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RURAL SUPERINTENDENTS AS POLITICAL AGENTS:
GRASSROOTS ADVOCACY IN APPALACHIAN DISTRICTS OF SOUTHEAST OHIO

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Abstract

This qualitative inquiry explores the narratives of rural superintendents regarding their roles as moral agents in the politics of public school settings and how they view their moral and political advocacy as grassroots activism for student and community rights. Insights from superintendent narratives provided themes about the history, practice, and expectations of school leaders as political agents within their respective communities. These themes focused on activism and advocacy for equitable funding and policymaking that specifically related to transportation, testing, and technology. Findings describe and define how superintendents make meaning of their political and public obligations and provide data that can help leadership preparation programs better prepare candidates for meaningful political practice.

Introduction

With shifts in power from the local education agency to federal legislature under No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), and back to the state under Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), the political roles assumed (or not assumed) by school superintendents have become increasingly critical to the present and future state of education. Netusil and Dunkin (1974) acknowledged that superintendents and other district stakeholders did not believe that educational leaders, including superintendents, should participate in a political role, especially at the state level. One participant in this study acknowledged this position, stating, "I have to tell you back in 1987 when I started as an educator I had no idea that I would testify before the house or the senate in the State of Ohio. Or anything. I didn't realize that education was political" (Personal communication, 2016).

According to Netusil and Dunkin (1974) this opinion developed most likely due to the idea that education and politics should not mix. Over time this mindset has changed. Scholars have noted a growing emphasis being placed on the superintendent as a political agent the district leader's responsibility for gaining needed resources and improving the educational experience for students in their districts (Antonucci, 2012; Cuban, 1985; Elmore, 2000).

The purpose of this study was to examine the opinions of practicing school superintendents in rural Appalachian Ohio regarding the roles they assume as advocates for students and look at ways they provide the local education agency with a political voice at the state or even federal levels. Primarily the study aimed to gain an understanding of the superintendent's role as a moral agent engaged in school politics, and subsequently create a more in depth image of his or her experience in activism at the local and state level for meaningful school change. As such, the researchers sought to determine what characteristics rural superintendents valued most in politics of school leadership. The research attempted to identify and prioritize the critical factors involved in educational leadership, from the perspectives of district superintendents as political agents.

Research Problem

As school district leaders, superintendents have a unique obligation beyond the immediate needs and interests of their students and various stakeholders that involves a broader scope of political engagement. Specifically, superintendents are responsible for all aspects of educational policy, including local, state, and federal issues. This can create a dynamic and complex political environment. According to Noguera and Wells (2011),

> Policymakers typically develop and legislate new education policy in state capitols based on ideas that may be politically popular (i.e., phonics versus whole language or opposition to bilingual education), but without consulting with educators or educational researchers. In many cases, educational policies are more   likely to be based on politics and ideology than on objective educational research. (p. 10)

The problems and concerns of school superintendents in rural regions of the United States, such as the Appalachian region of southeast Ohio, include distinctive difficulties with technology, high-stakes testing, and inadequate school funding (Howley & Howley, 1995; Meier & Wood, 2004; Nichols & Burliner, 2007; Ravitch, 2011). Historically, rural Appalachian school districts have been economically and educationally disenfranchised due to unconstitutional funding models (Obhof, 2005), overuse of standardized testing (Howley, 2001), and unstable enrollments due to competition with non-traditional schools (Carnoy, 2000). These factors have lead to a perception of sub-standard quality of education in the region (Shaw, DeYoung, & Rademacher, 2004). However, while these difficulties are unique, these problems are not exclusive. The perceptions and opinions of these superintendents about the actual and perceived political forces in these often-isolated areas lay down a foundational narrative that informs leadership practice and preparation.

Superintendents from rural school districts were interviewed using a questionnaire that delves into the way in which superintendents advocate and engage in activism concerning political issues impacting their respective districts. Past research from three decades ago (Cuban, 1985; Netusil & Dunkin, 1974) showed that superintendents did less in actual political roles than they thought they should do. As such, this investigation explored the notion of whether or not that is still the case and look at ways in which superintendents successfully (and unsuccessfully) engage in relevant politics.

Research Questions

The overarching research question for this study was, "How do rural superintendents in the Appalachian school districts of Southeast Ohio perceive themselves as political agents?" Underlying this principal question were two additional questions. First, "What expectations do Appalachian superintendents in rural districts have regarding their own moral obligation to be politically engaged?" In other words, how do rural superintendents *define* political agency? Second, "What do these rural superintendents perceive to be the primary political concerns for their stakeholders and what activities do they undertake to face these concerns?"

Theoretical Framework

Political agency can be viewed as influence, power, authority, and persuasion demonstrated by leaders in local, state, and federal contexts. Superintendents function as political agents through advocacy leadership to make education worthy to call it an education (Anderson, 2009; Apple, 2009). In Anderson's (2009) words, the term advocacy leadership refers to . . .

> . . . a more politicized notion of leadership . . . that acknowledges that schools are sites of struggle over material and cultural resources and ideological commitments. Political

alliances of leaders may have to be built among superintendents, principals, teacher leaders, union leaders, student leaders, and community leaders in order to defend the democratic goals of public schooling against those who to replace the political democracy with a logic of the marketplace. (p. 13)

By taking a role of advocacy leaders, superintendents engage in political activities that focus not only on local community realities but also on the impact that state and federal policies have on their communities. Thus, political agency refers to organizational processes, individual and collective efforts, formal and informal acts, and rational and affective demonstrations for impacting political spaces, events, processes, or outcomes (Barnett, 2008; Häkli, & Kallio, 2014; Lestrelin, 2011). Educational leaders, as political actors, exercise political agency in many facets of their work, and if these leaders are working toward equitable and socially just access for all students, they demonstrate competencies and dispositions of advocacy leadership (Anderson, 2009; Apple, 2009).

