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Perceptions of the Role of a Charter Superintendent by Charter Board Members and Principals

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Abstract: In this article, we extend and complement previous studies on self-descriptions of superintendents' administrative work by examining the influential role of a relatively new actor in charter schools: the charter school district superintendent. In particular, we examine the influence of a charter district superintendent's leadership on organizational factors such as mission, principal decision-making and school board involvement through interviews with the principals and board members in the district to identify how a charter school district superintendent exhibits leadership within an emerging context in the public school landscape. We use a qualitative case study approach to examine one charter school district superintendent and the perceptions of charter principals and charter school board members concerning his role and responsibility as a leader in the charter district. Three major themes emerged from the data: the superintendent's role in the mission of an autonomous district; superintendent as an instructional leader; and the superintendent as a policy entrepreneur. The superintendent's mission of the charter school district to operate as an autonomous entity, paved the way for the influence of the charter superintendent to employ and articulate instructional leadership strategies in his district, and spurred the superintendent toward action as a policy entrepreneur, establishing an LEA for his charter school district. The findings demonstrate that the superintendent has a significant, dynamic effect on the organizational mission and goals of the charter school district as well as influence on building principals and board members as the leader of the district.

Keywords: *Charter schools, superintendent's role, instructional leadership, policy reform.*

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Introduction

The world of school leadership and policy implementation is complex and at the center we find district superintendents immersed in strong political forces. Traditionally, the role of the school district superintendent is multi-faceted. Superintendents are the top managers of the school district, hired by district boards, to implement district and state policy, to oversee the operations of the school district, and to serve as an instructional leader to district educators (Kowalski & Brunner, 2011; Lashey, 2002). Superintendents also play political roles, often serving as a liaison between the school district staff and the school district board, the community and the school board, and the community and the school district staff (Kowalski & Brunner, 2011). As educational reform shifts, reforms such as site-based management, parental choice coupled with reforms aimed at school curriculum, testing of teachers and students and a disenchantment with bureaucratic structures of school management have introduced significant challenges to the superintendents' authority and leadership (Grogan, 1996; Norton et al., 1996; Petersen & Short, 2001). Despite the consistency of research findings, instructional leadership remains one of the more debatable characteristics associated with the district superintendent (Lezotte, 1994; Petersen, 2002). The climate on reform and restructuring of the educational system has placed enormous pressure on schools to demonstrate effective leadership at the district level (Petersen, 2002).

The research clearly demonstrates that building principals should be instructional leaders (Gawlik, 2018; Bamberg & Andrews, 1990; Duke, 1982; Levine & Lezotte, 1990; Smith & Andrews, 1989) but there are only a few studies that have examined the role of the district superintendent on the academic achievement of students (Bredeson, 1996; Bredeson & Johansson, 1997; Hallinger & Murphy, 1986; Herman, 1990; Petersen, 1999; Petersen et al., 1987; Wirt, 1990). These studies investigate self-descriptions of superintendents' administrative work, especially in the areas of instructional leadership and curriculum. In this article, we extend and complement these studies by examining the influential role a

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charter district superintendent plays through his relationship with the charter school board and charter school principals. In particular, we examine the influence of a charter district superintendent's leadership on organizational factors such as mission, principal decision-making and school board involvement through interviews with the principals and board members in the district to identify how a charter school district superintendent exhibits leadership within an emerging context in the public school landscape. What we found was a superintendent perceived as both a strong instructional leader and an effective policy entrepreneur. Given the novel context of the charter school district, this study adds to our understanding of superintendents as instructional and political leaders in an expanding context of public K-12 administration.

The emergence of charter school districts as a system of public schooling offers an opportunity to consider what superintendent leadership looks like in a school choice setting. Typically, in charter schools, one board governs a single charter school. What we see in a charter school district is markedly different. In the charter school district we studied, there is one appointed charter school board and one superintendent for all K-12 schools. Other models of charter school districts have formed in cities such as New Orleans and Washington DC where multiple boards exist for the charter schools.

We examine a charter school district in Meadowbrook Park[†], a small southern city on the edge of one of the largest school districts in the country. Leaders in Meadowbrook Park used the charter school law in the state to convert its district schools to charter schools, place them under one governing board, establish a central office to support K-12 schools, appoint a superintendent, who then successfully applied for the district to become its own local education agency.

