Superintendents of American Residential Schools for the Deaf: A Profile

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SUPERINTENDENTS OF AMERICAN RESIDENTIAL SCHOOLS FOR THE DEAF: A PROFILE

Data on selected characteristics of superintendents of American residential schools for the Deaf were gathered in a 1999 survey. The resulting profile of superintendents of residential schools was then compared with a profile of superintendents of public elementary and secondary schools that had been compiled in 1992 by the American Association of School Administrators. The study population consisted of the lead administrators of the 72 residential schools for the Deaf in operation in the United States at the time of the survey. One particularly noteworthy finding was that these superintendents reported the same beliefs about their essential responsibilities that had been reported by superintendents of public elementary and secondary schools. The greatest disparity between the two groups of superintendents was in how they characterized their relationships with their governing boards: Generally, the residential school superintendents reported relationships that were less formal. The study, apparently the first attempt to profile superintendents of American residential schools for the Deaf, establishes a baseline for future studies of this kind.

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Headmaster, superintendent, executive director, and other titles have been used to identify the lead administrator at residential schools for the Deaf in the United States. Whatever title is used, the first administrative position of this kind was created in 1817 with the establishment of the first permanent school for the Deaf, currently known as the American School for the Deaf, in Hartford, CT. The leadership of Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet, like that of Laurent Clerc, a skilled and experienced teacher from Europe, provided important guidance for the establishment of early schools for the Deaf (Brill, 1971; Moores & Meadow-Orlans, 1990). As the country grew, schools for the Deaf were established in every state in the nation, and the development of administration in these schools paralleled that in the public schools.

In public education, the position of superintendent of schools has existed since the mid-1800s. By 1860, a total of 27 cities had created superintendency assignments. The growth of superintendencies paralleled the growth of the public schools in America (Callahan, 1966). Beginning with *The Status of the Superintendent in 1923,* and in every decade since, there has been a survey of school superintendents of public elementary and secondary schools in America (Glass, 1992). In 1990, the American Association of School Administrators documented that elementary and secondary schools were facing an acute need because of an aging administrative pool and a shortage of candidates to fill vacancies (Glass, 1992). Because no comparable survey information has been gathered for residential schools for the Deaf, leadership staffing needs and the nature

of the role of the superintendent cannot be determined.

Background

Chand (1983) determined that superintendents in the public school system had to lower the level of professional demands and pressures, stress, anxiety, and safety risks on the job if they were to increase productivity and organizational success. Chand further reported that superintendents dealt with policy implementation, curriculum, finance, personnel, collective negotiation, planning and goal setting, evaluation, accountability, special education, state and federal regulations, and facilities management. Superintendents were also responsible for developing and maintaining relationships with board members, assistants, principals, teachers, classified staff, parents, state departments of education, businesspeople, and the community as a whole. Add to that a number of other necessary tasks, and the potential for stress and anxiety is apparent.

Superintendents of residential schools for the Deaf deal with similar demands (Balk, 1997). Schildroth and Karchmer (1986) observed that as these superintendents struggled to revitalize residential schools, they had to do so in the context of a low-incidence population and the not-always-favorable state of economics and public law. Declining enrollments, increasing operating costs, and the integration of children who are deaf or hard of hearing with hearing students symbolize for many the appropriate implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. As reported by Evans (1975), among others, issues have been raised concerning the suitability of a segregated, sheltered environment for children and their need to reside in the family home.

Students served by residential schools for the Deaf include individuals with all degrees of hearing loss, although historically a majority of those students have had severe to profound hearing losses. Since the development of more numerous educational options, children classified as hard of hearing have been more frequently served in the public school setting, while the percentage of youth served at residential schools for the Deaf has decreased (Schildroth & Karchmer, 1986). One prominent demonstration of the results of declining enrollment occurred at the Nebraska School for the Deaf, a well-established residential school that closed in June 1998 (Rosman, 1998).

Specialized programs in America for children who are deaf or hard of hearing have been in existence since 1817 (Moores & Meadow-Orlans, 1990). From that time to the present, there has been limited research on the leadership of these special schools. In one of the few studies that have been conducted, an investigation of leadership practices by Balk (1997), the researcher concluded that leadership at residential schools for the Deaf on the whole is not unlike leadership at other schools. However, Balk recommended further study and concluded that there appeared to be a clear difference between the leadership practices of superintendents of residential schools for the Deaf and the leadership practices described in the literature on leadership effectiveness.

