Advancing Professional Practice for School Superintendents:

Linking Effective Research with Effective Implementation

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"Scholarship in education administration appears to have been influenced

by the sense of urgency that stems from a rhetoric of crisis." (Willower and Forsyth, 1999)

Suppose in an interview for a position of school superintendent you are presented with the following questions. How might you answer them given the information available for school leaders today?

1) *Describe an effective system for monitoring and reporting continuous improvement in a school district.*

2) *Identify one effective implementation practice that cuts across all aspects of school organization, culture, diversity, politics, varying goals; and, when applied with fidelity, improves student achievement?*

3) *Identify three emotional competencies demonstrated by an effective superintendent.*

Okay, you are not in the hot seat today! However, complex and multiple demands on public school superintendents are quickly reducing the number of prepared candidates available to fill superintendent vacancies. This paper proposes that school superintendents and professional

associations can advance professional practice with the adoption of evidenced based research and the study of implementation practices. By doing so, the skills of incoming and current superintendents will be enhanced and learning outcomes will improve for personnel and students.

To accomplish this, school leaders must first adopt evidence-based practices as an effective means for improving performance. Second, we must share what we learn through implementation with other superintendents and education leaders to increase our effectiveness and the outcomes for all students. Third, we must use that evidence to stem the tide of errant political fixes and the rhetoric of crisis that harms public education. A shrill political argument should not trump good evidence in our profession and we must act first to dismiss a questionable contention.

History of Quick and Questionable Formulas for Improvement of Public Schools

The study of leadership in education in the United States is over 60 years long. Looking back, it is clear that the search by leaders for effectiveness, outcomes, order, meaning, and results spans all six decades. Like today, past public school leaders struggled for common beliefs and sufficient knowledge to succeed at large scale implementation strategies. Yet, the field of school administration and the study of superintendent leadership continues to operate from a fairly weak research foundation (Willower & Forsyth, 1999). The professional field remains dependent

primarily on research that identifies "what" should be put into practice and why it is good to do so. To a large extent, research on the impact and effectiveness of "how" a leader executes change or improvement is scarce.

Six or more decades of leadership study document a variety of large-scale strategies for facilitating change in public education. This incomplete list includes: soliciting community input on the purpose of schooling, schools as places to teach civic participation and democracy, human relations as the focus of the organization, collaborative leadership, site-based management, school councils, accountability, licensure programs, national standards and testing programs to measure performance. Most recent, of course, is the political fix in federal legislation; No Child Left Behind.

Shrill Arguments Do Trump Good Evidence

Unfortunately, the literature on the topic of school improvement and leadership offers some proof that a loud argument really does trump good evidence. Table 1 (p.5) provides an abbreviated analysis of these arguments by the rhetoric of the day. For example, in today's political climate, a perceived crisis in public schools spawned federal legislation in the form of No Child Left Behind; a law that utilizes testing as a means of improving public education (Crisis + Testing = Effectiveness). While this strategy of testing is popular, little implementation evidence exists to support high stakes testing as an overall effective means of improving

education and achieving the desired results for all students. Regrettably, high stakes testing is accepted with considerable reservation by many concerned about the long-term implications for students and public education. Perhaps this phenomenon of quick and easy political formulas might be deterred by school leaders if evidence of effectiveness was the basis for all forms of professional practice.

Table 1.   Rhetoric of Choice for Improving Public Schools

FORMULA (A + B) = Effectiveness		Evidence Based Research	
A	**B**	**Yes**	**No**
Knowledge of Subject Matter	Love of Children		x
Formal Training Programs	Licensure Programs		x
De-centralized Districts	Site Based Management		x
National and State Standards	Accountability Systems		x
Crisis	Testing		x

Wicked Problems for School Superintendents

While constitutional authority for public education resides in the states, federal policy and oversight in public schools is growing. The institutions of the federal government --- the courts,

Congress and executive branch have used multiple strategies to advance federal goals of equity, access, and measurement of public school performance. Legislation under No Child Left Behind now requires standards for performance in all states including a general requirement to implement instructional practices that have a strong research basis and evidence of effectiveness (Whitehurst, 2004).