Political agency, although a highly disputed and multifaceted concept (Brewer, 2011; Thomas, 2009; Wright, 2010), relates to the political behaviors of school superintendents in a dynamic and dimensional practice at the local, state, and federal levels of policymaking and public influence. Fostering true transformation and change has become an urgent need in the educational enterprise of closing the achievement gap and promoting equity and justice (Friedman & Mandelbaum, 2011). However, change demands school leaders find new ways of establishing connections with school stakeholders. Superintendents face a need to acquire and utilize power to disrupt the historical, social, and economic marginalization of their learning communities. Challenging trends in budgeting and standardization in the education may necessitate developing a strong public and democratic presence at all levels of policymaking.

Context of the Study

Geographically speaking, Southeast Ohio is synonymous with Appalachian Ohio. The region is comprised of 32 counties ranging from Clemont County in the southwestern region eastward along the Ohio River north of Kentucky, to the southeastern corner sharing a border with West Virginia, and then north up the Pennsylvania border to the northeastern most county of Ashtabula at Lake Erie (Appalachia Rural Commission, 2016). Appalachian Rural Commission (ARC) (2016) defines Appalachia as "a 205,000-square-mile region [including] the Appalachian Mountains from southern New York to northern Mississippi" (p. 1). The Appalachian area of Ohio is home to 327,102 people living in poverty (Ohio Development Services Agency, 2016). The Appalachian counties with the highest population in poverty are Mahoning with 40,784 and Trumbull with 35,147; the county with the highest percentage of population in poverty is Athens at 31.6%.

Images of Appalachian Ohio, such as those perpetuated by Vance's *Hillbilly Elegy*, bring to mind *rural* and *poverty* (Gorski & Landsman, 2014; Obermiller & Maloney, 2002). However, there are counties that are not part of the Appalachian region in Ohio that have higher percentages of poverty; for example, Franklin County in Central Ohio, Montgomery in the southwest, and Lucas in the northwest have respectively 210,472, 95,667, and 90,339 residents in poverty. Of the 32 "Appalachian" counties, six (6) represent the poorest areas in the state with 21.4% - 32.2% of the county population in poverty, and 19 counties with a poverty rate of 15.5%-19.9% (Ohio Development Services Agency, 2014). The poverty percentages of city and local school districts within a given county vary greatly. A school district in this region can have a rate as low as only 38% of students on the national free and reduced lunch program or as high as 100% participation.

As with the self-identifying, poverty-based frame prevalent in the area, there also exists a

strong *rural* identity. Although Southeast Ohio, as well as the state at large, does have a county that classifies as "rural" by the USDA standards (Cromartie & Parker, 2013; Parker, 2013), the lack of categorical rurality does not have an influence on the local metis of community leaders such as superintendents.

The federal classification system contradicts the state reporting typologies. Supporting this variance of what is "rural," Cromartie and Bucholtz (2008) have stated, "The term 'rural' conjures widely shared images of farms, ranches, villages, small towns, and open spaces. Yet, when it comes to distinguishing rural from urban places, researchers and policymakers employ a dizzying array of definitions" (Para. 1). At the state level, the Ohio Department of Education (ODE) (2013) lists 124 school districts as "Rural - High Student Poverty & Small Student Population" and an additional 107 school districts as "Rural - Average Student Poverty & Very Small Student Population."

As Figure 1 reveals, the Southeastern region of Ohio is predominantly comprised of school districts considered by state standards to be in one of these two categories. Also approximately 22 school districts in the region are classified as "Small Town – High Student Poverty." These districts, while not considered "rural" particularly, share certain descriptors with their rural and insular counterparts.

Legend

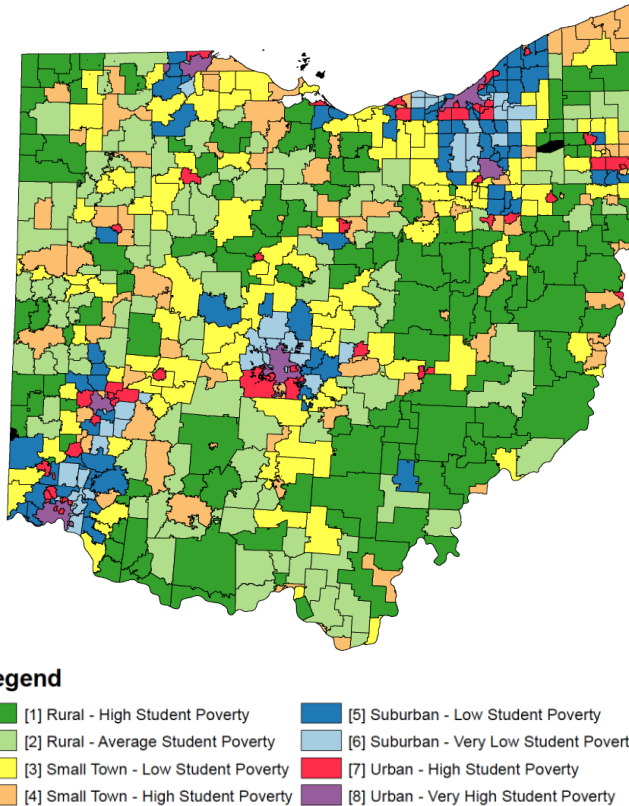|	
[1] Rural - High Student Poverty	[5] Suburban - Low Student Poverty
[2] Rural - Average Student Poverty	[6] Suburban - Very Low Student Poverty
[3] Small Town - Low Student Poverty	[7] Urban - High Student Poverty
[4] Small Town - High Student Poverty	[8] Urban - Very High Student Poverty