Instructional Leadership of Superintendents

Superintendents understand the importance and complexity of their leadership role in areas of curriculum and instruction (Blumberg & Blumberg, 1985; Carter & Cunningham, 1997; Petersen, 2002; Wirt, 1990). Research on the instructional leadership of superintendents has provided an outline of instructionally oriented skills and behaviors for district leaders (Petersen, 2002). Essentially there are five instructional-associated skills and competencies for district superintendents (Herman, 1990). They include the allocation of instructional personnel; organization of the instructional program; support of the instructional program; development of instructional personnel; and planning for the instructional program. Additionally, four major roles for district leaders have been identified by Bredeson (1996) from a study that investigated superintendents' descriptions of their involvement in curriculum-development and instructional leadership. These roles include instructional visionary; instructional collaborator; instructional supporter; and instructional delegator. Petersen (1999) also articulated four essential leadership attributes from an investigation of instructionally focused California superintendents. These include: articulation of an instructional vision; creation of an organizational structure that supports that vision; assessment and evaluation of personnel and instructional programs; and organizational adaptation. These cumulative findings articulate the need for superintendents to have a strong vision and establish high standards. They must build an organization through instructional personnel, planning and assessment that supports their instructional vision (Petersen, 2002). Moreover, there is a need for the superintendent to make decisions in conjunction with their staff:

The intersection of what needs to be done and who is going to do it varies from school to school but in every case, the superintendency is the only job title with the positional authority to orchestrate the intentional meshing of actors and script toward future improvement. The school superintendent's pivotal organizational perch has direct and proximate access to board members, building principals, and community residents, as well as direct and promote influence on vision inception, resource distribution, and operational procedures. Practicing superintendents therefore inherit at once both opportunity and responsibility and how they execute their leadership challenges may go a long way toward determining their success in their districts (Bird et. al, 2013, pp. 77-78).

Similarly, Hallinger and colleagues (Hallinger, 2017, 2003; Hallinger and Heck 1996, 2002; Hallinger and Murphy, 1985) and, Hallinger and Murphy (1985) described instructional leadership as emphasizing three dimensions: defining the school mission (framing and communicating school goals); managing the instructional program (supervising and evaluating instruction, coordinating curriculum, and monitoring student progress); and creating a positive school climate (protecting instructional time, promoting professional development, maintaining visibility, and providing incentives).

The first dimension of instructional leadership, defining the school's mission, refers to the leader's role in determining the purpose of the school (Hallinger, 2017). The leader, in theory, should work with the staff to ensure that the school has clear goals focused on the academic achievement of the students. The leader is also responsible for communicating these goals to the rest of the community. With regard to goal development, Hallinger and Murphy's (1985) model

^{† †} Meadowbrook Park is a pseudonym for the city and school system in our study.

emphasizes outcomes more than processes. The leader, along with staff members, determines goals (Hallinger, 2017). The critical outcome is for schools to have clear goals that guide their daily practices.

The second dimension of instructional leadership, managing the instructional program, incorporates three responsibilities: supervising and evaluating instruction, coordinating curriculum, and monitoring student progress. Because leaders must be deeply engaged in supervising and monitoring the teaching and learning that occurs in their schools (Hallinger, 2017), they must be both very knowledgeable about teaching and learning and dedicated to school improvement.

The last dimension of instructional leadership in Hallinger and Murphy's (1985) model, promoting a positive school learning climate, includes: protecting instructional time, promoting professional development, maintaining visibility of the principal, and providing incentives for teachers and for learning. This dimension encompasses a wider variety of tasks than the first two. Instructional leaders must engage in the development of high standards and expectations for students and teachers. In addition, these leaders must develop a culture of continuous improvement with rewards that are aligned with the school's purpose and practices (Hallinger, 2017; Hallinger and Murphy, 1985). With regard to school climate, instructional leaders seek to improve climate indirectly, assuming that a successful climate will emerge as the result of emphasizing a common focus on instruction. Finally, leaders should be directly involved in the curriculum and instructional practices of teachers and should focus on both teacher improvement and building individual capacity.

