

CHAPTER 1

Context of Study

After having the opportunity to work closely with a superintendent during my first principalship, I became interested in what appeared to be the multifaceted and multidimensional role of the superintendent. During my first five years as a principal, I witnessed the many roles that our division superintendent had to fulfill. On one hand, he was expected to deal with political realities associated with the day-to-day operations of the organization such as budgeting, funding, allocation of resources, curriculum policies, facility planning, disgruntled parents, personnel matters, and teacher shortages, while on the other hand he dealt with state and federal mandates and a changing accountability system – the Standards of Learning (SOLs). At the same time, he was also expected to keep an eye on any potential community unrest that might stem from basic decisions in order to prevent controversy from surfacing.

With all of the above responsibilities and the tasks associated with each area, there was one area that was the heart and soul of the organization – student achievement. Prior to the age of the Standards of Learning accountability system, our senior staff meetings, facilitated by the district superintendent, focused on incorporating best research-based practices and strategies to create optimum learning environments for student learning and the implementation of innovative programs. A year later, the tone of our meetings changed from creative and innovative programming to making certain that each principal clearly understood the implications of the state's newest mandate – the Standards of Learning. Although staff meetings were still productive and filled with meaningful dialogue, the truth of the matter was our passion as building level principals was beginning to change and to focus on making certain that our schools would be fully accredited.

While the affect of the new accountability system affected each principal in our district and brought about change and a far greater degree of stress at the building level, I also realized that this was just one more item added to the superintendent's list of responsibilities. It was at this point in my career that I recognized the changing role of not only the building principal, but also the changing role of the superintendent and what people considered to be the measure of success for the division: Can you solve my problem? Will you give me what I want? Did the schools meet the seventy percent pass rate on the Standards of Learning tests? And now, six years later we are not only discussing the requirements of the Standards of Learning, but we have added to the discussions the requirements and pressures associated with the federal No Child Left Behind Act.

Having had the opportunity to work closely with two superintendents as their assistant superintendent, my interest in the topic continues to grow. I have witnessed the challenges associated with the role of the superintendent. Earlier in one of my classes I wrote a paper that focused on the superintendent shortage and the challenges that school divisions are confronted with as they struggle to find qualified applicants to fill the top leadership role in the division. What I realized was that school boards are not only confronted with the challenge of finding the right person for the job but finding a person for the job.

Given these personal encounters, I began to develop an interest in what is affecting the role of the superintendent. In particular, I am interested in whether there is a relationship between the Standards of Learning and No Child Left Behind accountability systems, and the length of superintendent tenure and shortage of superintendent applicants in the Commonwealth of Virginia.

The superintendent's position was established in the mid-1800s. The main reason for the position was to have someone who could, on a full-time basis, supervise classroom instruction and ensure uniformity in curriculum (Andero, 2000). Decades later, in the twenty first century, the superintendent's role has evolved to include much more. Accountability, local and state standards, technology mandates, community relations, and political assertions are some of the additional areas that have shaped the role and expectations of the local superintendent.

America's educators have rarely been left alone to do what they know is best in educating students. Over at least the past ten years, there appears to have been a number of interferences that the top leader (school superintendent) has had to define, juggle, and in many cases, lead. With each new reform effort came increased accountability, as well as new standards and mandates to be implemented. These factors may be linked to the length of superintendent tenure.

The *A Nation At Risk* report of 1983 could be considered as the beginning of the reform efforts in education. The report forwarded several recommendations that began to drive many educational decision-making processes. *A Nation At Risk* indicated that our nation was at risk because our schools were "generally encouraging mediocre and undemanding work and that much more intellectually challenging instruction would be needed to make students more academically and economically competitive" (Cohen, 1995, p. 740). The report made it clear that the failure of America's educational system was planted squarely at the feet of school superintendents (Cassell, 1999).

While, on the surface, one might agree that the recommendations appeared genuine in nature, it may also be viewed as the beginning of a loss of faith in the public educational system

and disarmament of authority for the superintendent. *A Nation At Risk* outlined the following recommendations:

1. Graduation requirements should be strengthened so that all students establish a foundation in five basics: English, mathematics, science, social studies, and computer science.
2. Schools and colleges should adopt higher and measurable standards for academic performance.
3. The amount of time students spend engaged in learning should be significantly increased.
4. The teaching profession should be strengthened through standards for preparation and professional growth (NCREL, 2004).

On the heels of *A Nation At Risk*, the elder President Bush introduced America 2000. The program was renamed Goals 2000 under the Clinton Administration. The Goals 2000: Educate America Act was passed by Congress in March of 1994 (Ohanian, 2000). Although Goals 2000 was ambitious in nature, the goals created another framework for public education that focused on rigorous and in some cases demanding academic standards and assessments (Cohen, 1995). It attempted to more closely align standards, curriculum, assessment and instruction, but was viewed by educational leaders as another voice of reform that once again informed the practitioners what they needed to do in the business of educating. This movement was not viewed as a powerful national movement but seen as a politicians' reform movement (Cohen, 1995). Yet, Goals 2000 was interpreted as a way of reforming the entire educational system rather than a method of improving the system. Goals 2000 was amended in 1996 and its reign ended unfulfilled in 2001 after the change in presidential leadership.