Figure 1 –

2013 Ohio School District Typology (Ohio Department of Education, 2013)

Superintendents' Political Agency

Schools are public spaces. Often the conversation regarding schools as political spaces or school leaders as political agents is an uncomfortable, if not, controversial discussion. As Edwards (2006) has stated, "To be effective, today's superintendent must be an adept student of politics, and for a superintendent, school system politics tend to go beyond [a] basic definition [of politics]. The politics practiced by the astute superintendent are the politics of strategic involvement" (p. 134). However as Hoyle, Björk, Collier, and Glass (2005) noted, ". . . school districts operate within the political milieu of the community, state, and nation. They are affected by political actions taken by numerous governmental bodies and usually have very limited input or voice in these decisions" (p. 67). Hoyle et al. (2005) went on to note, "Political skills needed by superintendents are similar to those of any other public officer responsible to an elected governing body" (p. 68).

Previously, Elmore (2000) had indicated, "Political theories of group leadership stress the role of leaders as coalition-builders and brokers among diverse interests" (p. 20). Hess (1999), as cited by Elmore (2000), stated, "superintendents consistently engage in a kind of hyperactive policy dance . . . in which relatively unstable political factions advance new 'reforms' as ways of satisfying their electoral constituencies" (p. 19).

Yet still much of the dialogue focusing on the political agency of the superintendent is limited to local community politics: knowing the district's political climate, acknowledging the community members that influence opinion and decision-making, and uncovering the political and cultural history of the district and community (Hoyle et al., 2005; Peterson & Barnett, 2002). What remains absent from much of the literature is the way in which a superintendent's role as an instructional leader and political agent manifests not only at the local level but also state and national level of school politics.

Schools as Political Spaces

According to Alsbury (2003), "Educational administrators have been aware of the effects of politics on the efficient and effective operation of schools since the political reform movement in the late 1800s and early 1900s" (p. 667). Likewise, the Education Writers Association (EWA) (2003) purported, "The current clamor may be for "instructional leadership," but district leaders also must effectively manage change in highly complex, politically charged and often contentious system" (p. 6). Therefore, superintendents "need to understand, and be adept at, the politics of these jobs" (p. 6).

Unequivocally, the Educational Leadership Constituent Council (ELCC) standards (2011) stated,

> A district-level education leader applies knowledge that promotes the success of every student by understanding, responding to, and influencing the larger political, social, economic, legal, and cultural context within the district through advocating for district students, families, and caregivers; acting to influence local, district, state, and national decisions affecting student learning; and anticipating and assessing emerging trends and initiatives in order to adapt district-level leadership strategies. (p. 23)

The aforementioned EWA report (2003) went on to reveal that at least some superintendents believe that to be successful "school leaders must be political players. . . . [and that] leadership has to be effective within a political context" (p. 6). In a phenomenological study of the roles of superintendents, Antonucci (2012) "described a job that is complete with conflict, public scrutiny, unreasonable expectations, complex relationships, and politics" (p. 3).

Additionally, Antonucci states, "In today's educational arena, the superintendent is responsible for balancing the social, political, economic, and legal problems than penetrate the

schoolhouse, as well as for managing the tensions surrounding these problems" (p. 9).

Political Activities of Schooling

In a dissertation from the mid-1970s, Dunkin (1974) identified fourteen political activities that superintendents should and did do. Specifically, superintendents stated that they engaged in these politically relevant practices:

- Provide information to candidates about effects of educational issues to be considered;
- Help plan political rallies;
- Publicly support candidates;
- Discuss educational issues with legislators;
- Organize coffees for legislators to meet district educators and residents;
- Continuously contact legislators about educational issue;
- Encourage votes on bills according to statewide effects on education;
- Encourage board members to express views to legislators;
- Attend educational committee meetings in legislature one or more times;
- Personally contact legislators when home on weekends about educational issues;
- Read articles and bulletins which explain issues being considered;
- Subscribe to weekly reporting service and read;
- Analyze educational bills; [and]
- Should keep board members and district residents informed on education issues to be considered in legislature.

Of these fourteen activities identified in the 1970s, the items that ranked the highest on what superintendents perceived that they *should* do were "read articles and bulletins which explain issues being considered," "discuss educational issues with legislators," "provide information to candidates about effects of educational issues to be considered," "encourage board members to express views to legislators," and "continuously contact legislators about educational issue." According to Dunkin's (1974) study, these practices that school leaders *should do* correlated well with the activities that superintendents actually *did*. As Dunkin noted,

> Provid[ing] information to candidates about effects of educational issues to be considered and . . . read[ing] articles and bulletins which explain issues being so considered were the only items with a *should* response in the very certain agreement range and a *did* response that was close enough in agreement to warrant a nonsignificant difference. (p. 75)

In the interim, between the mid-1970s and the current era, research has been mainly silent in the area of identifying the political activities in which school superintendents should engage. As Kowalski (2013) acknowledge, more recent findings indicate that "superintendents either define political action narrowly or they suppress the political realities of their practice" (p. 314). For this reason, while the political role of the superintendent in recent decades has escalated or "heightened" it has become contradictory in "an age of pressure" (Carter & Cunningham, 1997; Wirt & Kirst, 2009). Blumberg (1985) condensed the superintendent's political activity into merely two categories, "the mobilization of community support and the management of conflict" (p. 48).

