (2010, p 2) states unequivocally, "Communication is the critical element of superintendent and board relations" and problems are caused by board

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Conceptual Framework (continued)

members that communicate directly with staff, without giving the superintendent prior notification. This staff communication by the board member undercuts the superintendent's authority and creates confusion, thereby straining board and superintendent relationships. Glass also identifies that the working relationship between boards and superintendents begins prior to hiring, that a honeymoon period seldom lasts more than six months until a serious problem arises, requiring the board and superintendent to establish parameters for making decisions. Potential conflicts can be avoided by clear mutual expectations for functioning as a team, and using successful written communications from the superintendent to the school board.

Glass (2010, p. 2) writes: "the root of many conflicts between boards and superintendents is a 'zone of acceptance'...in which the superintendent may operate and make decisions." Boundaries for this decisions-related zone of acceptance are determined by the school board, and if the superintendent errs in acting on the basis of what is understood to be within the zone of acceptance, individual board members often try to add to or delete from the actions of the superintendent, resulting in conflict.

Board conflict (National School Boards Association, 2010, p. 2-3) is often linked to behaviors of school board members and superintendents. Problematic school board behaviors by individuals include: overstepping authority and trying to be administrators; making promises; getting involved in labor relations or budget minutia; not preparing for meetings; not keeping executive sessions confidential; failing to act on sensitive issues; not being open/honest with the superintendent; making decisions based on preconceived notions; not supporting the superintendent; springing surprises at meetings; having hidden agendas. Superintendents can cause conflicts with their boards by: not treating board members alike; not informing board members of public concerns; not providing adequate financial or other needed information; using poor public management practices; making public statements before informing the board; not being open/honest with the school board; not providing alternatives in an objective manner; not adjusting to the new reality of an involved board; not supporting the school board; springing surprises at meetings; having hidden agendas.

Mountford (2004, p. 704) studied strained superintendent-school board relationships and the influence of personal power motives for school board service. She distinguishes the tendency of some board members to exercise controlling power over a person or issue as opposed to seeking altruistic ends by exercising power with others for the good of all students in the school district. The latter view of power expects that leaders not use authority or capacity derived from hierarchy to dominate, control or oppress others. Rather, leaders should use power in ways that facilitate collaborative decision making processes. Kowalski (2005) writes that individual school board members who practice power in dominating or oppressive ways can overtly and covertly disrupt a school district's democratic foundation. It seems reasonable that the same cautions also apply to superintendents.

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Conceptual Framework (continued)

Summers and Wells (2000) state that while adversarial boards can be draining, superintendents must work to preserve their inner strength and confidence, keep the board informed, involve the community in district activities, and provide joint training on maintaining an effective relationship. Goodman and Fullbright (1999) list several steps that the superintendent can take to improve board-administrator relations, such as: establishing a firm foundation for teamwork, nurturing mutual respect and support, understanding their roles, being a super coach, encouraging frequent, two-way communication, avoiding surprises, discouraging micromanagement, avoiding wasting team member's time, tackling conflict, and regularly assessing the team's progress.

Although MSBA and other experts recommend ongoing board training, Eadie (2006) states that board training or hiring a consultant is not as effective as establishing a joint task force of the board and superintendent to work together in identifying practical steps to strengthen the board's governance capacity. Similarly, Dawn & Quinn (2004) profile three school districts that changed the board governance focus from daily operations to long-term student achievement gain, thereby improving the superintendent-school board relationship as well. McAdams (2006) emphasizes the need for strong superintendent leadership to ensure high student achievement, working together with school board members in a high performing team.

Survey Responses

(See Appendix: Zoomerang "Results Overview" of Survey Responses Only)

Question 1: Are you a currently practicing superintendent or a retired superintendent in Minnesota?

85% of respondents are *currently practicing superintendents*. 10% of respondents are *superintendents that retired* in 2010, 2009 or 2008, and their responses are included within the total responses. (MASA superintendent retirees prior to 2008 are not included.) An additional 4% (n=9) designated themselves as *Other* (comments: 5 retired but still working, 1 superintendent's assistant working with the school board during a superintendent vacancy, 1 MN superintendent now working out of state, 1 unemployed, 1 soon to be retired.) Note: this question is not in the AASA study (2006).

Question 2: How many students were enrolled in your district as of October, 2009?

The respondents represent superintendents working in mostly small-to-average size districts. 48% of respondents represent Minnesota school districts with 1-999 enrolled students. 30% are from districts enrolling 1,000 – 2,999 students, 9 % are from districts enrolling 3,000 – 4,999 students; 8% are from districts enrolling 5,000-9,999 students. Only 5% of MN respondents represent districts with 10,000 or more students. The representation of mostly smaller school districts is similar to the AASA survey

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Survey Responses (continued)

sampling of superintendents (Glass & Franceschini, 2006, p. 20): “despite impressions created in the media and in professional literature, the American school superintendency is still a ‘small town’ business.” For example, 64% of the AASA respondents represented districts with *2,999 or less* enrolled students, compared to 78% of MN respondents in similarly sized districts in 2010.

The 13% of the AASA respondents representing districts with 10,000 or more enrolled students is larger than the 5% of Minnesota respondents representing districts with 10,000 or more. But, the largest subgroup (48%) in the Minnesota study represents districts with 1-999 students, and the next largest subgroup (30%) represents Minnesota districts of 1,000-1,999 students which compares closely to the AASA study with 32% of respondents representing districts of 1-999 students, and 33% representing districts of 1,000-2,999 enrolled students.

Question 3: How many years have you been in your current district as superintendent?

16% of respondents are in their first year; 15% report 10 or more years; and 61% are in their first five years of service. This is strikingly similar to the AASA study (2006, p. 28) with 63% in their *first five years* as superintendent; 15% in their *first year*; 15% report *10 or more years*. Each experience category shows 4-16% of respondents represented in the Minnesota study and 4-15% in the AASA study.

Question 4: How many years have you been a superintendent?

Among respondents, **41% have been a Minnesota superintendent for 10 or more years, 21% are in the first three years as a superintendent, and 33% have five years or less of superintendent experience.** As with Question 3, the sample is similar to the AASA study (2006, p. 31) in which 40% had *10 or more* years of experience but 45% are in their *first six* years of the superintendency, more than in Minnesota.

Question 5: In your opinion, what is the most important reason the board hired you?

Among respondents, **44% report that *Leadership Ability* is the most important reason for hire; another 21% cited *Personal Characteristics* such as integrity, honesty, and tact.** Other reasons were also somewhat popular for Minnesota respondents: 18% checked skills in *Finance, Instruction, and Personnel*, and 10% cited *Change Agent Experience* as hiring reasons. In the AASA study (2006, p. 69), these same four reasons were identified nationally in the same respective order (49% *Leadership*, 22% *Personal Characteristics*, 14% *Finance/Instruction/Personnel Skills*, and 10% *Change Agent Experience*), suggesting strong similarities to the 2006 AASA study. Additional responses: *Ability to Maintain the Status Quo* (2% in both the MN and AASA study) and *Other* (5% in MN and 4% in the AASA study). Minnesota comments for *Other* cite skills such as interpersonal, human resources/labor relations; able to accomplish goals;

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Survey Responses (continued)

being the best qualified overall; or district-specific circumstances (prior success as a principal; cheapest candidate; others turned it down).