In addition, increasing global competition raises the stakes for all countries to produce the best product at the cheapest price. The consumer has more choice than at any other time in history with the technological means to access those choices from anywhere in the world (Friedman, 2006). The public school system in the United States, a system designed to provide equal access and a basic education, now must raise the standard of learning for all and produce greater numbers of talented young people for the economic security of the nation (National Academy of Sciences, 2005). Today, regardless of the amount of revenue, preparation of students, race, poverty, access or talent, ALL SCHOOLS are expected to provide an adequate education that will help ALL CHILDREN meet academic standards and narrow current achievement gaps among students.

Public schools face this significant challenge and continue with an ongoing responsibility to address a host of societal concerns. Make no mistake --- little has been taken away from public schools over the decades while more responsibilities for special education, health and mental health services, early childhood services, community education and adult education programs,

school lunch programs, transportation services, student activities and athletics have been added. Left unchecked, any one of these services will eat away a large portion of school district revenue. Despite the demand for greater performance, present levels of state funding for public education are seen as adequate by many citizens, most of whom do not have children in school. For those citizens who might agree that state funding for public schools is not adequate, they disagree with an increase in local taxes to raise the needed money (Morris, 2007).

In a recent Star Tribune newspaper article in Minnesota (September 2007), more than one third of Minnesota school districts will hold local referendums in November 2007 to raise funds to operate current academic and student activity programs. The sheer number and frequency of local referendums indicate a lack of public agreement on, and commitment to, the purpose of public education. The community at large, taxpayers with or without school age children, truly must not understand the scope nor the cost of delivery of public education services today. Left unaddressed, this apparent lack of understanding will shrink the scope and quality of public school services in Minnesota.

Mason and Mitroff (1981) coined this class of social problems as "wicked" instead of "tame", asserting that problems of today are more complex and require leaders to consider non-linear planning and management strategies to address them successfully. Leaders are presented with wicked problems in public education today, the greatest of which may be the demand to "get

better" while responding to the next "fix" without evidence. Willower and Forsyth (1999) are correct in their proposition that the rhetoric of crisis defines our sense of urgency in education.

A Definition for Evidence-Based Practice

For purposes of this paper, evidence-based practice is the linking of effective research with effective implementation so that it results in improved outcomes for students. Overall, the purpose of an evidence-based approach is to produce greater benefits to consumers and society and help leaders across many disciplines improve implementation of services. According to Fixen (2006), leadership action that produces good outcomes for consumers is the result of the careful combination of effective intervention practices with effective implementation practices. Fixen postulates that what appears to be missing in the field of education today is the investment of time and resources dedicated to research on effective implementation. Identifying an evidence-based program is the first responsibility, the second responsibility is to implement and study the impact of that practice in the system.

Other definitions for evidenced-based practices today include the federal definition of scientifically based research. Whitehurst (2004) defines evidenced-based practice as "an endeavor in which decision makers routinely seek out the best available research and data before adopting programs or practices that will affect significant numbers of students (p.1)". At the What Works Clearinghouse, www.whatworks.ed.gov, evidence-based practices are interventions

or treatment approaches that have been scientifically demonstrated to be effective, regardless of the discipline that developed them. Therefore, the term evidence can be substituted with scientific evidence.

A distinction should be made between the terms evidence-based practice and evidence-based program. Practices are skills, techniques, and strategies that can be used by a practitioner. Evidence-based programs consist of collections of practices and methods necessary for effective interventions, treatment, management and quality control.

Three Evidence-Based Practices for Superintendents

This paper proposes three evidence-based practices within the role of superintendent that should be professional leadership standards as evidenced by strong research. These three practices are the:

1. Alignment of goals and superintendent leadership in the school district,

2. Adoption of continuous improvement practices and use of the balanced scorecard methodology for measuring progress, and

3. Application of the principles of emotional intelligence and resiliency for overall leader personal growth and effectiveness.

Admittedly, there will be other evidence-based practices identified as professional leadership standards in the future. This paper addresses three practices as a beginning point for professional consideration.