Therefore, as specific activities have not been discussed in detail, it has become more evident that the position of the superintendent, especially that of a superintendent in rural regions, is in and of itself "political" (Blumberg, 1985; Carter & Cunningham, 1997; Chalker, (1999). This study aimed to examine the way in which rural superintendents engage in political activities for their district and stakeholders. How do superintendents define political agency? What activities do rural superintendents take on as political agents (i.e. moral advocates) for their

districts? What politicized issues most concern them as the political representatives of rural Appalachian school districts and why? What advice would they offer to superintendent preparation programs to better educate future district leaders of political change? To answer these questions we employed a series of open-ended questions to conduct a qualitative research approach designed to involve practicing rural Appalachian superintendents in in-depth interviews. The accounts and descriptions that emerged from these discussions provided the data analyzed in this study.

Methodology

Design. Applying a model based on narrative inquiry (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Pokinghorne, 2010), this qualitative interpretative study considered the way in which superintendents encounter political realities and make meaning of their practice as political agents. Responses revealed discourses that uncovered functions "in the construction of human meaningfulness" (Pokinghorne, 1988, p. 31). A series of open-ended questions were designed to invite extended reactions and perspectives from practicing district superintendents pertaining to their political activities and efforts to attempt to influence legislation and policymaking on behalf of their students and stakeholders.

Our goal was to look at the "meaningfulness of individual experiences by noting how they function as parts in a whole" (Pokinghorne, 1988, p. 36). By grouping responses into categorical themes we configured data into meaningful groupings, which formed primarily around the research questions. These response groupings provided data to aid the researchers in identifying the meaning and making sense of the superintendent narratives collectively. In turn, the data were analyzed for common patterns and themes among the six participants, using first and second-cycle coding (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014).

Participants. Using a purposeful sampling, six (6) superintendents, four males and two females with a range of experience in the superintendent's office, were asked to volunteer for participation from the 32 counties that form rural and Appalachian southeast Ohio. Years of experience for the superintendent participants ranged from 2 years to 15 years. All were formerly classroom teachers and school principals at various levels, including elementary, middle, and secondary schools.

Table 1
Participant Information

Pseudonym	Gender	Typology of District
Jeff	Male	Small Town – High Student Poverty
Lisa	Female	Rural – Average Student Poverty
Lois	Female	Rural – High Student Poverty
Mark	Male	Rural – High Student Poverty
Rick	Male	Rural – High Student Poverty
Troy	Male	Small Town – High Student Poverty

The researchers used an in-depth interview process to determine emerging themes, patterns, concepts, insights, and understandings through participants' narratives about political activism and advocacy. A thick, rich description was developed through the data triangulation using participant responses, narratives, researcher journals, memos, themes, texts/documents, and visual models. After receiving approval from the Institutional Review Board the researchers invited and informed participants of the nature of the study. Consent occurred prior to the in-depth interviews. Participants were contacted via email to explain the nature of the research and

were provided an opportunity to ask questions and request information about the study before consenting. The consent form was provided in attachment to allow participants time to review it. The signed consent form was collected prior to the interview process.

Procedure. The researcher-developed questionnaire was designed to investigate the way in which superintendents get involved as political intellectual agents in politicized issues at the local and state level. The questionnaire was field tested with superintendents that were not a part of the study. With one exception, all interviews were conducted in a face-to-face setting that the participant selected (one participant was unable to meet face-to-face and the interview was conducted by phone). All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed immediately after each individual interview was conducted and completed, using a transcription service. Reflections and journaling on the interviews were taken both before and after the transcribing processes. The researchers identified themes by reexamining the data for useful quotes and through qualitative interpretation to provide support for the themes (Glesne, 2015; Patton, 2015; Stake, 2010).

Experienced researchers in the field of educational administration collected the data. Using open coding, the researchers initially labeled data independently and then in teams. Subsequently, we grouped responses into categorical themes and configured data "into wholes according to the roles these actions and events play in bringing about a conclusion" (Pokinghorne, 1988, p. 36). Researchers' reflexivity was a part of the interpretive process.

Trustworthiness. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), trustworthiness is determined in large part by credibility. In data analysis, multiple validation strategies were used to ensure trustworthiness and improve the reliability of results. We employed peer debriefing (Marshall & Rossman, 2016) as well as inter-rater reliability (Shenton, 2004). Patton (2002) posited that the background qualifications and knowledge of the investigators are factors contributing to the credibility of a study, citing that the *credibility of the researcher* is "dependent on training, experience, track record, status, and presentation of self" (p. 552). In this study, researchers that are experienced in qualitative research, teacher education, and school leadership conducted the collection and analysis of data. As a research group, we consisted of three experts in educational administration, each having served as a school leader, and one expert in critical studies in education. One researcher brought an international perspective to the study; all four researchers had extensive experience in rural settings.