In the context of a charter school district, the superintendent is pressed to balance the demands of his/her instructional vision against those of principal autonomy. In charter schools, principals are afforded more autonomy over the instructional aspects of their school (Gawlik, 2008). The charter superintendent is beholden to teachers, parents and members of the board in focusing the technical core of the curriculum and steering instruction while maintaining the autonomy granted to charter principals (Gawlik, 2018; 2017; 2008). In order to address the organizational relationships necessary for a charter district superintendent to be viewed as an instructional leader, this study examined the relationship and perceptions between charter school principals' and school board members' views of the instructional vision of the charter district superintendent. We focus in particular, on the influence of the charter superintendent's instructional vision on organizational dimensions such as district mission, principal influence in decision-making and school board involvement.

Superintendent as policy entrepreneur

Scholars have noted the importance of the political role in helping to establish a vision for the school district community. School superintendents in their districts are knowledgeable educational and political leaders. They have the capacity to play a larger political role, advocating for effective policies beyond the local school district. Policy entrepreneurs are individuals who advocate for particular policies, often taking their ideas directly to decision makers, working to build support for the changes they would like to see (Mintrom, 2000; Kingdon, 2002). They are major actors in the policy agenda setting process. Policy entrepreneurs often see beyond the limits of traditional boundaries and work across sectors to see their ideas take shape. Henig (2013) makes note of venue shopping as a way for policy actors to make change. Examining new arenas for the right opportunity to push a policy idea can be an effective part of the policy agenda setting process (Henig, 2013; Kingdon, 2002; Clune, 1987). Superintendents as the political leaders of their district are in a good position to push for policy change.

The major research question that guided this study was what the charter school principals' and charter board members' perceptions of the charter district superintendent's as a leader in the district is. What we found was that principals and board members saw him not only as an instructional leader but also as an effective political leader.

Purpose and methods of the study

It's been established that district superintendents perceive their building principals and school board members as critical in their ability to be instructional leaders (Carter et al., 1993; Petersen, 1999; Petersen, 2002). We use a qualitative case study approach to examine one charter school district superintendent and the perceptions of charter principals and charter school board members concerning his role and responsibility as a leader in the district. A qualitative case study allows for a rich, contextual description. In order to assess the perceptions of charter principals and charter board members about the charter superintendent's instructional leadership, we conducted semi-structured interviews, which included five charter school board members, six principals and the superintendent, during a two-day site visit to Meadowbrook Park. At the time of our interviews, the district had two unfilled seats for the board and the remaining board member was unavailable for an interview. The board members who were interviewed filled the following roles of expertise on the board: business, city representative, financial, educational, and teacher representative. The interviews were conducted in the school system's central office, and each interview lasted between 45 and 120 minutes. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. We asked board members, principals and the superintendent about differences in perception, practice, and philosophy from other types of school structures, including traditional district schools and individual charter schools. We also asked interviewees about the relationship

of the charter district board members and principals to the superintendent in the district, and the influence and role the superintendent has on the charter school district as a whole.

NVivo 11 was used to code the data and organize codes. Emergent coding was used to identify themes and categories across the data related to the instructional vision of the charter superintendent. Codes were organized according to the literature including concepts related to the articulation of instructional vision, creation of an organizational structure that supports that vision, and organizational adaptation. Codes were further refined with multiple readings. Additional themes that came from the data included the superintendent as a policy entrepreneur, private and public approaches to public education, and advantages and disadvantages of the school governance structure. Transcripts were coded until all themes and categories were saturated. Documents such as the school improvement plan, organizational chart, bylaws, and state law were also analyzed.

Overview of the State's Charter School Context

The state that houses Meadowbrook Park is a leader among states that use charter schools as a reform measure (Center for Educational Reform, 2015). According to the state's department of education, charter schools are public schools that operate under a performance contract or a "charter," which frees them from many of the regulations that govern traditional public schools while still holding them accountable for academic and financial results. Although length varies, most charters are granted for five years. As in the rest of the United States, charter schools in this state are intended to improve student learning; increase learning opportunities, especially for low-performing students and with regard to reading; and measure learning outcomes (FLDOE, 2016; Center for Education Reform, 2017). Other goals of state-based charter schools may be to create innovative measurement tools, provide competition to stimulate improvement in traditional schools, expand the capacity of the public school system, and mitigate the educational impact created by the development of new residential units (Center for Education Reform, 2017).