Cross Tab Analysis. A cross-tabulation report was run in the Minnesota study to further analyze the most important reason for hire responses (Question 5) as related to the reported level of satisfaction with the superintendent role (Question 6). The superintendents citing their satisfaction level as *very satisfied* designated the reason for their hire to be *Leadership Ability* (46%), followed by *Personal Characteristics* (16%) and *Financial Management Skills* (15%). The superintendents selecting the *satisfied* level also cited as hiring reasons *Leadership Ability* (43%), *Personal Characteristics* (27%), and *Experience as a Change Agent* (11%). Interestingly, of the superintendents that reported being *unsatisfied*, 41% also selected *Leadership* as the most important with *Change Agent Experience* selected by 18% and *Financial Management Skills* by 14%. Even among the 46% of *very satisfied*, 43% of *satisfied*, and 41% of those reported to be *unsatisfied* with the superintendent job, **leadership skill is reported as the most important reason for the board's hire.**

Leadership in the context of leading organizations is critically important. A nationally-recognized model for performance improvement (Baldrige National Quality Program, 2009-2010, p. 63) defines the leadership system as “how leadership is exercised, formally and informally, throughout the organization; it is the basis for the way key decisions are made, communicated, and carried out.”

Question 6: Which best describes your level of satisfaction with your current superintendency?

88% of Minnesota respondents report being *very satisfied* (42%) or *satisfied* (46%) with the superintendent profession. MN superintendents in this study are generally very content with the job, despite its challenges. Similarly, nearly 90% of the nation's superintendent respondents to the AASA study (Glass & Franceschini, 2006, p. 51) also reported to being *very satisfied* (51%) or *satisfied* (39%). Fewer Minnesota superintendents than the national respondents report being *very satisfied* (42% compared to 51%, respectively). Only 11% of respondents in the Minnesota study report being either *unsatisfied* or *very unsatisfied* with their current superintendency, compared to 11% in the AASA study. Only 1 % and 2% of the Minnesota and national respondents, respectively, report being *very unsatisfied*.

The majority reports of *very satisfied* and *satisfied* superintendents in both studies are clear indicators of job satisfaction. Education careers are widely viewed as representing service occupations whereby teachers, principals, and superintendents have the opportunity to positively influence the future for youth. Approximately 35% of the superintendents in the AASA study (Glass and Franceschini, 2006, p. 45) indicated that their motive for becoming a superintendent was a “desire to have a greater impact on student achievement.” Considering that the traditional career path for superintendents begins with

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Survey Responses (continued)

teaching roles, most superintendents have worked with students and derive satisfaction in promoting education and individual student success. For example, one superintendent commented in the Minnesota study: “The focus on education and students has made this a positive experience in comparison to a previous position in another district.”

Cross Tab Analysis. Cross tabulation question: Does the level of superintendent satisfaction (Question 6) relate to the superintendent’s reported relationship with the school board (Question 16)? Yes; the very satisfied and satisfied superintendents also rate their board relationships as more positive. Of the *very satisfied* superintendents, 92% report *very good* and 8% report *good* board relationships compared to the *satisfied* superintendents that report *very good* (42%), *good* board relationships (56%) and poor relationships reported by 2%. A similar linkage is clear among those reporting being *unsatisfied* with the superintendency; of this group, 9% report *very good* board relationships, 55% report *good* relationship, and 37% report *poor* board relationships. Similarly, those reporting being *very unsatisfied* report less successful board relationships as well; this small group (n=3) reports having either a *good*, *poor*, or *very poor* relationships with their school boards. Therefore, it appears **there are links among groups reporting positive relationships with the school board and their reported job satisfaction levels.**

Question 7: Which TWO of the following factors do you believe most contributes to your effectiveness as a superintendent? (Designate one as #1 and one as #2)

The #1 or #2 factors reported most often as contributing to Minnesota superintendent effectiveness are: *Board of Education*, followed by *Interpersonal Relations Skills* and *Central Office Team*. 25% of the survey responses for either #1 or #2 identify the *Board of Education*, with 21% for *Interpersonal Skills*, and 20% for the *Central Office Team*, indicating somewhat similar ratings for all three. The superintendent’s *Interpersonal Relations Skills* is the top-rated #1 factor while the *Board of Education* is the top-rated #2 factor by respondents. Further down in priority order for either #1 or #2 rating are: *School Principals* (12%), the *Teaching Staff* (9%), *Community Support* (5%), *Personal Support System* (5%), *Pre-service Training* (2%), and *Support from Elected Officials* (1%).

National respondents to the AASA survey (2006, p. 56) were provided only one factor choice; 37% identified *Interpersonal Skills* as the most important contributing factor, followed by 16% citing the *Board of Education*, 15% the *Central Office Team*, and 13% the *School Principals*. The Minnesota study provided more response options, and respondent ratings show a higher weighting for the school board’s influence on effectiveness, slightly ahead of the *Interpersonal Skills* factor. The AASA sample reported a weighting for the *Interpersonal Skills* factor that is twice that for the *Board of Education*.

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Survey Responses (continued)

Cross Tab Analysis. Question 7 linked to Question 9 Self Rating of Effectiveness: Cross-tabulation data analysis for the rating of superintendent effectiveness shows a **positive relationship between self ratings of effectiveness and indications that the school board is a contributing factor for the superintendent's effectiveness.** Of the 37% of respondents rating themselves as *highly effective*, 63% selected the *Board of Education* as their #1 or #2 most important effectiveness factor, with #1 selected by a 3:2 margin. Of the 62% of respondents rating themselves as *effective*, 53% selected the Board of Education as #1 or #2 in importance to their effectiveness, with the group closely split between #1 and #2. No other factor received higher ratings; in fact, the *Board of Education* influence was almost double the weighting of any other factor for this group except for *Interpersonal Relations Skills* selected by 35% of highly effective superintendents. Of the small group (n=3) of superintendents that rated themselves as *ineffective* (no Minnesota respondent selected *very ineffective*), one selection is reported for each of the following as either #1 or #2 contributors: *Board of Education*, *Interpersonal Relations Skills*, *Personal Support System*, *School Principals*, *Teaching Staff*, and *Community Support*.

The Minnesota data clearly shows that **the board's support is linked to superintendent effectiveness, with the superintendent's interpersonal skills ranking as next in priority importance to supporting superintendent effectiveness.** Future research is merited about the school board's impact on the superintendent and how to improve board member skills for supporting the superintendent while also observing school board statutory and fiduciary duties as elected officials.

Question 8: Which TWO of the following factors do you believe most inhibit your effectiveness as a superintendent? (Designate one as #1 and one as #2)

By a wide margin, the **#1 factor that seems to most inhibit Minnesota superintendent effectiveness is: *Inadequate Financing of Schools*, and the top #2 factors are: *State and Federal Mandates*, followed closely by *Too Many Insignificant Demands and Inadequate Financing*.** 27% of the responses for either #1 or #2 identify *Inadequate Financing of Schools*, with a higher number of votes than any other factor, and another 17% of responses identify *State and Federal Mandates*, followed by 11% of votes for *Collective Bargaining Agreements*. Other factors selected as either #1 or #2 are: teachers union (10%), too many insignificant demands (9%), board of education (9%), and special interest groups (7%). Other factors identified at even lower levels are: school principals (3%), teaching staff (2%), central office team (2%), and inadequate professional training (1%).

The AASA study (2006, p. 57) provided for only one response (the Minnesota study offered two options). For national respondents, *Inadequate Financing of Schools* was the most often cited single factor by 38% of respondents, followed by *Too Many Insignificant Demands* (25%), *State and Federal Mandates* (21%), and the *Board of Education* (17%). Since the Minnesota survey question listed the same response

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Survey Responses (continued)

options as did the AASA survey question, but with both a #1 and #2 choice, the Minnesota sample responded somewhat differently. Minnesotans sampled agree with their national colleagues about the role of *Inadequate Financing*, *Too Many Insignificant Demands*, and to a lesser extent the *Board of Education* (9% of responses in Minnesota compared to 17% of responses in the AASA study).