Moreover, data saturation was reached as we began to hear the same or similar responses from participants, and we began to see familiar patterns emerge (Patton, 2014; van Rijnsoever, 2017; Yin, 2014). Initially, we interviewed three participants and followed up with three additional participants to ensure that saturation was achieved. Finally, we attended various meetings of the regional superintendent association, collecting artifacts and notes that were used to support participant claims and perceptions.

Results and Findings

The political issues that participants referenced in this study did not differ significantly from those found in Dunkin (1974). Although contemporary superintendents did not directly mention planning political rallies, publicly supporting candidates, or organizing coffees for legislators to meet district educators and residents, data revealed that they still engage in a number of activities and face several issues that their 1970s counterparts did. For example, today's school district leaders continue to provide information to candidates about effects of educational issues to be considered; discuss educational issues with legislators; continuously contact legislators about educational issue; encourage votes on bills according to statewide effects on education; encourage [stakeholders, *board members* assumed] to express views to

legislators; attend educational committee meetings in legislature one or more times; and work to keep board members and district residents informed on education issues to be considered in legislature. Superintendents have made personally contacting legislators about educational issues a task that is not only reserved for the weekend or time at home; it now seems to be an integral undertaking of the office of the superintendent. Based on participant comments it can also be inferred that superintendents still read articles and bulletins that explain issues being considered and spend time analyzing educational bills.

Data collected from the participant narratives provided insights into the history and practice of the politics of school leadership relating generally to issues of accountability and access. Within their respective communities, these overarching issues focused on activism and advocacy for equitable funding and policymaking broadly relating to technology, accountability, and funding. The codes and themes that emerged from the responses were used to describe and define how superintendents function morally as political agents in public policy- and decision-making. The reported themes revealed ways that educational leaders, specifically superintendents as political agents and instructional leaders, can better serve their respective districts.

Moreover, some consideration has been given to designing superintendent licensure programs to foster meaningful political practice. Ultimately, from the analysis five predominant themes emerged. The first three themes were: 1) Defining the superintendent's political agency; 2) Activities of superintendents as political agents; and 3) Political issues encountered. These three themes are reported in the findings of this paper. Additionally, a fourth theme, *political expectations for building level leadership (principals)*, was decisively omitted from the scope of this study due to its lack of relevance to superintendent political agency. However, a fifth theme, *suggestions for new superintendents and superintendent licensure programs*, was used as a foundation for the recommendations section of this paper.

Defining the superintendent's political agency. Superintendents defined their political agency in terms of advocating for the students, staff, and stakeholders. The primary themes that emerged dealt with serving as an iconic advocate for their district and navigating the changing political climate relating to schooling.

Iconic advocacy. We use the term iconic advocacy to refer to the way in which superintendents of schools view their service as "the political figure," "political liaison," and "the face of the district." This was especially emphatic in the responses from female superintendents. As Lisa stated,

> I am the political figure for [my] school district. I am the political icon for the families, the staff, the students, and the agencies of our area—the liaison to the state department of education and to legislators, house representatives, the government agencies . . . And I . . . . realize that I represent my staff, my students, the families of these areas; and have to do what best for them politically. (Lisa)

Lisa went on to add,

> You have to realize that people are going to hit you from every direction, but you've got to be that political liaison, to say, 'I understand your problems or your issues, and I will look into it. I will see what we can do for the best of the district and the children and the parents.' (Lisa)

To some degree Lois echoed these words:

> I feel that superintendents are the face of the district . . . You must advocate for the kids in your district of whatever shape, size, color, creed, or whatever, you are seen as an advocate for those children of your district. (Lois)

Generally, for male participants the role of superintendent manifested as active engagement. According to Jeff,

> [A] lot of superintendents probably don't understand . . . what our role is, but . . . if you want to be successful or effective . . . you want to advocate for what's best for the children that you are here to serve then you better be in touch with political powers [and] legislative mandates, impacting them, responding to them. . . (Jeff)

Interestingly enough, at least one male superintendent did define his advocacy in terms of being "a political lawyer for [his] district." As Mark summarized it,

> Whatever I have to do . . . whether it is going to testify about budget material, or trying to meet with local lawmakers and make our voice heard. I feel that my job is to advocate for my kids. (Mark)

Navigating the changing political climate. Superintendents identified the ever-shifting political landscape of schooling as a political problem requiring much attention. This was expressed as negotiating partisan and local community disputes around school related politics as well as dealing with the frequent iterations of new mandates and legislation. Two quotes from the data function to demonstrate these superintendent sentiments:

> We should be talking about the positive things in public education and the things we do right. I think too often [affiliation with state and regional associations] becomes a way to get too involved in attacking legislators . . . I think too often we draw a line in the sand and then we alienate certain parties, instead being at the table trying to talk about solutions. Things get done to us and we're not a part of it because we were not part of the solution. (Rick)
>
> Being politically active for education to me is distasteful, but it is a job that I have to take on, because of the things that are coming out of not only Columbus but out of Washington DC. Just within the last 10 years, and this is my 8th year as the superintendent, the political climate has changed toward education completely. (Troy)

Superintendents engaged as political agents. Several superintendents acknowledged the now common work of testifying to statehouse committees or maintaining open lines of communication with legislators as important factors of being engaged politically. Mark stated, "I testified in front of both the house and the senate and finance committees, or subcommittees, about funding models that the government put out which really was inadequate for a district like mine." As Lois noted, "[It's] our duty to stay politically involved in the process just so we know what's going on." One superintendent noted his participation in a regional organization that has historically advocated for equitable school funding in Ohio. Through his leadership in the organization, he shared,