Though the term "charter school" is often used generically to refer to all schools that have established a contractual relationship with a school district, state, college or university, all charter schools are not the same. There are basically two types of charter schools: conversion and start-up charter schools. A conversion charter is one that was a regular public or private school but opted to convert to a charter school. A start-up charter is a school that was established as a new charter school. More than 650 public charter schools in the state serve more than 150,000 students (Center for Education Reform, 2017). The majority of the state's charter schools are freestanding, managed by individual members or organizations within the community. Within the state, only 3.1 percent (18) of all charter schools are conversion charters, while 96.9 percent (558) are start-up charter schools (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2017).

Nationally, 10.6 percent (639) of all charter schools are conversion charter schools, while the majority, 89.4 percent (5,364) are start-up charter schools (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2017).

Overview of Meadowbrook Park

The K-12 charter system we investigated attempted to bridge the gap between the autonomous charter school and the coordinated district system by creating a system of K-12 schools that serves the students and families of Meadowbrook Park, a rural community at the edge of the countywide school district. The county school district is one of the largest in the United States, with an enrollment of nearly 100,000 students and more than 150 schools. The charter school system is made up of four elementary charter schools, one middle charter school, and one charter high school, serving in total approximately 2,000 students. Four of the schools, the elementary schools and the high school, converted from district schools to the charter system after their respective school communities voted to join the K-12 system. The charter school district's middle school was built as a start-up charter school. Only two schools in the community, a district elementary and a middle school, opted not to join the charter school system. The design of these schools presents a unique market picture: All but two of the schools in Meadowbrook Park are charter schools that belong to one charter system so there is little competition among schools in Meadowbrook Park.

The charter schools are independently authorized by the county school district but governed under one eight-member board. The charter school district also has a superintendent and central office staff, which support the charter school principals and provide leadership for the K-12 system. According to Meadowbrook Park's bylaws, board members are chosen by a committee of the board based on a set of criteria, including the need for expertise in education, business, law, finance, community, a representative from the city, and a parent. The board also invites a teacher representative to participate in board meetings.

The charter school board selects and appoints the superintendent. The current superintendent, the school district's second superintendent, has been serving since 2002 so he has had a long tenure in his role. The superintendent identified a need to change state policy to better serve his goals with his school district. He came to the job with a high degree of instructional leadership and policy knowledge, just out of a position of leading an experimental lab school in the state and finishing his doctoral program in administration and policy studies. The charter school district converted almost all of their schools to charter schools and became a Local Education Agency (LEA) in 2003.

Findings

The findings are organized based on the emergent coding performed by the researchers. The first theme is mission and provides insight into how the superintendent envisioned the mission of the charter school district and displayed both attributes of an instructional and political leader. The second theme is the instructional leadership of the superintendent and his vision of how to enact instructional leadership at the school sites relying on site-based management. The final theme is the superintendent as a policy entrepreneur and the role and responsibility he took on to effect laws and policies that constrained the charter school district, ultimately leading to independence as an LEA for the charter district. We also found that the three themes were interconnected. The superintendent's focus on the district mission, for example, helped establish his actions as an instructional and political leader. His instructional goals also motivated his political actions, suggesting that political leadership is also important to be an effective instructional leader.

Mission: To create an autonomous charter school district

The qualitative data analysis suggests that there exists a significant relationship between the articulated vision of the charter superintendent and the charter's ability to become academically successful. The overarching vision of Meadowbrook Park was to provide high quality schools for its community. The leaders of Meadowbrook Park saw this as fundamental to their mission and linked it to being an autonomous district. Moreover, the analysis revealed that the mission and goals of the charter district were intimately tied in the instructional mission and vision of the charter superintendent as well as the charter school board members and principals. When the superintendent saw the barriers to breaking away from the financial constraints of the former school district, he engaged as a political leader, first seeking approval from his board to attempt to change state law so the charter school district could function as its own local education agency. As the superintendent remarked:

I said in our leadership meeting, 'What we're going to have to do is we're going to have to pursue some legislative change.' And they looked at me like, 'What are you talking about? This is how it is. You can't change that.' So {the attorney} and I got together and we started talking about pursuing legislative change to become an LEA.

He deliberately sought input from the charter school board members as to what they wanted to see as the mission of the charter school district. It was important both to the superintendent, charter school board members and principals that Meadowbrook Park be an autonomous district. As charter board member Michael said:

I like this charter school system because it actually does offer more autonomy to the teachers and to the principals to reach those students and it's paying off. We're seeing it on every level. I think last year we had something like 86 percent college-bound students coming out of high school. And this year it wouldn't surprise me if we've got 90 percent or better students coming out of there and going to college.