The systematic review of superintendents in America conducted each decade by the American Association of School Administrators provides background information on the superintendents of elementary and secondary public schools. These research efforts have occurred each decade since 1923 (Glass, 1992). Comparable background information on superintendents of residential schools for the Deaf is unavailable because no survey information has been gathered.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the present study was to identify and compare selected characteristics of superintendents of American residential schools for the Deaf with those of public school superintendents as surveyed by the American Association of School Administrators in its 1992 national study (Glass, 1992). Two research questions were asked:

1. What is the current profile of superintendents of residential schools for the Deaf?
2. How does this profile compare with the profile of superintendents of public elementary and secondary schools?

For development of this profile, residential school superintendents were surveyed about characteristics of the position of superintendent and the relationship between that position and the community. The survey questions concerned the personal characteristics and professional experience of superintendents, the characteristics of school boards and how these characteristics relate to the functions of superintendents, racial-minority and women superintendents, essential responsibilities of school administrators, professional preparation and training of superintendents, and school characteristics.

Significance of the Study

What may have been the first serious scholarly research on the leadership of residential schools for the Deaf did not become available until 1997, when J. W. Balk completed a dissertation comparing the leadership practices of superintendents at residential schools for the Deaf with the practices recognized as essential to effective leadership in the literature on leadership and in organizational assessment. Balk's research raised important questions, but it did not include a survey for the purposes of composing a basic profile of these superintendents.

Changes in the population being served, the first closing of an established residential school for the Deaf since the 1800s, and the findings of Balk's study all suggest a need for systematic empirical reviews of residential schools (Balk, 1997).

Although Balk (1997) reported that the responsibilities of superintendents at residential schools for the Deaf were similar to those of superintendents of public elementary and secondary schools, his research documented a difference between the leadership practices of superintendents of residential schools for the Deaf and the leadership practices described in the literature on leadership effectiveness. For the present study, a survey of superintendents of residential schools for the Deaf that paralleled the 1992 survey of public-school district superintendents (Glass, 1992) established a profile of residential schools superintendents and provided valuable information, including insights into the profession. A secondary product of the research was a comparison between superintendents of residential schools for the Deaf and superintendents of public elementary and secondary schools in the United States.

Literature Review

A literature review identified and provided understanding of the relevant research on superintendents at residential schools for the Deaf and the type of research that had been conducted regarding superintendents of public elementary and secondary schools. The reviewed literature included a study of superintendents of America's public elementary and secondary schools (Callahan, 1966), a history of residential schools for the Deaf (Brill, 1971), and a study of superintendents of residential schools for the Deaf (Balk, 1997). Since Balk's was the only study concerning superintendents of residential schools for the Deaf, the review was expanded to include literature concerning leadership by and for individuals with hearing loss.

This literature review did not identify a profile of superintendents of residential schools for the Deaf. It did, however, identify extensive research regarding superintendents of public elementary and secondary schools in America, including periodically compiled profiles going back to 1923. The superintendency has been the primary leadership position in both public elementary and secondary education and residential education of the Deaf since the mid-1800s. These profiles reviewed attributes of superintendents such as personal characteristics and professional experiences; the profiles also provided information on characteristics of school boards and how these related to the superintendents, racial-minority and women superintendents, essential responsibilities, professional preparation, and school characteristics. As the literature review showed, a national profile of superintendents of residential schools for the Deaf did not exist prior to the present study. Absent such a profile, it was not possible to compare these leaders with the superintendents of U.S. public elementary and secondary schools.

Methodology and Data Analysis

The study population consisted of the leaders of the 72 residential schools for the Deaf in operation in the United States at the time of the survey, late 1999 ("Schools and Programs in the United States," 1998, 1999). The individuals included in the study were the administrative leaders (i.e., superintendents, headmasters, and executive directors) of the selected schools. The survey instrument, a modification of the one used for *The 1992 Study of the American School Superintendent* (Glass, 1992), explored the same aspects as that American Association of School Administrators study. Modifications of the instrument involved changing the term *district* to *school* and adding four questions about a special-interest group: the Deaf community. The instrument was 16 pages long and consisted of 110 questions, many with subparts. Testing suggested that it would take 30 to 75 minutes to complete the survey.