Not long after Goals 2000 was put to rest, President George W. Bush introduced the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act which was signed into law on January 8, 2002. The tenets of this law are to ensure that every child succeeds academically. NCLB affects virtually every program authorized under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). ESEA Programs include Title I, improving teacher quality, initiatives for Limited English Proficient (LEP) students, and safe and drug-free schools (NSBA, 2002).

The NCLB requirements fall into four primary areas:

1. Testing and accountability;
2. Employment and hiring practices;
3. Choices for parents, and
4. Miscellaneous provisions

The goals of NCLB include: 1) all students will reach high standards at a minimum attaining proficiency or better in reading and mathematics by 2013-2014; 2) all Limited English Proficient students will become proficient in English; 3) by 2005-2006, all students will be taught by highly qualified teachers (revised March 2004); 4) all students will be educated in learning environments that are safe, drug-free and conducive to learning; and 5) all students will graduate from high school (NSBA, 2002).

Critics of NCLB have suggested that it does not take into account the many cultural and diverse educational settings of each school district, thus, pigeon holing schools and students into two groups – those who pass and those who do not (Schloss, 2004). One superintendent lamented that under the rating system of the No Child Left Behind Act, schools in his district that had received national and state awards for student achievement would be labeled as “needing improvement” (Schloss, 2004).

On the state level, Virginia adopted the Standards of Learning (SOL) in June of 1995. The SOL delineate achievement expectations for grades K-12 in four core areas including mathematics, science, English, and history/social science. There are also standards for computer technology. Students in grades 3, 5, and 8 are tested in these areas, and specific end-of-course tests are administered at the high school level. The tests were field-tested in 1997, and the first administration took place in 1998. In order to retain accreditation, schools must demonstrate a 70 percent pass rate on the SOL. Critics of high-stakes testing such as the SOL have argued that the curriculum is “dumbed down,” that instruction time is lost to teaching test-taking techniques, and that rote memorization may take the place of emphasizing critical thinking and problem-solving skills (O’Neill, 2000; Dounay, 2000).

The advent of the SOL and NCLB brought about greater accountability for superintendents. No longer are superintendents just responsible for managing the day-to-day operations of running a school district, but they are expected to ensure alignment of curriculum and instruction, raise academic standards, produce better test scores, and close the achievement gap (Cuban, 1998) among a myriad of other expectations. Superintendents are expected to effectively and efficiently implement reform programs often without corresponding funding to do so. Additionally, they are asked to make educational revisions and changes to the system with little or no input at the level at which the reforms are being initiated.

While the set of expectations has broadened and superintendents have been placed in the seat of greater accountability, the topic of discussion at recent educational leadership conferences has been the existing shortage of school superintendents. Glass (2001) represented this concern when he noted that there are “superintendent applicant shortages, growing numbers of retirements, and declining quality among those entering the superintendent profession,…” (p. 3).

Over 80% of sitting superintendents are at or near retirement age (Stover, 2002) and fewer administrators are seeking the superintendency (O'Connell, 2000; Stover 2002). According to Stover (2002) many in education consider the personal costs of administration to be too high and choose not to enter, therefore, creating a short supply of future administrators. Is this shortage real? Esparro & Rader (2001) say that it is real, and the future looks bleak as superintendent turnover continues to rise.

Purpose of the Study

On a national basis, the superintendency has been affected by reform efforts including the accountability movement (Archer, 2003). While no one would argue with the desire for our schools to successfully meet the educational needs of all students, the question remains whether or not the constant interference of reform and accountability have created an undesirable climate and culture for the superintendent.

The purpose of this study is to examine and determine what is the effect, if any, of increased accountability in light of current state and federal initiatives (i.e. NCLB & SOL) on the superintendency in the Commonwealth of Virginia.

The data to be collected by this study will answer the following questions:

1. What is the relationship, if any, between the Standards of Learning and the tenure of the superintendent in the Commonwealth of Virginia?
2. What is the relationship, if any, between No Child Left Behind and the tenure of the superintendent in the Commonwealth of Virginia?
3. What is the relationship, if any, between other influences and the superintendent tenure in the Commonwealth of Virginia?

4. What is the relationship, if any, between the Standards of Learning and the superintendent applicant pool?
5. What is the relationship, if any, between No Child Left Behind and the superintendent applicant pool in the Commonwealth of Virginia?

Theoretical Framework

The Theoretical Framework, noted in Figure 1, represents the increased accountability levied upon the superintendency via Virginia Standards of Learning and Virginia's implementation the No Child Left Behind Act. As indicated by the Framework, the superintendent is ultimately responsible for successful implementation of each of these mandates. Unsuccessful implementation of the SOLs could result in a school not attaining accreditation, the loss of accreditation, and students not graduating from high school if they do not pass and earn the appropriate number of SOL verified corresponding tests. In addition, if schools do not make Adequately Yearly Progress as required by NCLB, federal funding can be withdrawn from the district, parents are given a school choice option, and many other sanctions can be levied against the schools and the district. With such increased accountability, this study seeks to determine if the accountability of the SOLs and NCLB accountability result in shorter tenures for superintendents and/or a shortage in the superintendent applicant pool in the Commonwealth of Virginia.