Cross Tab Analysis. Cross tabulation of Question 8 Inhibiting Factors for Effectiveness and Question 9 Self Rating of Effectiveness: Of the number of responses identifying Inadequate Financing of Schools as a #1 factor inhibiting effectiveness, more than three-fourths (77%) came from superintendents that identified themselves as either *very effective* or *effective*. Of the responses identifying *Inadequate Financing* as a #2 factor, 23% came from these same groups. Analysis of superintendents rating themselves as *ineffective* (3 respondents) as linked to the responses about what factors inhibit effectiveness (Question 8) shows that the *Board of Education* received 2 votes, with an additional one vote for each of the following: *State and Federal Mandates*, *Teacher Union*, *Collective Bargaining Agreements*, *Too Many Insignificant Demands*. The data suggests there is **linkages among respondents that view themselves as ineffective and those also reporting a negative school board impact**. Similar **linkages are evident among superintendents that view themselves as effective and those reporting positive school board influence** on superintendent effectiveness.

Question 9: How effective overall do you think you are as a superintendent?

An overwhelming majority of 99% of Minnesota superintendent respondents report being very effective (37%) or effective (62%), an even higher positive rating than reported for job satisfaction (88%). The 99% of MN respondents exceeds the 96% of AASA respondents (2006, p. 54) that reported being *very effective* (43%) or *effective* (53%) as a superintendent, and compares to the 90% national sample reporting being *very satisfied* (51%) or *satisfied* (39%) in their jobs. Only 1 superintendent in the Minnesota sample identified himself/herself as *ineffective*, and no one selected *very ineffective*. Such a high level of effectiveness (self-reported) by respondents is one of the most surprising findings of the study.

Cross Tab Analysis. Question 9 linked to other survey questions: Is there a relationship between superintendent ratings of self effectiveness and other questions? Yes, the cross-tabulated data suggest that the **respondents' self ratings of effectiveness are related to several school board relationship factors** (below). Examples of such factors are: the degree that the school board contributes to or inhibits the superintendent's effectiveness (Question 7, 8), the school board's most recent rating of the superintendent's performance (Question 11), how the superintendent rates the board's overall leadership of the district (Question 18), and the superintendent's view of the superintendent-school board relationship (Question 16). That is, **those rating themselves as more effective also report higher**

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Survey Responses (continued)

ratings for other factors, such as their school board leadership of the district, evaluation ratings received from the board, and superintendent-school board relationships.

The school board's critical role in contributing to superintendent effectiveness, as perceived by superintendents, is cited in question 7 above, but stated another way: all of the respondents (100%) that identified themselves as highly effective or effective cited the school board factor as the #1 most important contributor to their success (49% and 51%, respectively) or the #2 most important (33% and 66%, respectively). Even the one superintendent that selected a self rating of *ineffective* identifies the school board as #2 in importance for contributing to superintendent success.

Of the 37% (n=78) rating themselves as *very effective* superintendents, over half (56) received an *excellent* rating from the school board and 14 a *good* rating. Of the 62% rating themselves as *effective* (131), 44 received an *excellent* rating from the school board and 64 a *good* rating. But, of the 1.4% respondents (n=3) rating themselves as *ineffective* (no respondent selected very ineffective for a self rating), each was most recently evaluated by the board as *excellent*, one as *good*, and one as *average*. This data suggests that at least two respondents rate themselves as lower than their school board's overall effectiveness.

Cross Tab Analysis. When Question 9 is linked to Question 18: A surprising relationship emerges from a cross tabs analysis of superintendent effectiveness self ratings and their view of how well the board leads the district. First, the *very well* (52, split between 27, 25) or *well* (85 split between 30, 55) ratings of school board leadership were marked by the *very effective* and *effective* superintendent groups, respectively, and the average ratings (46 split between 13, 33) came from the same two groups. But, the ratings of *poorly* (22 split among three groups 5, 15, 2) showed this school board rating was selected by 5 *very effective*, 15 *effective*, and 2 *ineffective* superintendent respondents. Also, the ratings of very poorly (5) also split among these three groups (2, 2, 1), respectively. This suggests that effective superintendents also rate their school board's leadership as needing improvement. As might be expected, the ineffective respondents (n=3) rate their board's leadership in the *poorly* (2) and *very poorly* (1) ranges.

Cross Tab Analysis. Question 9 linked to Question 16 about the superintendent-school board relationship: Does the superintendent's effectiveness (self rating) appear to link to the superintendent-school board relationship? Yes; of the 78% responding that they are *very effective*, 80% of respondents report *very good* superintendent-school board relationships. Of the three respondents rating their own effectiveness as *ineffective*, two report *good* superintendent-school board relationships and the other reports a *poor* relationship with the school board. There appears to be a positive relationship between perceived effectiveness and the superintendent-school board relationship as reported by respondents.

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Survey Responses (continued)

Question 10: In general, how do you think your board of education evaluates you?

A wide majority (90%) of superintendent respondents in Minnesota report being *very fairly* (42%) or *fairly* evaluated (48%) by their school boards. Another 8% report being *unfairly* evaluated, and 2% *very unfairly* evaluated. This is similar to the 89% of national respondents reporting that they are fairly evaluated in the AASA (2006, p. 81) study: 34% of respondents reported being *very fairly* evaluated by their board, 55% *fairly* evaluated, 8% *unfairly* evaluated, and 4% *very unfairly* evaluated. Minnesota respondents seem to view the fairness of the board evaluation slightly more positively.

In the national AASA study, Glass and Francheschini (2006, p. 81-82) report, “Superintendents characterizing their relationships with their boards as *very good* felt about half the time (50.3%) that they were evaluated *very fairly*, and those indicating a *very poor* relationship with the board (52%) felt they were *very unfairly* evaluated. The importance of board relations to superintendent evaluations seems to be noteworthy.” The linkage of superintendent evaluations to board relationships is supported by the Minnesota data as well.

Cross Tab Analysis. Question 10 linked to Question 16 about the superintendent-school board relationship: Is the relationship between superintendent’s ratings for their board evaluations and their rating related to the superintendent-school board relationship? Yes, it appears there are **linkages among how respondents view their school board-superintendent relationships and ratings of fairness for the school board’s superintendent evaluation.** Of the 42% viewing their school board’s evaluations of them as *very fair*, 99% characterize their board relationship as *very good* (93%) or *good* (6%). Of the 49% viewing their evaluations as *fair*, 97% characterize their school board relationships as *very good* (40%) or *good* (57%). Conversely, those viewing their school board evaluations of their work as *unfair* (8%) tend to characterize their school board relationship with the superintendent as *poor* 38% of the time. Those viewing the school board evaluations as *very unfair* (1%) characterize their school board relationship as either *poor* or *very poor* 66% of the time. The relationship between the superintendent evaluation ratings and the reported superintendent-school board relationship seems clear.

Question 11: Indicate the most recent evaluation rating given to you by your board of education.

86% of superintendent respondents report *excellent* (48%) or *good* (38%) evaluation ratings, respectively, from their boards of education in Minnesota. Only 6% (13) reported an *average* rating, none reported a *below average*, and another 8% (16) indicated *no evaluation*. A similar percentage of 90% of the national respondents in the AASA Study (2006, p. 80) report *excellent* (59%) and *good* (30%) evaluation ratings, respectively.

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Survey Responses (continued)

Cross Tab Analysis. Question 11 linked to Question 16 about the superintendent-school board relationship: Is the evaluation rating related to the superintendent's rating about the superintendent-school board relationship? Yes, **the quality of the school board-superintendent relationship seems to be linked to the rating (positive or negative) the superintendent received from the school board.** For example, 84% of the respondents reporting excellent ratings also rate their present board relationship as *very good*, another 16% rated excellent rate their board relationship as *good*, and none indicated *poor* or *very poor* evaluation ratings. Conversely, the respondents reporting *average* or *below average* evaluation ratings were more likely to rate their superintendent-school board relationships in the *good* to *poor* ranges (the one respondent rated *below average* also characterized his/her board relationship as *very poor*).

Question 12: Which of the following methods are used by the board to evaluate your performance? (Choose all that apply.)