Principal Giselle commented:

Now we have the freedom to look and to figure out what is it that we want to do, what is it we feel like is best for our kids. And we have that autonomy that we didn't have before. And I think that has been empowering as a school to be able to make those decisions.

Both the perceptions of charter school board members and principals of the superintendent's instructional mission of an autonomous charter district was widely shared and felt that it was directly linked to the academic success of their students. The principals felt empowered to make decisions that directly impacted their students. This was part of the articulation of an instructional mission for the charter school district. It required members of the school community and the charter school board to be involved in the planning and formulating of the charter district instructional goals. Being an autonomous district afforded principals and the superintendent alike to focus on decisions that were most relevant to academic success. They were free from the bureaucracy of the county district office and felt they had the freedom to pursue creative instructional strategies that best served their population of students.

Instructional Leadership of the Superintendent

In order to support the mission of the charter school district, the superintendent created an organizational structure through a central office that fulfilled the parameters of his instructional vision. Because of their small size, Meadowbrook Park district was more flexible and manageable for its leaders. The central office provided instructional leadership and financial support to its principals. The principals, superintendent and central office leaders met weekly to discuss instructional strategies, curricular options and areas of finance that principals were dealing with. The purpose of the central office was to build capacity in order to support the mission of being an autonomous district. Principal Jane gave one example of how the central office provided support:

Our finance guy goes over all of our finances and anything, if we're in the deficit or anything and they asked us questions. We'll tell them we're purchasing Chromebooks, that's why we're in the deficit here or we're purchasing

this or whatever. We have a very open relationship as far as them feeling—I think they feel like they can ask us anything and if we had an issue we feel like we don't try to hide things from them.

The central office worked with principals to support purchases of instructional materials for their students. The relationship between the central office and the principals was supportive and the superintendent sought to ensure that the needs of the principals were being met and that autonomy was maintained within the charter district.

One of the most important aspects of the superintendent as instructional leader, according to interviewees, was that the superintendent has an active and ongoing relationship with his staff, the board and the community. He is seen as a hands-on leader in the district, and as such is able to effectively bring new ideas and strategies to both the staff and the board. Board member Steve characterized the relationship this way:

But I mean we're also together on a regular basis. So, all of the principals and the administrators, the school administrators meet on a weekly basis. Board members are invited to be there. The monthly finance and audit committee meeting, are invited to be there. We meet monthly with everybody, all of the principals are there, and we were all interacting. They're telling us what's going on within their schools.....Well between the superintendent's office and the schools, I don't think there could be anymore interaction than what there is.....You won't find Superintendent James in this office very often. He's not in this office. He's somewhere out. And so there is constant interaction between him and the principals of the school in their environments.

There was constant interaction between superintendent James and his principals and he visited with students often. Based on informal observations he interacted with students asking them what they were learning and how they were doing in their classes. As principal Paula commented:

Superintendent James comes over this morning for our kindergarten graduation or he comes at least two times week, at least. And when I see superintendent James, I don't get that, wanting to pick my thumb, because I want to know. Oh, my god, what has happened? He comes over, he talks to our kids, they know him, staff know him, and he goes into rooms. He stays as long as he wants to. When I was at the traditional district—lots of the children don't even know who the superintendent was and certainly, if she came to the room, some of the teachers may not know.

The presence of the superintendent was felt throughout the charter school district, according to board members. He made regular rounds at the six charter schools and engaged with students around their academic progress. As board member Ralph put it: "Superintendent James has done a great job. They have principal meetings where they all get together and they brainstorm and share ideas with each other. ...Well between the superintendent's office and the schools, I don't think there could be anymore interaction than what there is."

It is clear that the superintendent and charter school principals work with each other and there is a healthy exchange process. The role of the superintendent is highly interactive and not static or hierarchical. The weekly leadership team meetings are evidence of that. Based on the observation of one of these meetings, it is highly engaging for the charter school principals as they share and compose instructional ideas with the superintendent and the central office staff around the academic success of their students. Instructional strategies are discussed and vetted by the leadership team members and the superintendent is engaged in listening and offering ideas to the charter principals in the promotion of curriculum and instruction. He also sees himself as a facilitator of those meetings:

So what I'm trying to facilitate is knowledge base so that that knowledge base can actually help them to implement those things that they need to implement in their school. Now, daily I'm at the schools because I'm trying to see, "Where are we with that?" as opposed to from here, command and control, I'm going out to say, "Okay. Let's see how that is going."