Definitions

Listed below are key terms used throughout this paper:

- **Accountability**, according to Smith & Fey (2000), "...is a concept that glosses political and institutional arrangements and exchanges. One person is said to be accountable to another person or entity by virtue of the roles each plays in an

institution or polity and accountable for certain actions or accomplishments as demonstrated by some indicator” (p. 334).

- **Superintendent** - The superintendent is the school board's chief adviser on educational matters and the district's educational leader.

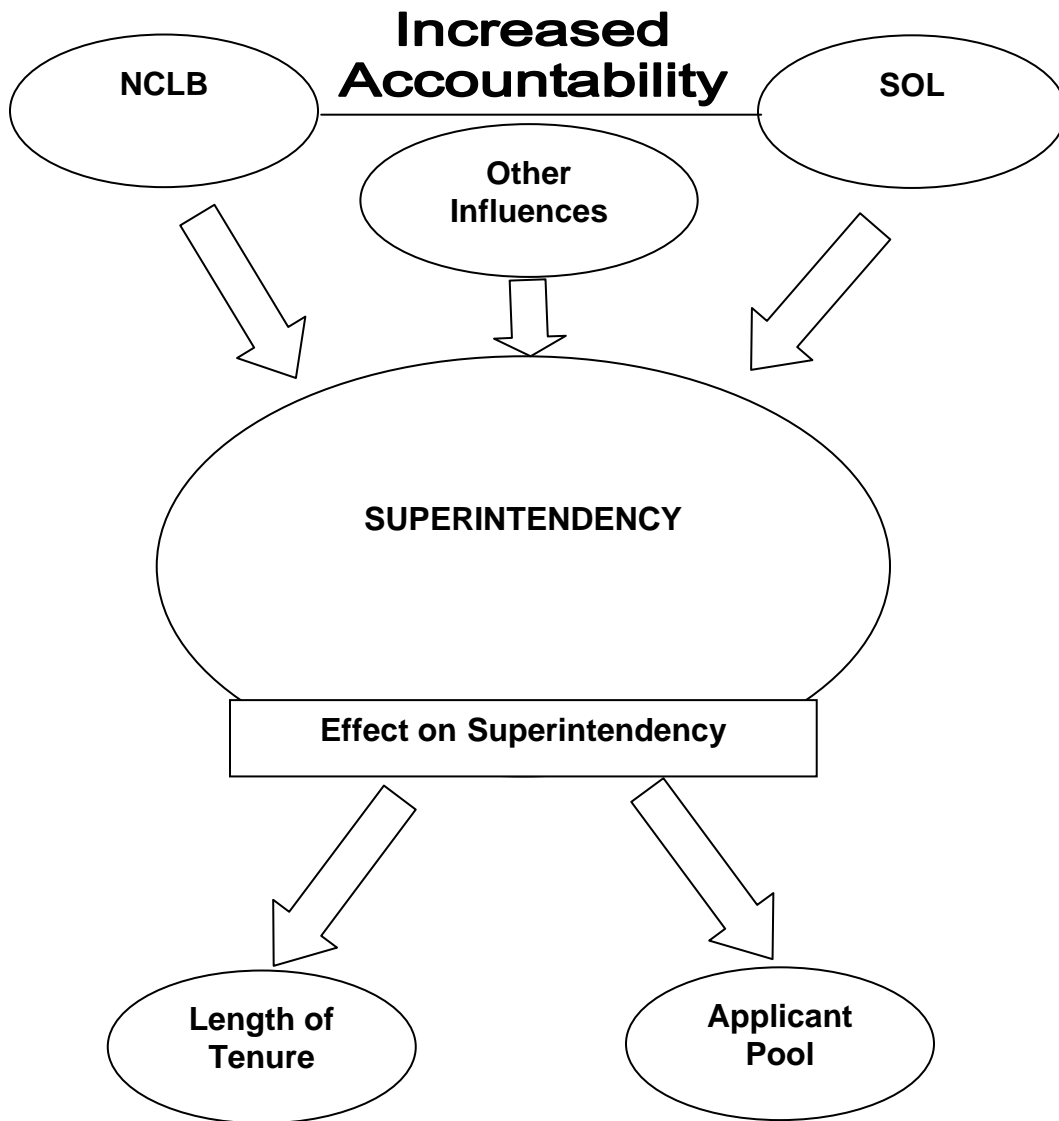


Figure 1. Theoretical Framework

Summary and Organization

Chapter one of this study provides background and focus that is essential to completing the study. Additionally, the purpose of the study, research questions, definitions to key terms and a theoretical framework for the study are outlined in this chapter. Chapter two provides a review of relevant literature. The information included and referenced in this section relates to the research questions. Chapter three outlines the study's methodological approach. Chapter four outlines the results of the data analysis. Chapter five provides a summary of the study and implementation and suggestions for future study.