> [While] serving last year as the president of the [regional superintendents'] organization [we advocated] in the previous biennial budget process [by attending] the budget hearings at the Education Committee hearings at the statehouse *en masse* . . . holding press conferences. So being part of that advocacy group [is important] . . . (Jeff)
>
> Mark echoed being involved with teams that have "met with a couple different

representatives as a body up in Columbus with a couple of different guys from the statehouse that were our local legislators, and tried to advocate through them."   Similarly, Lisa emphasized the importance of helping legislators who have the power to change the system physically see the impact testing has on children. She pointed out,

> Last year we had [our Senator] that came to our district to visit, to look at testing, to see how we handle testing and what impact it had on us. So I spend a day with [the Senator] walking to the school, explaining how we run everyday programs, explaining the impact

of testing on our students, explaining the reasoning why maybe for your special
education] students it may not be a true picture of their abilities. (Lisa)

One superintendent emphasized the importance of building relationships with lawmakers as a
way of staying engaged as a political agent for her district.

I have been invited to speak at finance committee meetings at the statehouse. I talk to my
legislators on a *regular* basis . . . I have their cellphones; they have my cellphone. If
there's a piece of legislation that has to do with education, and they want some of advice
on it, they'll just pick up the cellphone and call me. And if I don't know about it, I find
out about it and get right back to them. (Lois)

Political issues encountered. Political issues highlighted by participants focused on
school funding, overuse of (i.e. incessant) testing, and other political concerns grounded in
working with the public and policymakers. These included being a figurehead for the district in
times of tragedy and managing expectations from legislators, such as concerning updates to
technology and accountability measures.

School funding. The number one political concern that superintendents in the
Appalachian Ohio region noted was school funding—each of the 6 participants referenced this as
an underlying issue. Principally, inequitable school funding was voiced by a number of
participants. Participant remarks on funding can be characterized generally as systemic. As one
superintendent commented,

Its school funding...and the heavy reliance on the funding system that is real estate based.
The whole foundation of public schools in our society is to actually level the playing field
for kids—so that those who are born in poverty don't have to remain in poverty, unless
they choose to. We know as a society that the key to prosperity in the United States is
education. If you're going to earn a legitimate income in the United States, and be
successful, you have to have some education to do that. Otherwise people are going to
take advantage of you. If you can't read and you can't do mathematics, if you can't think
logically and strategically, you're not going to be able to survive in the world of business,
commerce, whatever. (Troy)

One participant, Troy, also had this to say:

So the public school system was designed to level the playing field so that those kids
from poverty had as many opportunities to be successful as anyone. It's the American
Dream, if you will. You know it's the people coming—the immigrants coming into the
United States, saying, "If I work hard I can build up some equity either in those works or
financially, and I can become my own made person." It is that American Dream, that
opportunity to do better than I had it before. So until we fix the funding issue in Ohio
where kids from poor communities have poorer resources than kids from affluent
communities there's a group of us who keep fighting for a different funding system.
(Troy)

Lois' comments provided an adequate summation:

Over time I think school funding in Ohio must be fixed. There doesn't seem to be a
standard way to fund schools in Ohio that's equitable. My brother's children go to [a
large suburban school]. His kids can play lacrosse, and they can take seven different
offerings of music in eighth grade. They can take [foreign] language at sixth grade. We
can't offer that in rural high-poverty districts. We don't have the funding to do that. They
can offer it because they have so much more local funding because it's based on property
tax value in Ohio. The property taxes my brother pays are astronomical, but his property
is worth that. (Lois)

Additionally, school leaders are concerned with how to justify the allocation of available funds in the context of progress and the ever-changing society that schools serve. One superintendent put it in these terms:

> Justifying what we purchased in the past and what we have the right to use now 10 years later down the road [is a major concern]. Also politically making sure we're doing the best for students and spending money correctly. That's a big issue also. People are watching what we are spending, so, you better be spending it right. (Lisa)

Incessant testing. Relating to incessant state testing, participating superintendents had much to say. Fundamentally, the political activities of superintendents involved direct and indirect methods to challenging the misuse and overemphasis of high-stakes testing. Jeff shared his story, stating,

> [Our state representative] comes to [a superintendents' association] meetings and she talked about some of her legislation and we're telling her about [how] we have 90 days of testing in our district. In fact we are doing our third grade literacy testing today and high school end-of-course exams begin today. All this testing—all the emphasis on testing— and [legislators are proposing educative measures that] I'm not just sure [should be] legislative mandates. [For example], take cursive writing. I do think all kids should know how to do cursive writing; I just don't understand why that should be a state mandated thing when our kids don't know how to keyboard and are taking state tests on computers. (Jeff)

Recognizing that testing potentially placed students in a state of undue anxiety, Lisa informed us that her strategy was to not draw so much attention to the test. This meant trying to redirect the focus of staff and parents to the good things her teachers and school leaders had been doing all throughout the year. In her words,

> I told [the elementary principal], "You know what? Maybe this year rounding into testing, we're not going to emphasize it to the parents. We are not going to emphasize it to the kids. Guys, we've been working all year. We have this test. It's just a test. I want you to do the very best." And, sometimes, the way the teachers approach it, maybe it'll take the anxiety away from the kids. If they're that nervous and upset over a test, that's not good. (Lisa)

Not all superintendents viewed testing as a negative concern in and of itself. In fact, at least one superintendent favored testing if administered in a meaningful manner. Rick shared,