The frequency and percentage of responses to questionnaire items that related to the present study's first research question (i.e., "What is the current profile of superintendents of residential schools for the Deaf?") were reported in tabular form. Within these tables, the results from the study of public elementary and secondary school superintendents (Glass, 1992) were also reported. A comparison of the results of these two studies served to answer the second research question (i.e., How does this profile compare with the profile of superintendents of public elementary and secondary schools?"). Because the second research question required a comparison, a chi-square analysis was applied to the two data sets. A .05 level of significance was used with the chi-square tests. The questions reported in a ranking manner did not receive statistical analysis. The ranking orders were determined using a 5-point Likert scale.

Findings

Surveys were completed and returned by 42 of the 72 superintendents of residential schools for the Deaf, a 58% response rate. Similarities and differences between the two study groups were reported. The two study groups' responses revealed identical profiles regarding the essential responsibilities for school administrators, with no statistical differences in any elements. Personal characteristics, professional experience of superintendents, and professional preparation and training of superintendents appeared to be the next-most-similar aspects of the two groups. The characteristics of school boards and how they related to the superintendents and constituent groups were the most disparate. Racial-minority superintendents, board members, and central office personnel at residential schools for the Deaf were so underrepresented that there was insufficient data for analysis or comparison.

This first profile of superintendents of residential schools for the Deaf showed that these individuals could be characterized generally as White

married men, politically moderate and distributed equally between the two major political parties. The respondents generally came from small-town or rural backgrounds. All were 46 years of age or older, with a median age between 53 and 54 years. These individuals had accepted their first administrative positions between the ages of 25 and 35 years. The predominant career paths were teacher-to-principal or teacher-to-principal-to-central office prior to acceptance of the initial superintendent assignment. The mean tenure in current superintendent positions was 6.26 years. Master's degrees were held in educational administration or special education. Superintendents who held either a specialist or a doctoral degree had studied educational administration.

The superintendents of U.S. public elementary and secondary schools have been characterized as White, male, married, middle aged, coming from small towns, holding advanced degrees in education, and, for the most part, sharing common values and opinions. The research suggests that this characterization may be changing, however. Although still proportionately underrepresented, an increasing number of racial-minority and female superintendents are serving in larger districts, studies have found (e.g., Glass, 1992).

In regard to personal characteristics, professional experience, and professional preparation, there were both great similarities and modest differences between superintendents of residential schools for the Deaf and superintendents of public elementary and secondary schools. Superintendents of residential schools for the Deaf were, on the median, 4 to 5 years older, came from more suburban backgrounds, and had more diverse educational backgrounds at the undergraduate and master's levels. Specialist and doctoral degrees of superintendents of residential schools were nearly exclusively in educational administrations, just as was the case with their counterparts in public elementary and secondary education. On average, superintendents of residential schools for the Deaf who had doctorates completed these degrees 7 years later than superintendents of public elementary and secondary schools. The residential school superintendents also had an average of more than 2 years of additional administrative experience by the time they completed their doctorates.

Two comparisons worth noting were in the areas of beliefs regarding essential responsibilities and the relationships among superintendents, boards, and other constituent groups.

The two study groups held identical views on the essential responsibilities of superintendents. The American Association of School Administrators reviewed opinions about the priorities of effective schools in its 1992 study (Glass, 1992). These priorities included effective curriculum practices, positive learning environments, effective models of instruction, promoting continuous improvement and evaluation, careful management of school finance and of school operations and facilities, building strong support for education, and utilization of research. An example of the similarities between the results of the 1992 study by the American Association of School Administrators and the present study's survey of superintendents of residential schools for the Deaf is presented in Table 1. In both studies, superintendents were asked to rate each area along a scale ranging from "very essential" to "never essential." The results were similar for the two study groups, with statistical analysis of the data showing no statistical differences between them. The superintendents in both studies had similar perceptions of the relative importance of each of the priority areas.