The **#1 superintendent evaluation method: Written Evaluation Completed by the Board Chair and/or Entire Board (57%), followed in rank order by #2: Criteria Previously Agreed To By the Board and the Superintendent (51%) and #3: Discussion at a Meeting of the Board and Superintendent (39%).**

Minnesota responses almost mirror the AASA study responses. The AASA (2006, p. 87) and Minnesota percentages (reported in respective order) reporting these top three methods are: 72% compared to 57% for *Written Evaluation*, 55% compared to 51% for *Criteria Agreed To*, and 50% to 39% for *Discussion* at a joint meeting.

While Minnesota respondents selected *Discussion at Executive Meeting of Board Members* 18% of the time, this compare to 49% of the time for AASA respondents, likely due to Minnesota's Open Meeting Law, superintendent contract templates, or possible confusion about what constitutes an executive session. Minnesota responses for *Other* (16%): MSBA model, 360 Evaluation, job description only, goals progress, staff evaluations, special criteria developed annually, daily feedback, list developed by a rogue school board member, not evaluated or evaluated from time to time, or variations on the survey options.

Question 13: Are your board's expectations for your performance congruent with the evaluation criteria?

Over three-fourths of Minnesota respondents (78%) report that the board expectations for the superintendent's performance are *always* (16%) or *usually* (62%) congruent with the evaluation criteria. 78% is a higher percentage than the 61% of AASA national respondents reporting this same level of congruence with the evaluation criteria, a result the authors (Glass & Franceschini, 2006,

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Survey Responses (continued)

p. 89) indicated “may denote the presence of either community or intra-board politics creating a strain in board/superintendent relations.” (Question 16 about superintendent-board relationships indicates that Minnesota respondents also view their board relations more favorably when compared to the AASA sample.)

Minnesota’s sampling suggests not all superintendents are evaluated as recommended by MASA and MSBA. While 3.5% of the AASA sample (2006) reported their board evaluates them *very unfairly*, a slightly smaller 2% (n=4) in Minnesota agreed with this rating. 5% of the AASA respondents reported a *not evaluated* status, but 8% of the Minnesota respondents reported the *not evaluated* status.

Cross Tab Analysis. It is not clear whether the lack of an evaluation (reported by 8% Minnesota respondents) may be linked to established board process or the presence of factors such as board politics or other relationship strains. But an additional cross tabs analysis of those *not evaluated* with other questions indicates the subgroup of Minnesota respondents *not evaluated* (n=16) see themselves as *either effective* (75%) or *very effective* (25%); fairly (81%) or very fairly evaluated (19%), with their board expectations *usually* (83%) or *sometimes congruent* (17%) with evaluation criteria, and their current board relationships as *good* (50%) or *very good* (44%) with only one rating the relationship as *poor*. For this subgroup of respondents, it appears that **the lack of a board evaluation is not clearly linked to superintendent ratings for self effectiveness or relationship with the school board.**

Question 14: In your opinion, which of the following is the most important reason for your board to evaluate your performance?

One third (33%) of Minnesota respondents reported that the most important reason for the board to evaluate their performance is: *To Assess Present Performance in Accordance with Prescribed Standards*. Other reasons selected in ranked order: *To Help Establish Relevant Performance Goals* (24%); *To Identify, Direct, and Encourage Areas in Need of Improvement* (21%); *To Better Clarify the Role of the Superintendent* (13%); *To Point Out Weaknesses* (3%); *Other* (5%).

Comparison to the AASA sampling (2006, p. 90) is limited because the Minnesota 2010 survey did not include the AASA option that received the most votes by national respondents (author’s error not caught in time). For example, in the AASA study, almost half of respondents reported the reason for the board to evaluate superintendent performance as: *To Diagnose Strengths, Weaknesses, and Professional Development Needs* (47%). (The Minnesota study inadvertently divided portions of this statement into three separate options.) Additional reasons selected in the AASA study in ranked order: *To Better Clarify the Role of the Superintendent* (32%); *To Determine Salary Increment for the Following Year*

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Survey Responses (continued)

(10%); *To Assess Present Performance in Accordance with Prescribed Standards* (6%); *Other* (3%); *To Help Establish Relevant Goals* (2%).

5% of Minnesota respondents report *Other*. Comments relate to: the need to strengthen the board-superintendent link, to clarify board vs individual priorities, board control, to ensure common expectations by the superintendent and school board. An insightful perspective volunteered: “I feel it is most important for the Board to use the progress towards the strategic goals as the most important reason for evaluation. However, I also feel that they need to evaluate on the ‘total package’ because if you achieve progress on the goals but the cost is so great in regard to administrative/teacher relations, then the long-term success of the district will be diminished.”

Question 15: How many hours per week do you spend in direct communication with board members (e.g., phone calls, meetings)?

Nearly half of the Minnesota respondents (47%) reported spending *three hours or less per week in direct communications with the board*, compared to the AASA respondents (49%) reporting three hours or more per week (2006, p. 74). Stated another way, the most often selected number of hours spent per week communicating with board members among the Minnesota respondents are: *one hour* (10% compared to 13% for AASA), *two hours* (26% compared to 22% for AASA), *three hours* (11% compared to 15% for AASA), *four hours* 11% compared to 12% for AASA), *five hours* (14% compared to 13% for AASA), and *six hours* (8% compared to 7% for AASA). The rest of both samplings are spread in a similar pattern across the remaining choices, with only one category (ten hours) showing 6% in Minnesota compared to 8% for AASA. This level of agreement across both Minnesota and AASA samples is noteworthy.

The 2006 AASA study (Glass and Franceschini) collected data from superintendents categorized by type of school district, enabling authors to compare the number of hours spent per week on school board communications by superintendents with the type of district. They report that “the number of hours spent in communication with the board in rural/small town districts was significantly lower than the hours spent in either suburban or urban districts” (p 73). The Minnesota data does not support similar data analysis, given the small number of respondents from larger school districts.

The superintendency is known to require heavy personal time demands. This is supported by a Minnesota survey comment: “I pretty much dedicated my life to my job this year. I have not spent much time with my family nor taken more than 4 days of vacation/sick time. I have worked nights and weekends constantly. To my relief, the building bond referendum passed. I am hopeful that my board has witnessed positive relations and trust being built throughout the school community and at large community.”

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Survey Responses (continued)

Question 16: How do you characterize your present relationship with the board?

95% of Minnesota respondents report a *very good* (59%) or *good* (36%) relationship with the board, a very positive finding. Only 11 respondents (5%) in the sample termed their relationship as *poor*. This compares to the national AASA study (2006, p. 66) in which 93% of respondents reported a *very good* (63% compared to 59% in Minnesota) or *good* (30% compared to 36% in Minnesota) superintendent-school board relationship. This is a very positive finding in the study!

Cross Tab Analysis. Question 16 linked to other survey questions: The relationship between the superintendent and school board seems clearly linked to several factors including: superintendent's level of satisfaction with their current superintendency (Question 6), superintendent's self rating for effectiveness (Question 9), how fair is the board's evaluation of the superintendent (Question 10) most recent rating of the superintendent by the school board (Question 11); superintendent's rating for how well the board leads the district (see Question 18 below). **Superintendents that report a *very good* relationship with the board also report higher ratings for: satisfaction, effectiveness, fairness of the board's evaluation, most recent evaluation, and school board leadership of the school district.** This same linkage is evident for those reporting a *good* relationship, but with lower ratings for each factor as compared to the respondents reporting a *very good* relationship.

The relationship between the superintendent-school board relationship and other superintendent factors constitutes a major study finding. Questions 19, 20, 21, 22, and 23 are designed to probe for more data about school board behaviors and their link to the school board-superintendent relationship as reported by superintendent respondents.

Question 17: In your opinion, which of the following is your board's primary expectation of you as superintendent?