Evidence-Based Practice #1: Alignment of Goals

Waters and Marzano (2007), conducted a meta-analysis of research on the effect of superintendent leadership on student achievement providing strong evidence to support specific leader practices for superintendents. This seminal work, published *The School Administrator* (March 2007), produced three major findings:

District level leadership matters. There is a significant relationship (.05 level, 95 percent confidence level) between district leadership and improved student achievement. District leadership responsibilities correlate with student achievement (p.14). This is also supported in recent research of Michael Fullan and Douglas Reeves. Increasing the performance of students and staff in public schools today requires the wisdom of sound research and the ongoing study of how well one is performing when putting that research into practice (Fullan, 2005). Reeves (2007) identified high yield strategies at both the district and school levels in order to raise student achievement.

Effective superintendents focus their efforts on setting clear goals for the district. Waters and Marzano (2007) identified specific leadership responsibilities to focus goals on teaching and learning.

> *"The superintendent who implements inclusive goal-setting processes that result in board adopted, non-negotiable goals for achievement and instruction, who assures that schools align their use of district resources for professional development with district goals, and who monitors and evaluates progress toward goal achievement is fulfilling multiple responsibilities correlated with high levels of achievement (p. 15)"*

Effective superintendents provide leadership in these five ways:

1) lead an inclusive process for setting goals,

2) define the non-negotiable goals that all staff must address,

3) align the school board with those goals,

4) set up a system to monitor work and progress on those goals, and

5) align resources accordingly to provide the necessary resources of time, money, personnel and materials.

Superintendent tenure is positively correlated with student achievement. Waters and Marzano (2007) identified two additional studies that affirm the positive correlation between the length of superintendent service and improved student achievement. The longer the tenure of superintendents, the more likely student achievement increases.

Evidence-Based Practice #2: Continuous Improvement and Measurement of Performance

Collins (2005) argues that leadership discipline is the prerequisite for greatness. Like in great businesses, strong social sector institutions must practice greater discipline in processes of planning, governance, finance and human resources. In addition, there is a need for greater discipline when examining progress, both qualitative and quantitative in nature, in order to measure progress toward greatness (p.7).

Unfortunately, the reporting of continuous improvement practice in public schools by public school leaders is limited. While many school districts purport the practice occurs, there is scant evidence that the profession at large adheres to a rigorous implementation of continuous improvement practice. Many districts conduct an annual performance report that consists primarily of test scores and other demographic data. More often, state departments of education or other public and private organizations report progress in education absent the complete data found at the local district or school level.

Think about this; if rigorous continuous improvement practices were solidly in place today, should federal legislation like NCLB be the necessary elixir to increase student achievement? A system that collects results and measures progress will provide more compelling data to leaders. Professional practice has devoted more attention to reporting results and insufficient attention to measuring and reporting progress.

Regardless of your beliefs about NCLB and testing as a means of raising the bar of performance for public schools, continuous improvement practice is more possible today because of the expansion of technology. In past years, copious amounts of data presented technical obstacles and challenges that only a few school districts were fully capable to manage. Today, educators have access to technology hardware and software capable of managing large amounts of student information including the monitoring of student learning. Capable technology on the desk of the teacher, the principal and the superintendent allows for a true partnership in a continuous improvement system.

Both practices of evidence-based and continuous improvement merge successfully with the application of computerized adaptive testing to measure growth in student achievement. One assessment system produced by Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA) provides teachers with student performance data that can be used to improve instructional practice. Used by more than 2,200 school districts nationwide, Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) reports student growth independent of grade level and allows comparison of performance data across years. States of Minnesota, South Carolina and Indiana report 60 to 90 percent adoption of MAP assessments to measure continuous improvement of student progress (Olson, 2007).

Programs like MAP offer teachers, principals and superintendents robust analysis of student learning and growth, instructional practices, curriculum choices, choices with grouping students and so forth. School district curriculum standards and other demographics can be imported for

further analysis and understanding. Applications like MAP for measuring continuous improvement of learning offer students, teachers, principals and superintendents the opportunity to develop shared goals, align resources, improve curriculum and improve student achievement. This is evidence-based practice at its best.