In contrast, the two sets of superintendents had dramatically different relationships with their boards. For example, just 38% of superintendents of residential schools reported that they prepared board agendas, in contrast to 76% of superintendents of public elementary and secondary schools. Contract length for the two groups was also dramatically different, as Table 2 shows. The proportions of superintendents in each group with 1-year contracts or with contracts of 4 years or more were more-or-less similar, but that is where any similarity ends. The most commonly reported contract duration among the public school respondents was 3 years (reported by 42%), yet only about 10% of the residential school respondents said they had 3-year contracts, a statistically significant difference. There were also statistically significant differences between the two study groups regarding 2-year contracts and working without a contract. Every one of the 1,704 public school superintendents who responded reported having some

Table 1
Priority Area: "Develops and Delivers an Effective Curriculum"

	Schools for the Deaf, 1999		AASA,[a] 1992	
Rating	*n*	%	*n*	%
Very essential	24	61.5	1,004	59.2
Essential	14	35.9	539	31.8
Somewhat essential	1	2.6	144	8.5
Almost never essential	0	0.0	10	0.6
Never essential	0	0.0	0	0.0
Total	39[b]	100.0	1,697	100.1[c]

[a] American Association of School Superintendents.

[b] Three superintendents did not respond to this item.

[c] Exceeds 100 because of rounding.

Table 2
Length of Superintendent's Current Contract

Length (years)	Schools for the Deaf, 1999		AASA,[a] 1992	
	n	%	*n*	%
1	12	28.6	299	17.5
2	1[b]	2.4	250	14.7
3	4[b]	9.5	716	42.0
4 or more	9	21.4	439	25.8
No contract	16[b]	38.1	0	0.0
Total	42	100.0	1,704	100.0

[a] American Association of School Superintendents.

[b] Denotes significant difference at .05.

Table 3
Priority Area: "Board Actively Seeks General Community Participation in Decision Making and Planning"

Response	Schools for the Deaf, 1999		AASA,[a] 1992	
	n	%	*n*	%
All the time	8	21.6	537	31.3
Frequently	7[b]	18.9	746	43.4
Seldom	15[b]	40.5	421	24.5
Never	7[b]	18.9	13	0.8
Total	37[c]	99.9[d]	1,717	100.0

[a] American Association of School Superintendents.

[b] Denotes significant difference at .05.

[c] Five superintendents did not respond to this item.

[d] Does not equal 100 because of rounding.

type of contract; about 38% of superintendents of residential schools for the Deaf reported working without any type of contract.

Board members and superintendents must relate to the general community.

Table 3 illustrates differences between the two study groups regarding the frequency with which boards actively sought the general community's involvement in decision making and planning. Although the percentages of the two groups who said they sought participation "all the time" were similar, the other three rates were statistically different, suggesting that the boards of residential schools for the Deaf are much more distant from the general community.

Superintendents within all settings must respond to special-interest groups. The superintendents of residential schools for the Deaf were asked about the involvement of the Deaf community in the school setting. Sixty-four percent of these superintendents indicated that Deaf community involvement was, at that time, more important than in the previous 10 years. Fifty-nine percent indicated that members of the Deaf community were willing to participate in decision making. Thirty-eight percent sought input from members of the Deaf community all the time; 54% of the respondents said they sought such input frequently. In instances where superintendents provided their perceptions of whether their board sought deaf citizen input, 29% said their board sought input all the time, 21% said the board sought such input frequently, 26% said it was seldom sought, and 24% said it was never sought.

Conclusions

Within the limitations of the present study, seven conclusions have been drawn from the findings and data analysis of the research.

First, the *personal* characteristics of superintendents of residential schools for the Deaf and superintendents of the public elementary and secondary schools are similar. The *professional* characteristics of superintendents of residential schools for the Deaf and superintendents of public elementary and secondary schools are also similar, with a few exceptions. Superintendents of residential schools have more diverse teaching experiences, including special education assignments. Like superintendents of public elementary and secondary schools, superintendents of residential schools for the Deaf have experienced one of two career paths nearly two-thirds of the time: teacher-to-principal or teacher-to-principal-to-central office prior to the superintendency.

Second, superintendents of residential schools for the Deaf have less-formal relationships with governing boards, and these boards have less contact with constituent groups. These results indicate that superintendents are more interested than their boards in involvement by the Deaf community. Neither superintendents nor boards of residential schools for the Deaf viewed general community input as important. These types of disconnectedness may not be in the best interests of residential schools for the Deaf.

Third, racial minorities are much less represented as superintendents, board

members, and central office personnel at residential schools for the Deaf than in public elementary and secondary education in America. Women are also less represented as board members and central office personnel.