Almost half of Minnesota respondents (48%) report their board's primary expectation of them is to be a *Managerial Leader* implying general management skills, including budget and finance. Another 19% selected *Educational Leader* (curriculum and instruction) and 18% selected *Political Leader* (board and community relations). The 18% selecting political leadership aligns with the research about growing political pressures upon superintendents and school boards.

The Minnesota responses to Question 17 contrast with the AASA study (2006, p. 72) in which 42% of the respondents reported their board's primary expectation of them (Question 5) as *Educational Leader* in curriculum and instruction (compared to 19% in Minnesota), followed by 35% as *Managerial Leader* in general management and budget/finance (compared to 48% in Minnesota), and 16% as *Political Leader*,

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Survey Responses (continued)

as in board and community relations (compared to 18% in Minnesota). The 19% rating for *Educational Leader* also conflicts with the 44% of Minnesota respondents that cited *Leadership Ability* as the primary reason for their hire, and the 21% citing *Personal Characteristics* and 18% citing skills in *Finance, Instruction, and Personnel*. The *Change Agent Experience* was selected by only 10%. While leadership is the common denominator, the educational program leadership in Question 5 does not connote the same leadership required for management of budget and finance. Therefore, it may be that Question 17 response options needs rephrasing for clarity, to better delineate leadership vs. finance skills.

15% of Minnesota respondents (n=31) selected *Other*; representative comments follow: all of the above (20), two of the above (5), different each day across the two districts that I represent, organizational leader for regional support services, following board members' personal agendas or micromanagement, unsure.

Question 18: From your perspective, how well does the board lead the district?

Almost two-thirds (65%) of Minnesota respondents rate their schools boards as leading the district very well (25%) or well (40%). Another 22% selected *average*, 11% selected *poorly*, and 2% rated their board's leadership as *very poor*. In contrast, 82% of the national AASA sample (2006, p. 75) rated their school boards as leading the district *very well* (25%) or *well* (54%). But the *average* option was not provided, resulting in 17% rating their school board's leadership as *poor* and 5% as *very poor*. The Minnesota data suggests that Minnesota superintendents may be less positive about their school board's overall leadership of the district than is the national superintendent sample.

Question 18 linked to Question 16 about the superintendent-school board relationship: Does the data about the board's district leadership as viewed by the superintendent relate to the superintendent's perception of the superintendent-school board relationship? Yes; 98% of the respondents rating their board leadership as *very well* characterize their superintendent-school board relationship as *very good*, and 100% of those rating their board leadership as *well* characterize their board relationship as *very good* or *good*. Only 13% rated their school board leadership as *poor* or *very poor*. Of those respondents rating their board leadership as *very poor* (2%), 60% characterize their superintendent-board relationship as *poor*, and 20% as *very poor*. The superintendent-board relationship is clearly related to the superintendent's view of how well or poorly the school board leads the district.

Question 19: Does your board have an understanding of the limits upon an individual board member's authority as part of a governance body that acts as a trustee for the school district?

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Survey Responses (continued)

70% of Minnesota respondents report that an understanding of limits to individual board member authority is demonstrated by *all* (19%) or *most* (51%) board members and *works well*. But another 30% of respondents report that only *some* on the board demonstrate this (19%) or that this understanding is *not demonstrated* by the board (11%) and *is of concern* to the superintendent.

Cross Tab Analysis. When Question 19 is linked to Question 16 about the superintendent-school board relationship, it seems there is **linkage between superintendent respondents' ratings of what *works well*/what is of concern about individual board member understanding of authority limits and the rating for the superintendent-school board relationship**. Of the 98% of the affirmative subgroup (those reporting that this understanding of board member limits is demonstrated by *all* board members and *works well*) also report a *very good* superintendent-school board relationship. Of those reporting that this is demonstrated by *most* board members and *works well*, a lesser number (67%) report a *very good* relationship and 33% report instead a *good* superintendent-school board relationship.

However, 11% of respondents report that this understanding is *not demonstrated* by the board and *is* an area of *concern*. Of this group concerned about board member behaviors, *very good* school board relationships are reported by only 13%, *good* relationships by 48%, and *poor* relationships are reported by 35%, suggesting that current board behaviors may be likely to undermine the superintendent-school board relationships in these school districts.

Question 20: Does your board have a formal policy or practice for staff communications clarifying that board communication with a district staff member requires advance consultation with or goes through the superintendent first?

50% of superintendents report board practice/policy exists for advance notification by board members and is followed by *all* (11%) or *most* (39%). But another 36% report that only *some* on the board observe this (16%) or that there is *no established* board policy/practice (20%) and this *is an area of concern*. Another 13% report *no* board policy/practice, but this is *not* an area of concern for them.

Cross Tab Analysis. When Question 20 is linked to Question 16 about the superintendent-school board relationship, it seems there is a **linkage between the superintendent respondent's ratings for what *works well*/what is of concern about individual board member communications with staff and the ratings for the superintendent-school board relationship**.

The compared data shows that 100% of the affirmative subgroup (superintendents reporting this communications practice (to alert the superintendent first) is followed by *all* board members and *works well*) also characterize the superintendent-school board relationship in Minnesota as *very good* 92% of

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Survey Responses (continued)

the time and *good* the remaining 9% of the time. Of those reporting that this policy/practice is followed by *most* board members and works well, a lesser number (74%) characterize their school board relationships as *very good* and 24% select *a good* rather than *very good* rating.

In addition, 21% of respondents (n=43) report that this policy/practice is *not demonstrated by the board* and *is* an area of concern to superintendents. Of this subgroup, *very good* superintendent-board relationships are reported by 21%, *good* by 65% and *poor* by 12%, with the remaining one respondent reporting a *very poor* school board relationship. This negative report by 21% of the superintendents about their board's communications with staff is double the 11% group with concerns in Question 19 about limits to board member authority. Both kinds of board behaviors are likely to undermine the superintendent-school board relationship.

The data is surprising in that 13% of respondents report that "there is no established policy/practice followed by the board and is not an area of concern" for staff communications through the superintendent. Yet, 82% of this group rated their board relationships as *very good*, and 18% as *good*. In the follow-up interviews, several superintendents commented about why advance notification is not a concern, generally because the school boards keep the superintendent informed in other ways.

Question 21: Does your board respect the board's policy-making role as separate from the superintendent's role to administer operations?

70% of Minnesota respondents report the separation of roles (board policy role vs. the superintendent's administrative operations role) is observed by all (21%) or most (49%) board members and works well. But 30% report that only *some* board members (16%) or *no board member* observes the *role separation* (14%) and that this *is of concern to the superintendent*.

Cross Tab Analysis. When Question 21 is linked to Question 16 about the superintendent-school board relationship, a **linkage is evident among superintendent respondent's ratings of what works well/what is of concern about the individual board member adherence to the policy making role and the respondents' rating for the school board-superintendent relationship.**

The compared data shows that the 98% of respondents (those reporting this separation of board and superintendent roles is observed by *all* board members) also characterize the superintendent-school board relationship as *very good*, with 2% reporting a *good* relationship. It appears that even when a few board members don't observe the roles separation, the superintendent-school board relationship can suffer. For example, while 68% of superintendents (those reporting that *most* board members observing the role separation) still rated the relationship as *very good*, another 32% rated it as *good*. Of

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Survey Responses (continued)

special concern is the group of respondents (13%) reporting *no clear separation* of duties; while 54% of this subgroup rated the superintendent-school board relationship as *good*, another 25% rated it as *poor* and 4% rated the relationship as *very poor*.

A Minnesota School Boards Association sample board ethics code (2010) states the proper functions of a school board member to meet the legal responsibility of a policy-forming body, and not to act as an administrative officer. This study indicates that several boards may not be observing this recognition that the roles of board members are separate from the superintendent's role to administer the operations in adherence to the board's policy guidance.