The superintendent noted that he aims to increase and improve the knowledge base of his charter principals and at the same time assist them in implementing instructional plans. His strategy included visiting the charter schools and observing how effective the knowledge base efforts were linked to practice.

The superintendent was able to personalize his interactions with the charter schools because of the size of the district. As charter board member Michael said:

Now Superintendent James here in Meadowbrook Park, he can develop that relationship with each and every school, each and every principal, because we are small. And I think that is what brings us to the point of having that quality education that everybody was looking for.

There was indication of expanding the charter school district to add another middle school and possibly expand the high school. Scalability was an issue for the charter district because they wanted to maintain a personal touch with the community. Expanding their charter district jeopardized the community culture they had cultivated throughout the years. The superintendent was able to maintain close contact with each of his schools because the charter district was small. As of now, the formal position of the charter superintendent within the school organization did not keep him distant from most building level decisions.

Finally, as an instructional leader, the superintendent endorsed site-based decision-making at the charter school sites. While site-based decision-making is nothing new and has been around for several years, Principal Sarah noted that the superintendent empowered the charter school principals to employ site-based decision-making as part of their repertoire for leadership. He supported their instructional decisions as well as innovative ideas around curriculum and instruction.

As Sarah pointed out:

It's very site-based decision-making. Superintendent James encourages that, expects that and we let him know. So we can say, "This is what we're thinking. This is where we're headed." But it's never a, "No, you can't do that," or, "you have to do this." Superintendent James has created and empowered the leaders at the schools to be leaders at their schools in all areas. So, that's really the difference.

The data presented clearly show that the superintendent was involved in instructional leadership at the charter school sites. Moreover, he encouraged site-based decision-making among his principals reinforcing the mission of the charter school district. The fact that the charter school district was small in size assisted him in being able to enact visionary leadership and kept his feet in schools. What this data illustrate is that the charter superintendent has influence but is also influenced by his principals and charter board members in focusing the technical core of curriculum and instruction. In addition, the autonomy of the charter school district was imperative in allowing the district to allocate funds and resources to reinforce instructional activities.

Superintendent as a policy entrepreneur

To be an effective instructional leader, Superintendent James said he also had to be a strong political player, establishing independence for the district, so that he could make decisions he felt were the most efficient and effective for the Meadowbrook Park. One of his first moves was to establish his district as a local education agency (LEA). He commented:

This is not going to work for us because the only way that we could really do the things that we need to do, you got to be able to control for those dollars." So then I said in our leadership meeting, "What we're going to have to do is we're going to have to pursue some legislative change." And they looked at me like, "What are you talking about? This is how it is. You can't change that. So Bob {attorney} and I got together and we started talking about pursuing legislative change to become an LEA. And so then I made an appointment with one of our local senators and expressed that desire to him. And so then Bob and the senator and I began having meetings talking about things like becoming an LEA. I mean I knew you could do that. They had no idea that you could pursue something so specific.

Part of the superintendent James' strategy in becoming an LEA was to direct Title I funds directly to the charter school district instead of having the county district manage it. Through lobbying efforts and a push for a policy change at the state level, superintendent James was able to reinforce the mission of the charter school district as an autonomous district, which managed and controlled federal as well as state dollars.

Superintendent James as a political leader of the charter school district was in a good position to push for policy change and he did so successfully. He was indeed a policy entrepreneur as he identified a need to change state policy to better serve his goals with his charter school district. He came to the job with a high degree of policy knowledge, just out of a position of leading an experimental lab school in the state and finishing his doctoral program in administration and policy studies. When he saw the barriers to breaking away from the financial constraints of the former school district, he first sought approval from his board to attempt to change state law so that the charter school system could function as its own local education agency. It took three years of meetings with legislators, sponsors, and legislative proposals before the superintendent was successful in securing LEA designation for the charter school district, but he was ultimately successful, saving the district thousands of dollars in service fees.