Fourth, superintendents of residential schools for the Deaf basically hold the same core beliefs about the essential responsibilities of school superintendents that are held by superintendents of U.S. public elementary and secondary schools. This similarity exists across all the areas reviewed: effective curriculum, positive learning environment, effective models of instruction, promoting continuous improvement and evaluation, management of school finance, management of operations and facilities, building support for education, and utilization of research.

Fifth, superintendents of residential schools for the Deaf have more diverse educational backgrounds at the undergraduate and master's levels. At the specialist and doctoral levels, both groups have degrees in educational administration.

Sixth, although school characteristics definitely merit consideration, the great diversity in school size between the two study groups makes this attribute difficult to compare.

Seventh, across several areas of the study, superintendents of residential schools indicated that the areas did not apply, that they did not know, or that they had no opinion. These types of responses suggested a disconnectedness between the superintendent and groups such as staff, boards, training programs, and state and national groups.

Discussion

The American Association of School Administrators has followed the development of the role of superintendent and how the superintendent's relationships with the school board and the community have evolved in public school districts. The present study of superintendents of residential schools for the Deaf, conducted in 1999, allowed for a comparison with the profile of superintendents of public school districts and established a baseline that will allow future studies to track changes or trends. There were elements between the two groups that were identical, and others that were dissimilar; racial minorities and women were so underrepresented at residential schools for the Deaf that no comparison could be made. The area of greatest similarity is superintendents' beliefs regarding essential functions of their job; relationships among superintendents, boards, and other constituent groups is the area of least similarity.

There may be unique elements of residential schools for the Deaf that logically differ when these schools are compared with public elementary and secondary schools. These elements merit study and analysis. Differences exist regarding the characteristics of school boards and how these relate to the superintendent and constituent groups. These differences suggest a disconnectedness between superintendents of residential schools for the Deaf and those outside the school, between superintendents and boards, between staff and boards, and between parents and boards. This disconnectedness may not create dilemmas during routine times, but when a crisis occurs, special needs arise. Likewise, during times when important changes are needed, an absence of relationships between and among these various groups could be problematic.

Recommendations for Practice

The leadership at residential schools for the Deaf should review the characteristics profiled in the present study and compare these to their local situation, determining whether any local adjustments would be beneficial. Specifically, the leadership should review its local situation for possible disconnectedness among different constituent groups. If the school has a profile resembling that of the schools supervised by the 1999 study group, does this disconnectedness serve as an advantage or disadvantage for the school? Depending on the conclusion, the leadership might initiate change to alter the interactive patterns among various groups associated with the school.

Since women and racial minorities were underrepresented in the survey for the present study, reporting statistics on these groups and making a comparison with the 1992 study was not possible. School officials should conduct a local review to determine whether adequate representation exists among women and racial minorities. Among other benefits, adequate representation can promote respect for diversity.

Recommendations for Further Study

First, when the American Association of School Administrators completes its next study, the results should be compared with the data collected for the present study in 1999 from superintendents of residential schools for the Deaf. Shortening the period between the two studies would reduce the influences of time's passage as a study factor.

Second, national leadership in deaf education should ask the American Association of School Administrators to include superintendents of residential schools for the Deaf as a subgroup within its 2010 study of superintendents. This would allow for the first longitudinal review of superintendents of residential schools for the Deaf and would also permit some trend analysis.

Third, if inclusion in the national study is not possible, specific characteristics should be selected from the total survey that would provide information that would benefit residential schools for the Deaf. It is recognized that a higher percentage of respondents would be secured if a shorter, more specific instrument were used. For example, would a specific survey focusing on women and racial minorities that is developed for use with res-

idential schools for the Deaf provide an adequate volume of responses to allow analysis and reporting of results? Also, a specific study of the demographic characteristics of superintendents should be conducted to determine whether the absence of respondents younger than 46 years is representative. If this is an accurate age profile of superintendents, what are the reasons for and implications of an complete lack of superintendents under 46 years of age?

Fourth, specific studies are needed to document the persistence of and reasons for patterns of disconnectedness among groups with a stake in residential schools for the Deaf. If these patterns are consistent, researchers should determine whether this helps the schools. If this disconnectedness is not an asset, researchers should determine what changes are needed. This may require an investigation of the best practices of elected and appointed boards. Specifically, what type of role should be established and nurtured with constituent groups? This type of investigation could allow individual residential schools to adjust and strengthen their policy, procedures, and practices.

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