Examples of affirming respondent comments reported in the survey's open-ended Questions 25 and 27: "Strong board chair who understands role and function of board and superintendent," "board members generally understand their function as a board member," "policy governance and board training and implementation," "our new board chair and several new board members understand that the board's role is policy governance, not administration," "board support without micro-managing," "my board is a good board but in a small town some have difficulty separating the community and board role."

In Question 26, the board's policy-making role was addressed in several comments about micromanaging by school boards or individual school board members who stray into operations. Sample comments: "the school board is in the habit of micromanaging and wants to solve administrative issues," "interference in administrative items," "micro management-lack of ethics-board receiving end runs from union and many others-media has also been very challenging," "an occasional (very seldom) event of a board member overstepping bounds into administrative area," "unfortunately, the school board chair had a history of micro-management."

Question 22: Does your board value collegiality, cooperation, and respectful treatment of other board members and administrative employees including the superintendent?

78% of Minnesota respondents indicate the value for respectful treatment of others is demonstrated by all (41%) or most (37%) board members and works well. However, 22% report that only *some* (14%) or *none* (8%) on the board demonstrate this value, and this behavior *is of concern the superintendent*.

Cross Tab Analysis. When Question 22 is linked to Question 16 about the superintendent-school board relationship, a **linkage is evident among superintendent respondents' ratings of what works well/what is of concern about individual board member value for respect/cooperation and respondent ratings for the school-board superintendent relationship.** The compared data shows that the 83% of respondents (those reporting the board's values are demonstrated by *all* board members)

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Survey Responses (continued)

also characterize their present board relationships as *very good*, with another 18% reporting a *good* relationship. But, the data shows that when only *some* or *no* board members demonstrate the specified values (collegiality, cooperation, and respectful treatment of others including the superintendent), the perceived superintendent-school board relationships receive lower ratings. For example: the 14% of respondents reporting that this value is demonstrated by only *some* also characterize their board relationships as *very good* (21%), *good* (62%), and *poor* (17%). The 8% reporting that this value is *not demonstrated* by the board rate their board relationships as: *very good* (13%), *good* (50%), and *poor* (31%).

In general, responses about positive events or factors relating to the board relationship elicited comments that centered largely on communications, and board-superintendent respect is cited often. It appears that board members are rated positively, overall, for demonstrating values of respectful treatment, collegiality, and cooperation.

Examples of comments regarding the one positive impact or factor on the board relationship:

“Respect and having a relationship with each other,” “the board has told me they have complete trust in me and appreciate all that I do,” “relations typically improve when programs are added or improved for students,” “the district was struggling with trust when I arrived—the trust has been re-established with the board, staff, and many community members,” “most school board members are very respectful and supportive of me,” “the honest conversations that are potentially conflict oriented but not taken personally—the practice of being made for 48 hours and then get back to the work for children,” “healthy conflict regarding a principal’s performance,” “mutual respect,” “open communication and trust,” “treating everyone equally,” “trust in my abilities,” “a key factor in our strong working relationship is open and honest communication—we work hard on this from both perspectives,” “board trusts me to make calls that a number of boards might require the superintendent to run by them,” “honesty,” “our district has practiced a professional relationship between superintendent and board members as well as between board members,” “the communication between the board and me has always been very good—we may disagree at times, but we always continue to communicate and respect each other,” “trust developed over time,” “most school board members are very respectful and supportive of me,” “our board works effectively with each other and with administration.”

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Summary of Individual Board Member Behaviors in All Five Areas:

- (1) Does your board have an understanding of the limits upon an individual board member's authority as part of a governance body that acts as a trustee for the school district?
70% report that this board practice works well, that this is demonstrated by either *all* (19%) or *most* (51%) board members. **But, 30% report that individual board member behavior is of concern**. The 30% rate this as demonstrated either by only *some* (19%) demonstrate this understanding or that it's *not demonstrated* by the board (11%).
- (2) Does your board have a formal policy or practice for staff communications clarifying that board communication with a district staff member requires advance consultation with or goes through the superintendent first?
50% report that this board practice works well, that this is demonstrated by either *all* (11%) or *most* (39%) board members. But, almost half (49%) report only *some* (16%) demonstrate this or there is *no board practice* (33%). **36% report that individual board member behavior is of concern, in that only some follow this or there is no such established board practice**. Of 33% reporting there is *no board practice*, 20% report that individual board member behavior that bypasses the superintendent *concerns* them, while another 13% are *not concerned* that there is no such practice for the board as a whole to consult with the superintendent in advance of contacting staff members.
- (3) Does your board respect the board's policy-making role as separate from the superintendent's role to administer operations?
70% report that this board behavior works well, that the separation of duties is observed by either *all* (21%) or *most* board members (49%). **But, 30% report that the behavior of individual board members is of concern**. 30% report that only *some* (16%) board members demonstrate this, or that this is *not demonstrated by the board* (14%).
- (4) Does your board value collegiality, cooperation, and respectful treatment of other board members and administrative employees, including the superintendent?
78% report that this board behavior works well, that this value is demonstrated by either *all* (41%) or *most* (37%) board members. **But, 22% of respondents report that the individual board member behavior is of concern to them**. 22% report only *some* (14%) board members demonstrate this, or it is *not demonstrated by the board* (8%).
- (5) Does your board have a code of ethics or practice requiring serving the interests of students and the district and not being conflicted by loyalties to any school subgroups or special interest groups in the community? **63% report this board behavior works well**, that this is followed by *all* (23%) or *most* (40%) on the board. **But, 28% of the remaining respondents report that individual board member behavior is of concern to them**. 38% of all respondents report that only *some* (15%) board members observe this, or this is *not an established board code/practice* (23%). 10% of superintendents reporting *no established board code/practice* also indicate that the lack of an established code/practice is *not an area of concern* for them.

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Survey Responses (continued)

Question 23: Does your board have a code of ethics or practice requiring serving the interests of students and the district and not being conflicted by loyalties to any school subgroups or special interest groups in the community?

63% of Minnesota respondents report that a board ethics code/practice for serving the interests of all students and the district is followed by *all* (23%) or most (40%) board members and works well. But the remaining 38% report that only *some* follow this code/practice (15%), or there is *not an established code/practice* followed by the board (23%). More than a third of respondents report that board members are not consistently following ethics codes, which suggest negative implications for the superintendent-school board relationship.

Cross Tab Analysis. When Question 23 linked is to Question 16 about the superintendent-school board relationship, it seems there is a **linkage between superintendent respondents' ratings of what works well/what is of concern about individual board member service in the interests of students/district and the rating for the school board-superintendent relationship.**

The compared data shows that the 63% of respondents (those reporting the board code/practice for serving all students/district is observed by *all* or *some*) also characterize their present board relationships as *very good* (89%) or *good* (11%). Even when the practice is followed by *most*, the perceived board relationships are rated as *very good* (62%) or *good* (32%); but, when only *some* follow the practice, the relationship ratings change to *very good* (23%), *good* (52%), *poor* (23%) and *very poor* (3%). For the 13% reporting that this is not an established practice and it is of concern, the ratings fall even more to *very good* (27%), *good* (62%), *poor* (12%).

It's surprising that an additional 10% of respondents report that "No, this is not an established code/practice followed by the board and is not an area of concern" for the superintendent. Among this group, 71% still rated their board relationship as *very good*, 29% as *good*, with none selecting lower ratings of *poor* or *very poor*.

Examples of comments about the negative impact of special interests or subgroup loyalties:

"a former employee returned as a board member with an agenda to remove one principal and the superintendent—the board rallied behind the superintendent and forced the person to resign," "five of six board members 'standing up' to one consistently contrary board member," "special interests—board members who represent labor," "board members with special interest agendas," "personal agendas and relationships with individual staff members," "board changing a decision based on a small vocal interest group," "two board members have allowed their very conservative political ideas creep into decision making," "self serving agenda items with personal attacks involved," "rogue board member elected after

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Survey Responses (continued)

a campaign of hype and half-truths—many in the public now understand he doesn't support K-12 education but it is too late—this board member is high maintenance and demands much time from the administration and board—the rest of the board members are now starting to be more forceful in their dealing with him,” “the incredibly difficult board members that popped up onto the board from time to time—I was fortunate to have encountered only one of these in the last nine years,” “board members with a single issue,” “one board member being too focused on a personal agenda.”