Superintendent James took on the role of policy entrepreneur, pushing for a change in policy that would allow the charter school system to break away from the financial constraints of the county school district and become its own local education agency. Superintendent James in this case was an effective venue shopper (Henig, 2010), as he searched beyond the charter school district boundary to the state legislature for an opportunity to make change in state policy. The state's charter school law and the new politics it created along with the superintendent's effectiveness in pushing policy change provided opportunities for Meadowbrook Park to develop the kind of schools it wanted for its community.

Discussion

Given the expanding landscape of K-12 school systems, greater knowledge of the leadership within the emerging context is needed to fully grasp the potential capacity of K-12 school leadership, including the potential influences of superintendents of autonomous K-12 charter school districts. This study broadens our conceptual understanding of school leadership and defines the leadership and policy activities of the charter district superintendent. (Bjork, 1993;

Henig, 2010). The purpose of this investigation was to explore the perceptions of charter principals and charter school board members regarding the leadership role of their superintendent. The conclusions of this study are limited in their generalizability because they were derived from a single case study of one charter school district. Nonetheless, the results of this investigation support previous work in this area (Hallinger & Murphy, 1986; Peterson et al., 1987; Petersen, 2003) but also suggest some new conceptual areas concerning the role of the district superintendent as a policy entrepreneur.

This qualitative analysis revealed that the mission and goals of the district and principal instructional planning were strongly related to the instructional vision of the charter superintendent. Superintendent James envisioned an autonomous charter school district where he served as an instructional collaborator and supporter. This is in line with the roles Bredeson (1996) identified for instructional leaders. In order to fulfill his vision for the charter district, Superintendent James had to engage as a political leader, meeting with legislators, drafting changes to state law, and advocating for the independence of his district. What this investigation reveals is the larger importance of the superintendent and his relationships with school personnel in leading an academically successful charter school district. A major contribution of this study is the fact that the charter principals who have been identified as key contributors to the academic success of the charter district, as well as the charter board members who direct and form policy to address reforms, perceive the significance of the articulated instructional vision of the superintendent and see him as a major player in their success.

District leaders often find themselves in a position where they must support and facilitate school-based decisions or site-based management approaches to leadership (Carter & Cunningham, 1997; Crowson, 1997). This investigation demonstrates that the charter superintendent embraced these forms of greater involvement for principals. Previous investigations suggest that district leaders in high performing districts often create and sustain a positive note through their relationship with their principals (Bredeson, 1996; Coleman & LaRocque, 1990; Hallinger & Murphy, 1986). Other studies indicate that the association of the district superintendent and the school board also has leadership and policy implications that affect the quality of a district's educational program (Odden, 1995; Nygren, 1992). The findings from this study support these lines of inquiry as the charter superintendent had strong and positive relations with his charter principals and charter school board.

This study offers an example of the power of a superintendent who is knowledgeable about the policy systems and processes that can affect his school. It poses insight into how we can rethink the superintendency as a position for policy change agents, and it offers a concrete example of the power of venue shopping (Henig, 2013) as a strategy for agenda setting and policy change. What we learned from this case study is that superintendents who are prepared with knowledge of the policy systems may be better able to advocate for their school districts. Equipping educational leaders with policy knowledge prior to taking a job also will provide superintendents with the confidence and understanding they need to be persistent in their advocacy of policy change, which is often a long, incremental process.

Implications for Research and Practice

The quality of K-12 schools is linked to its educators and the leadership of its superintendents. Superintendents must position themselves to create a culture that enables teaching and leadership through connections with school board members, building administrators and the community (Carter & Cunningham, 1997). This exploratory study is a starting point for understanding the dynamics of one charter school district and how instructional leadership was coupled with a superintendent who operated as a policy entrepreneur. It is insufficient to say that an articulation of an instructional vision by the district superintendent will translate to a district that is academically focused. Rather, the results from this study demonstrate that a superintendent's vision can have a significant, dynamic effect on the mission and goals and involvement of building administrators and school board members and can lead to an organization focused on the academic achievement of students. This study also suggests an important role for superintendents as policy actors and political leaders. The superintendent in this case study deliberately sought the policy tools available to him to create his own LEA. He operated as a policy change agent and this added role expands our understanding of the critical elements needed to influence district outcomes. Finally, our study highlights a new player in the public educational landscape: the charter district superintendent. As new organizational structures for public education continue to emerge, it is important to investigate the similarities, differences, and opportunities that exist for school leaders, particularly those charged with district leadership.

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