In addition, there is one more strategic advantage to this advanced degree of continuous improvement practice; it builds credibility for your school district. Kaplan (1999) identifies three high level objectives for the public sector to satisfy its mission:

1) Create value,

2) Provide services at minimal cost, and

3) Develop ongoing support and commitment from funding authorities.

In Minnesota, state funding to school districts has not kept pace with the increasing rate of inflation over the past decade. As a result, the number of local levies to raise funds for schools has increased. A system of continuous improvement practice implemented with fidelity has the capacity to grow support and commitment from local taxpayers and ultimately the public at large.

Fullan (2006) reinforces this strong linkage with internal and external accountability. He writes:

> *"External accountability dos not work unless it is accompanied by development of internal accountability. That is why assessment for learning is such a powerful, high-*

yield strategy. It helps people clarify goals and where they are in relation to achieving

them, and it gives them a tool for improvement because it links performance data with

changes in instruction needed to increase student achievement (p.54)"

A Balanced Scorecard Process to Measure Progress and Increase Public Support

There is no shortage of data in classrooms, schools, district central offices, and state departments.
The amount of data collected by teachers, school principals, district office staff, superintendents,
school boards and state departments is just plain staggering in volume and detail. There is so
much data that the sheer volume is confounding. Becoming lost in the details is inevitable.

The challenge for school district leaders is to reduce complexity and increase the likelihood that
the right information will be monitored and interventions made to address the given
discrepancies. By doing so, levers for change and improvement can be identified and therefore,
progress made.

An approach with strong evidence of usefulness and successful application for public sector
organizations, like school districts, is the use of a balanced scorecard. Kaplan and Norton (1992,
1993) created the balanced scorecard as a tool for the private sector, however it is potential to
improve the management of public organizations is great. The balanced scorecard is not a recipe
that can be copied but a performance management strategy that can be replicated.

How does it work? A balanced scorecard, when used as a performance management strategy, allows leaders to identify overarching objectives to meet the mission of the organization. Kaplan and Norton (1993) identify four key perspectives that a balanced scorecard approach to measuring a system's performance should include. These are: a customer's perspective, an internal perspective, a financial perspective, and a learning or innovation perspective. In public schools, areas of student achievement, system performance, satisfaction, and communication are likely arenas for measurement. Once these areas are identified, an assessment of present status is made and the work to define the best means of achieving desired outcomes begins. This process occurs at the district level and is replicated at the school level as well. Information for access to several examples of school district scorecards is available at the end of this paper (p.23).

The balanced scorecard is a process for the school system to:

- Identify the critical strategic objectives of the school district,

- Identify the data sources that will be used to measure progress,

- Identify the weighting of each data source,

- Determine the rating scale used for measurement,

- Measure progress over time.

A recent internet search for applications of balanced scorecard processes in public education yielded few scorecard documents available in the public domain. However, in the field of health care a much different picture emerges. Many hospitals, clinics and health care organizations

across the United States publish balanced scorecards for consumer and citizen review. More importantly, the scorecard process focused improvement processes and achieved results for a dozen hospitals and clinics in the Midwest. Public school districts might learn from the successful application of a balanced scorecard process in the health industry.

Evidence-Based Practice #3: Apply the Principles of Emotional Intelligence and Resiliency

Daniel Goleman inspired many leaders with his groundbreaking book, Emotional Intelligence more than ten years ago (Goleman, 1995). Warren Bennis, Distinguished Professor of Business Administration, University of Southern California, summed up the work of Daniel Goleman this way:

> *"Emotional Intelligence (EI), more than any other asset, more than IQ or technical expertise, is the most important overall success factor in careers. And, the higher one's position in an organization, the more important EI is; EI accounts for 85 to 90 percent of the success of organizational leaders (p. xv)* (Cherniss & Goleman, 2001)

Since that time, more researchers are engaging in the study of emotional intelligence and how EI can be measured and learned. Fernandez-Araoz (2001) and others studied the impact and effectiveness of senior executives (n= 515) in Argentina, Japan, and Germany and found that serious weaknesses in the domain of emotional intelligence predict failure at senior levels with amazing accuracy (p.189). For successful executives, emotional intelligence was found to be the

most relevant characteristic, closely followed by relevant experience. Outstanding IQ came last. In other words, if executives were hired for their experience and IQ, they were likely later on to be fired for their lack of emotional intelligence (p.190). Table 3 below provides the summary of the findings.