One of comments suggested that the board might be negatively evaluating the superintendent: “three board members that wanted to get rid of the superintendent and recruited staff and community members to support their cause.” If boards aren't sure of how to manage a difficult personnel issue involving the superintendent, an important board duty, conflict may spill into the community.

Question 24: Have you ever been forced to resign or decided to leave a superintendent position because of poor relations with the board?

15% of Minnesota respondents report yes and 85% report no to being forced to or deciding to resign. This data is very similar to the AASA study (2006) in which 16% reported having left a district due to problems with the board (p. 78). Clearly, effective superintendent-school board relationships are linked to superintendent longevity.

Question 25: From your perspective, what is one event or factor that had a positive impact on the superintendent-school board relationship in your current school district?

187 individual written comments from respondents are reported to this open-ended question. The most common theme is communications, with almost 20 tips or practices cited, and 6 positive references to the Minnesota School Boards Association. Representative examples:

- “At the beginning of my superintendency, boundaries, expectations and roles were not clear and some board members were ‘out of bounds’ due to the way they did things previously. During the first few months I/we spent many hours/meetings as a group and with individual board members to agree on decorum, roles, expectations, etc. It was the most major factor in helping define how we would do business”
- “I worked really hard at communicating with the board. If for some reason I haven't been in contact with them for more than a week, I send the full board a written update.”
- “Respect and having a relationship with each other”
- “Keeping the board well informed by using written communications, and rather infrequent telephone communications. I use a well-developed agenda with as much details as I believe is

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Survey Responses (continued)

needed. We also strive to work from a 'no surprises' format for both superintendent and board members."

- "Total honesty by the superintendent"
- "Board members that did not get along having to work together as a Personnel Committee in negotiations work"
- "I try to stay ahead of any information that I think might eventually come to the board and give them an FYI ahead of time so they can respond confidently that the board is aware and the issue is under study or has been taken care of."
- "Built one-on-one relationship with all 7 board members early on."
- "Attending the MSBA leadership conferences together."
- "The annual MSBA conference, attended by nearly all Board members nearly all the time, provides an excellent opportunity to board members and me to get to know one another as people rather than merely as policymakers."
- "MSBA came in to do an inservice with the new superintendent and the board, the board admittedly had overstepped their bounds with the previous superintendent based on a lack of trust"
- "Annual retreat and board planning session."
- "Bi-monthly, Saturday board retreats"
- "No Surprise Rule for either the Superintendent or the Board. Communication!"

Question 26: From your perspective, what is one event or factor that had a negative impact on the superintendent-school board relationship in your current school district?

Respondents report 180 individual written comments that fell into the themes of role confusion and board tendencies toward micromanaging, the influence of special interest groups on board members, and inter-board relationships. 15 respondents cited that they had nothing negative to report.

Representative examples:

- "Special interest. Board members who represent labor."
- "One individual board member who could not work as a team member for what is best for the students."
- "The school board is in the habit of micromanaging and wants to solve administrative issues."
- "Concerns over discussions with staff away from the lines of authority in the district"
- "Personal agendas and relationships with individual staff members."
- "Board changing a decision based on a small vocal interest group."
- "Board members with agendas that run counter to the rest of the board and/or administration."

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Survey Responses (continued)

- “I have 3 school board members who have their own agenda and at least 1 of those 3 works diligently to sabotage the district.”
- “Dealing with a board member that wanted to be a listening board for a community subgroup of parents that did not like what a coach was doing and not allowing me to address the situation.”
- “Board members with single issue.”
- “Not supporting the superintendent on several issues that are standard operating procedures.”
- “I cannot think of any negatives, other than a rare time when a board member reverted to old practices and/or stepped out of bounds.”

Question 27: Do you have additional comments you’d like to add to this survey about the superintendent-school board relationship in your school district?

101 written comments are reported by respondents. Many repeat earlier, similar comments or tips, emphasizing the value of clear roles and communications, concerns about special interest group influence on board members, and statements about how superintendents have worked to improve board relationships. Events such as board elections or board training have fast impact. MSBA assistance is recognized with both positive comments and calls for more involvement. Representative examples:

- “I still don’t think school boards get enough ongoing training made available to them. Yes, they get initial phase training, but it tapers off from there quickly. They could use ongoing training for all the years they are on the board.”
- “In my 20 years as a superintendent, I have never had a ‘bad board,’ although at times I have had some individual board members who were a challenge. Part of that is because I had good people serving on the board and part of that is the role I played in helping them develop their skills as board members. My current board is very inexperienced. They have a total of 16 years of board experience among the 6 members. That presents some challenges and requires that I spend extra time making sure everyone is going in the same direction.”
- “Good relations don’t just happen – it needs to be worked on; roles need to be clarified. Further, too many superintendents try to make things work when the fit is not right – my belief is it is better to move on rather than try to change an impossible situation.”
- “You’re always an election away from effective and/or non-effective relationships.”
- “The relationship ebbs and flows as board members come and go...it is amazing how one or two ‘off course’ board members can negatively affect the entire school board.”
- “The relationship has a greater chance of being positive if neither the superintendent nor board individuals have too large of an ego and/or feel a strong need to be completely in control.”

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Survey Responses (continued)

- “I believe MSBA has to take a more active/aggressive role in having sessions and training for board members clearly identifying their role and responsibility as Policy Setters, not Administration.”
- “As an educator, the board is like any classroom of kids I have ever taught. You get what walks in the door and you work like heck to have each member learn and grow. This causes me to look respectfully at my learners/board members, and to look up to them as my single boss. It is a role that requires long range wisdom, lots of patience, and deep respect for the potential of any board to learn to lead well by developing policy. I do not find effective superintending to be different from effective teaching. It is humble, hard work, and it requires reflection and action, in a loose/tight manner.”
- “I was blessed with great board members during my 14 year run at my last school district. It is so important to guide present board members to seek out strong community members to run for board positions as needed...people that are student centered, work well with others and are not single issue minded.”

Two superintendent comments related to the need for the traditional school governance structure to change. Richardson (2005) and Hess (2010), cited ideas that could change the board governance in ways that would likely improve the public relations and support for public schools.

Question 28: Please provide your contact information if you are willing to participate in a confidential telephone interview to discuss any or all of your answers.

115 respondents volunteered to be interviewed and provided their names, phone numbers and email addresses. This high number far exceeded the author’s expectations, as only ten interviewees were sought, and may indicate the level of interest in the topic and how readily ideas for improving the school board-superintendent relationship might be collected from Minnesota superintendents and school board members.

Follow-Up Superintendent Interviews

In August, ten Minnesota superintendent respondents were individually interviewed by phone, as selected from the total 115 respondents volunteering for this additional activity following the survey completion. The following script was used for the interviews:

“Thank you for volunteering for a follow-up interview. Similar to the surveys, no participant will be personally identified, so your comments here will be reported anonymously. In fact, your earlier comments on the survey are not reported by name in Zoomerang, so the purpose of this part of the study is to probe for better understanding and insights about the relationship between superintendents and their school boards. I’ve a list of questions below,

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Follow-Up Interviews with Superintendents (continued)

but first, do you have any questions for me before we begin? Is there anything preventing you from speaking frankly and honestly in this interview today?"