> [W]e had some problems with PARCC. It was way too much testing. I get it. There's got to be some testing; there's going to be some benchmarking, some measure, something to look at; and I think some people just say, "One hundred percent local control, I don't want any accountability, I don't want any standards." I don't—that is not my mindset. I used to have to fight with my board 7 or 8 years ago on why computers were important. You know? So if you left what we're going to teach . . . and how we're going to, you know, evaluate how we're doing, strictly up just our board and our local community for everything—well intentioned, of course—we wouldn't. But there's got to be some standard. There's got to be some compliance. But I just don't think it needs to be what it is. (Rick)

Various participants viewed the constant changes in the basic testing system and standards as problematic. However, one participant—Troy—was very vocal on this issue. In his view, the overuse and misuse of testing as a means of discrediting and attacking public schooling. He put it in these words:

> The incessant testing that goes on to try to grade schools and teacher performance is all

wrapped up in that political plan to discredit public education, and really it has done so now on an international level. The politicians and those people in the private sector that want to lean towards failing schools just need to look at NAEP tests and the fact that several countries in our world have made some progress on academic measures so that the United States, in just some people's views, is falling behind in academic progress. (Troy)

Troy went on to provide this summary:

We had one year of [the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers] testing and they threw that out before we even got the results back for that. So now we have to retool for AIR tests that are going to be administered. So I've had to become a political fighter—a political advocate for our community and for public education to survive. That's really what it is—it's an attack on public education. (Troy)

Additional political concerns. The data exposed various other political matters that superintendents have to confront in their careers. Included are handling community needs including simply being visible but also dealing with local tragedy, keeping up with technology advancements, making sense of accountability measures, and losing students to homeschooling and online charter schools. Specifically, Lisa referred to the importance of connecting with the community during a time of tragedy:

Another piece of political advocacy is not just the legislative piece but also the community piece. We had a tragedy happen in our district last [weekend]. We had two band students killed on the way to get on the band bus to go to the football game to perform. Four children were in the accident, two were killed, one's in critical care at [the Medical Center]; the other one has been released. So for the last 7 days I have been non-stop every single day doing—doing interviews, talking with families, writing letters, ordering flowers. I've been at all the calling hours and the services for these kids. And so I don't know if you call that political or not but it is part of your job as a superintendent to be the face of your district and to represent the kids and families of your district in *all* aspects. And I think that's a critical piece of being a superintendent also. (Lois)

At least one superintendent mentioned technology as a concern. In Jeff's words "I think that an issue in the future is getting the technology into the districts. When you complicate that with the funding issue then it goes back, so that one goes across issues of past, present, and future."

Making sense out of accountability measures was noted particularly in regards to the state's inability to understand the local context:

Accountability, testing, you know, all that garbage the states keep throwing at us. [It] does not mean anything. I mean, I know that sounds awful, but you know if you talk to superintendents and say, "how many phone calls have you had about football and cheerleading?," I am sure they can list the numbers, but if you ask them, "how many angry phone calls have you had from the community about your "report card"?" . . . nobody does. . . For some reasons the legislators think that they know more about schooling than we do locally, and they have to hold us accountable to that. (Mark)

Similar to what Mark mentioned here, Rick added a concern for accountability efforts to remain meaningful. From his perspective,

There is always going to be some accountability system. I just think it is worse now than ever. That is the part that I do not like. People are getting used to getting these scores back and because kids have either opted out, or there are so many people who have said it is a bad idea, people just disregard it. Even now we are going to get our test scores from

last school year in January. [*laughter*] What good does that make? I am going to be half way through the school year and my whole purpose for looking at the scores is to guide instruction. (Rick)

Rick concluded by adding, "If we all could just sit down and say, 'yeah, there needs to be some accountability.' And let us sit down at the table and be a part of that discussion, so legislators are not doing it for us."

Discussion

There is little argument that superintendents inherently must be political leaders. As Hurst (2017) has stated, "The modern superintendent does not have the luxury of ignoring the politics inherent in the position. Shifting cultural norms and an increasing politicization of the educational system have forced superintendents to become active political players" (p. 3). The participants of this study defined superintendent's political agency in terms of demonstrating iconic advocacy for the students, staff, and stakeholders. They identified themselves as the *political figure*, the *political liaison*, and the *face of the district*. Accepting this political role Lisa indicated that she had to do what best for her students, staff, and stakeholders *politically*. Acting as the face of the district and advocate for the children, Jeff purported a need for *active engagement* on the part of the superintendent. Active engagement in the political activities was required to pass student-friendly legislative mandates and also to respond to already existing mandates. This unwavering advocacy for student learning and the district is supported in various literature (Hess, 1999, 2011; Björk, Browne-Ferrigno, & Kowalski, 2014; Kowalski & Brunner, 2011).

Likewise, the constant navigation of an ever-changing political climate was another major political task the superintendents highlighted in their interviews. The metaphor of *drawing a line in the sand* provided a deeper sense of political uncertainties embedded in their job. Superintendents were occupied with drawing new lines in the sand, taking on the often-unpleasant tasks, and building and rebuilding the relationships with their lawmakers and their public as well.

The study uncovered several political issues that were related to school funding, high-stakes testing, technology, community relations, and so on. While these issues seem routine or obvious at first look, as supported by existing studies (Blumberg, 1985; Carter & Cunningham, 1997; Chalker, 1999), the stories of these leaders provide a nuanced understanding of the issues. Inequitable school funding and its impact was voiced as a constant political struggle, fought seemingly on a daily basis. Due to the real estate based funding structure of many U.S. public schools, it was perceived as difficult problem not easily fixed. As well as it stood out as a highly contested political issue in rural Appalachian Ohio.