Table 3.   Success and Failure Profiles of Executives (n=515)

Failure in the Role	Trait of Executive Hired	Success in the Role
79%	**Relevant Experience**	71%
24%	**Emotional Intelligence**	74%
71%	Outstanding IQ	48%

Goleman (1998) defines the emotional competence as a learned capability based on emotional intelligence that results in outstanding performance at work (p.24). Goleman's emotional competence framework includes 25 skills of personal competencies and social competencies. There are many new developments in the field of emotional intelligence in the past ten years, including groundbreaking work with children and in schools. New assessment scales for leaders are developed, field tested and easily available. Curriculum modules have been developed for school age and adult learners. What are the implications for school superintendents?

First, the skills of emotional intelligence are assets for a leader in any field today. A leader competent in giving empathy, with habits of self-regulation, social skills and self-awareness, is

more likely to succeed than a leader less competent. Second, the work ahead for school leaders is more an adaptive challenge than a technical challenge. Technical problems are ones for which current knowledge will help us solve. Adaptive challenges are more complex and move beyond what we know and are comfortable doing. This challenge alone requires above average levels of emotional intelligence in school superintendents.

Heifetz & Linsky (2004) identify several properties of adaptive challenges:

- The challenge consists of a gap between aspiration and reality demanding a response outside of our current skill repertoire,

- Adaptive work to narrow the gap requires difficult learning,

- The people with the problem are the problem, yet they are the solution,

- Adaptive work generates disequilibrium and avoidance, and

- Adaptive work takes time.

Many unexpected and challenging events occur in the work life of superintendents and how one thinks about what is happening at the time is profoundly important. In jest, you might consider this thinking skill a form of mental hygiene. In the emotional competence framework, it is the personal competence of emotional awareness and the social skills of conflict management and understanding others.

Habits of Mind and Body: Prayer, Play and Pilates

One cannot examine the research on emotional intelligence without finding the word resiliency. Fullan (2005) identifies resilience as perseverance plus flexibility (p.18). There are several scientific definitions in a body of longitudinal research on resiliency, however, of most interest for this paper are practical suggestions from school superintendents about finding their own personal resiliency under duress.

The approaches used by school superintendents to find their personal resiliency under extraordinary and difficult circumstances can be captured by three simple words: *Prayer, Play and Pilates.* When asked to describe how to stay healthy and lead with strength, superintendents provide these words of wisdom: humility, stewardship, be a role model, stay present with family, silence, listen for my values, love the game, play, sleep, embrace failure and learn from it, find hope, be disciplined in practice, exercise daily, pray, spirit, spiritual practice, habits of mind and body, persist in the face of adversity, compassion, empathy, show mercy, well-being, positive attitude.

The more we are aware of our own emotions and how we respond to those emotions, the greater our skills in handling adversity and adaptive changes in the workplace. Moreover, the more successful we are personally with adversity, challenges, and change, the greater our personal success, well being and happiness with the work at hand. The evidence-based research is strong.

Summary: Seek the Wisdom of a Crowd

Surowiecki (2004), in his book, <u>Wisdom of Crowds</u>, substantiates through his research how decisions made by a large group of people are smarter than those decisions made by a few, no matter how brilliant the few. Together, superintendents have the wisdom to propose sound solutions for critical areas of performance in public schools. There is little doubt that superintendents bring many skills and attributes to their leadership position. Overall, we have unique talents, traits, aspirations, experiences, strengths, and weaknesses. Yet, we have a common bond in the role; a role that isolates us from others too easily.

This paper proposes that school superintendents must provide more leadership to advance the profession and improve public education. To accomplish this, school leaders must first adopt evidence-based practices as an effective means for improving performance. Second, we must share what we learn through implementation with other superintendents and education leaders to increase our effectiveness and the outcomes for all students. Third, we must use that evidence to stem the tide of errant political fixes and the rhetoric of crisis that harms public education.

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Balanced Scorecards

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