1. How many different superintendent jobs have you had?
2. How would you characterize the relationship you had with the school board for each school district?
(Choose from: *very good, good, poor, very poor*)
3. For each, did this relationship change during your tenure? If so, what do you think is the major reason for the change in the relationship?
4. Five board behaviors were listed at the end of the survey. I'd like to probe for more understanding about your ideas for each of the board behaviors (review each quickly).
 - (a) For each, please rate how important this board behavior is to you? (Choose from: *high, medium, low*)
 - (b) Please feel free to comment about the impact when all/most vs. when one board member behaves differently than the rest of the board.
 - (c) Which of the five board behaviors is the most important to you?
5. What do you predict will be the rating most often cited by the group of superintendent respondents when describing their current superintendent-school board relationship?

The ten superintendents (6 males and 4 females) have phone numbers representing all area codes in the state for geographic balance. 5 are in their first superintendency, 2 in their second superintendent job, 1 in his third job, and 2 in their fourth job as superintendent. The total number of years spent as a superintendent ranged from 4 years to more than 10 years (one of the respondents is a retired superintendent, currently working again as a superintendent).

As a group, the 10 interviewees had worked in twenty different school districts, and for most, their board relationships improved over time. The group's **ratings for each of their superintendent-school board relationship are positive: 12 are characterized as *very good*; 6 as *good*; and only 2 as "*good-to-poor*."** Most respondents talked about individual board member impact on the whole board:

- "This is the best board I've had, after the last election in which a difficult member was not elected things have improved"
- "They trust me now; I can take risks after proving myself and treading lightly in my first years"
- "A dysfunctional board member resigned and the whole board changed for the better"
- "As the board composition changed, the reasons for being on the board also changed"
- "I was being questioned more, seemed like the board was less trusting, I decided to leave"
- "A consolidation shook things up, there were always issues percolating related to one board member, difficult place to be"
- "One member micromanaged, others were afraid to speak out"

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Follow-Up Superintendent Interviews (continued)

- “One board was not doing well, out of control, a mid-year chair resignation was followed by other resignations, a troublemaker offered his resignation but the others on the board didn’t accept it, problems continued, even MSBA training didn’t help”
- “When money is tight, it brings out the uglies (sic) in everybody”
- “Every board election has changed the board dynamics; each new board group goes through the form-storm-norm-perform stages”
- “I’ve been lucky; after fearing change with the last election, it’s even better now”
- “The board has improved, more a function of my learning better superintendent behaviors—superintendents are like teachers with a new class, having to get to know each”

Interviewees comments focus on how to improve the board relationship: working through difficult experiences usually improves a board, especially if the board chair is effective; the role of the board chair is critical to board effectiveness; involving the board on committees with the superintendent (and sometimes community and staff members), MSBA training and national conference attendance by the board are very positive influences; board members who micromanage (especially in personnel issues) or are single issue board members are very difficult to work with; superintendents need to understand group dynamics, individual board members, and help their boards to be more effective.

The five board behaviors summarized for interviewees are: (1) when individuals sometimes fail to observe the legal limits upon individual board member authority, or (2) members not keeping the superintendent in the loop when talking to staff members under the superintendent’s supervision, or (3) when individual board members behave in ways that exceed the board policy role and encroach into administrative operations duties expected of the superintendent, or (4) individuals failing to hold themselves to behavior standards for respectful treatment of others including the superintendent, or (5) board members sometimes being conflicted by loyalties to special interest groups instead of serving the interests of all students and the district.

All of the five board behaviors are rated as *high priority*, except for the *medium* rating of importance given by two superintendents for board members that communicate directly with staff without giving the superintendent prior notice or consultation. Each of the two added that this is not an area of concern because the board members do keep the superintendent in the loop by sharing the information with the superintendent after the communications exchange.

Which of the five individual board behaviors is considered the most important by superintendents? The majority (80% or 8/10) of interviewed said **“the most important board policy or practice” for me is *separating the board’s policy role from the superintendent’s administrative role (40%) or demonstrating service in the interests of all students and the district (40%)***. For example, two were

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Follow-Up Superintendent Interviews (continued)

tied for the #1 most important ratings with four votes each for: *board members' being able to separate the board's policy making role from the superintendent's administrative role*, and the *board members' needing to serve all students and the district, as opposed to being conflicted by loyalties to subgroups or special interest groups*. Each of the other three board behaviors received one vote (10 %) for being the #1 most important individual board member behavior.

How do these superintendents estimate the majority of survey respondents will rate their own overall school board relationships? **Interviewees' predictions of 80% good ratings are less positive than the actual survey ratings with 95% reporting very good (59%) or good (36%) board relationships.** While only 5% of survey respondents reported a *poor* board relationship, one interviewee (10%) estimated that survey respondents would report *good to poor*, and another (10%) estimated most survey respondents would report *poor* board relationships. He commented, "I hear lots of poor from my neighbors". It's noteworthy that the 2010 Minnesota study survey results are much more positive than predicted, with 95% of survey respondents characterizing their present board relationship as *very good* or *good*. By comparison, 93% of respondents in the AASA study rated their board relationships as *very good* or *good*. In MN 59% report *very good* compared to the 63% reporting *very good* in the AASA study.

Implications for Practice

Board Policies and Practices. The positive relationship between the superintendent-school board relationship and other superintendent factors constitutes a major study finding. School boards have significant impact on superintendent success. While the school board-superintendent relationship is reported to be *very good* or *good* by the majority of respondents, 20-30% of respondents have concerns that the behaviors of *some* or *most* do not align with expected board practices (see Questions 19-23). It is important to learn how school boards work as a unit to successfully demonstrate recommended board practices while preserving individual board member talents and insights. Exemplary school leadership in public schools requires effective school board-superintendent working relationships, and greater awareness and understanding about how and when things can go wrong in the relationship will likely improve the performance of superintendents and board members.

Board Training. MASA and MSBA are recognized professional associations serving school administrators and school boards, respectively. Administrator and board development could include strategies for improving the superintendent-school board relationship, and ensuring recommended board policies and practices are in place to assess how well things are working. How to identify when the school board-superintendent relationship is deteriorating is important in board/superintendent discussions about expected board practices. Effective communications can prevent or ameliorate conflicts and could be

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part of a relationship development theme. Both professional associations could tackle the misconception that conflict is bad and reflects negatively on the superintendent or school board, a factor that likely negatively impacts the school board-superintendent relationship.

Owens and Valesky (2007, p. 354) conclude: “Whereas conflict was once thought to signal a failure of the organization, it is being increasingly recognized as a normal and legitimate aspect of human social systems. Thus, conflict is not only inevitable but, contrary to earlier views, it can serve a useful function by stimulating creating solutions to problems.” Skills in identifying constructive conflict could help to clarify important problems and issues, find solutions, involve individuals in resolving issues important to them, promote clear communications, help to release emotions (anxiety or stress), build cooperation among people, promote individual skill building, and lead to team conflict resolution (National School Boards Association, 2010).

Recommendations for Future Study

1. Design a study to investigate what are the priority policies and practices that school boards should adopt in the interest of effective governance and building successful school board-superintendent relationships. Probe for what school board response is appropriate when individual members demonstrate outlier behaviors that undermine effective board governance. Identify descriptors and tools for boards to assess their board performance as relates to preserving individual board member roles and contributions that support ethical and legal standards as well as contractual obligations.
2. Replicate this study by surveying both superintendents and adding school board members to collect data about their experiences and observations about the superintendent-school board relationship in Minnesota.
3. Replicate a 2001 study (Chan & Pool & Strickland) that used a self-designed instrument to interview fifty of the nation’s best superintendents, to gain insight into their success. Superintendent behaviors studied were: work hours per week, perceived stress levels, board expectations for leadership vs. management, strategies for board communications and improving the superintendent-board relationships.
4. Study the short- and long-term impact of school board training and/or superintendent training upon the school board-superintendent relationship in Minnesota. Investigate which governance situations present the most difficult challenges for board members. Develop training ideas to improve school board and superintendent teamwork in political or high pressure situations that may lead to conflict, role confusion, or serve to undermine effective governance and superintendent leadership in school districts.

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