The constantly changing social structure was another area that placed political demands on the superintendents. Not all superintendents viewed testing as a negative concern in and of itself. However, they collectively believed that there must be a better way of assessing students and ensuring educational quality. The political role was not only limited to the public office, the schoolhouse, and the football field; it extended to hospitals and even to funeral homes, or to the doorsteps of a mourning family in cases of student-related tragedy.

Superintendents viewed their active role in legal, social, financial, and instructional as a necessity. In academic and all other aspects of the district's business they saw themselves as political agents or strategists (Björk, Browne-Ferrigno, & Kowalski, 2014; Brewer, 2011). They agreed that doing so is their everyday job. As such, they affirmed the political concept of school leadership that Anderson (2009) and Apple (2009) advocated and described. Moreover, data collected from the participating superintendent provided themes that we interpreted as

fundamental to the practice of the superintendent. We determined that these should be included as recommendations for preparation and practice.

Recommendations

The recommendations put forward in this section are excerpted directly from participants' responses. Recommendations are categorized into two types: 1) advice for recently hired superintendents and 2) advice for superintendent preparation programs.

Findings to inform new superintendent practitioners. Participants in this study stated that new superintendents should consider the following:

1) Reach out to your state legislators and know who they are. Reach out to your state representatives and state senator and introduce yourself to them.
2) Become a part of an advocacy group such as a regional superintendents' association. Network, get connected and get involved; ask other experienced people to be educated about how things work.
3) Make time to get out of the office in order to educate people and learn from colleagues and community members to better understand the "big picture."
4) Be visible. Be a people person, in the eyes of the staff, the students, the non-certified, and treat everyone as an equal. If it means serving Thanksgiving lunch or doing bus duty the community needs to know that you are one of them. In the words of one participant, "You need to become human to the people that entrust you with their children." As another put it, "Let people see you as interested in more than just what goes on educationally."
5) Take time to look at individual concerns and try to understand where parents and other stakeholders are coming from or what exactly it is that you need to do. In Lisa's words, "You have to take time to dig into [each issue] and look at every issue from a couple different angles because it is going to affect different people differently. From each angle."
6) Finally, be an instructional leader and always do what you believe is best for students. No matter how challenging, stressful the role or how unpopular the decision you have to make you have to be able to say, "I did what was best for kids today." (Lois)

Findings to enhance superintendent preparation programs. Based on our analysis of the data and comments from participant interviews, we provide these recommendations. According to participants, superintendent preparation programs should . . .

1) Give due consideration to meaningful and relevant course offerings and class activities. Aspiring superintendents should take courses or engage in activities in state politics, public policy, and classroom facilities that have a strong focus on school finance and funding and, relatedly, courses/activities in project management and problem solving. A course in competitive bidding processes and delivering models for construction was suggested. At least one participant proposed having "a grab bag a class of 'crazy things you have to deal with' in which visiting superintendent practitioners share stories of the weirdest situations they had to mediate. As well courses that involve legal issues, such as managing human resources, and public relations and community oriented learning experiences are important.
2) Make aspiring superintendents aware of the various professional organizations that are available to them and encourage involvement.
3) Provide aspiring superintendents opportunities to listen and learn, and get involved and advocate, in current events relating to the local and state contexts of education. This includes placing an emphasis the importance of content for whatever the circumstance.

4) Connect aspiring superintendents with local Educational Service Centers to discuss questions and issues that are in the moment for local districts.
5) Challenge students with concrete examples of ethical dilemmas and decision-making through case studies and problem-based scenarios. Have them reflect on situations in which there appears no "correct answer." One participant stated, "There are not many win-win solutions. They are usually lose or lose worse [situations]. You go with lose, instead of lose worse. [. . .] People are out there, and they don't understand the decision and are critical." This individual added, that it is crucial that aspiring superintendents understand that "you can't take it personally."
6) Be up-to-date on political issues and cultural concerns, for example transgender issues.
7) Ensure new superintendents coming through their training have to realize the depth and breadth of the politically charged role they are taking on. This includes training superintendents to expect poverty and to not always run away from poverty as an issue of schooling.
8) Concentrate on giving those new superintendents the entire breadth of what the superintendency can mean—from a small rural district to a large urban or suburban high socio-economic situation. Superintendents need to explore the greater educational context of the region and/or state in which they practice.
9) Provide as many vicarious experiences as possible, through reading, but also through field trips or virtual field trips.

Conclusion

This study adds to the literature of school superintendent preparedness for political leadership. Findings from the study contribute to the further development of strategies to help improve the preparation and education of superintendents as political intellectual agents in the democratic and equitable education of economically diverse communities. Effective advocacy of superintendents in political leadership can serve to reform and improve learning environments for all students and can have a positive influence on student success for schools in rural isolated areas. Ultimately this study attempts to better inform school administrators and preparation programs regarding the political expectations for leaders and strategies that leaders can implement to bring about meaningful change for student equity in public education. In the words of one participant, "The political landscape changes daily around here, and it is growing with a crescendo that is deafening—for those of us who have been in leadership, even for a short time, the amount of legislation that we have to deal with is unbelievable." It is the aim of this paper to better inform practitioners and preparation programs in ensuring that school leaders are ready for such a climate.

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