Leadership Practices of Urban Superintendents Who Have

Closed the Achievement Gap: A Qualitative Study

Purpose

In 2001, Congress passed the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act (Public Law 107-110). The law signaled a requirement to demonstrate accountability via large-scale standardized test results and the disaggregation of data by specific subgroups. As stipulated in the introduction to the legislation, the purpose of NCLB is "to ensure that all children will have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to receive a high quality education and reach, at a minimum, proficiency on challenging state academic achievement standards and state assessments" (No Child Left Behind, 2001, § 1001).

NCLB and other education reforms promoting high-stakes testing and accountability received wide support from politicians and public figures as a way to increase academic achievement and close the achievement gap. The achievement gap between white students and certain groups of ethnic-minority students has long been a concern of educators in America (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Howard, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Murphy, 2010; Paige, 2011; Rothstein, 2004; Singham, 2005).

The purpose of the current study was to investigate the leadership practices of superintendents in school districts where the achievement gap between African American, Hispanic, and White students is closing. Four urban school districts in four states with similar demographics (California, Florida, New York, and Texas) that have at least 50% minority populations and which were designated by their state education agencies as exemplary, or high performing, districts were targeted for study.

Theoretical Framework

For this analysis we draw on the Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL) report *School District Leadership That Works: The Effect of Superintendent Leadership on Student Achievement* (Waters & Marzano, 2006). The McREL report presented the results of a meta-analysis of 27 quantitative studies involving 2,817 school districts and 3.4 million students to determine how school district superintendents influence student achievement and identify characteristics of effective superintendents (Waters & Marzano, 2006).

Waters and Marzano (2006) identified five superintendent leadership responsibilities and 29 practices that are significantly correlated with student academic achievement. All five superintendent responsibilities that were identified were related to "setting and keeping the districts focused on teaching and learning goals" (Waters & Marzano, 2006, p. 3). The five responsibilities include (a) the goal setting process; (b) setting nonnegotiable goals for achievement and instruction; (c) school board alignment with and support of district goals; (d) monitoring goals for achievement and instruction; and (e) using resources to support the goals for achievement and instruction.

Methods

We chose a qualitative, interpretive case study design (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007) which permitted us to examine how educators interpreted and responded to accountability pressures and how those interpretations and responses related to their approaches to closing the achievement gap. This qualitative case study placed the perspectives of superintendents and other study participants (school board members and district level team members) at the center of the research (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Lincoln & Guba, 1993; Merriam, 1998). As Lincoln and Guba (1993) pointed out, case studies encompass the multiple realities and mutual shapings found in

particular contexts and are more likely to be responsive to contextual values (not merely investigator values).

Data Sources

Sample. Participants for the case study consisted of a purposive sample of superintendents, school board members, and district level team members from four large urban school districts in California, Florida, New York, and Texas that served a student population that was at least 50% minority as well as at least 50% economically disadvantaged (eligible for free or reduced price lunch). District A is the sixth largest in the state with a student population of 61,466 and 98% minority (92.98% Hispanic, 3% White, 2% Asian, 0.7% African American). District B is the largest in the state with a student population of 347,133 and 93% minority (65% Hispanic, 25% African American, 9% White, and 2% other). District C has a student population of more than 99,000 and 78% minority (68.95% Hispanic, 6% African American, 18.82% White, and 2.9% Asian). District D is the largest in the state with a student population of 1,026,979 and 84% minority (40.5% Hispanic, 27.7% African American, 16% White, and 16.6% Asian).

Data Collection. Data collection consisted of one-on-one, semi-structured, 90-minute, in-depth interviews with school superintendents, school board members, and district level team members. Interviews focused on the ways in which educators and support personnel made sense of testing and accountability pressures and the influence of those pressures on the school district and their own thoughts and/or practices for closing the achievement gap. Interviews were supplemented by official minutes of school board and district level team meetings, curriculum plans, strategic plan, press cuttings, as well as statistical student data from each state education agency. Interview data were methodically triangulated with district observations and documentary evidence (Denzin, 1970; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994).

Data Analysis. Data analysis included interview transcripts, field notes and audiotaped transcripts of district observations, research logs, interview memos, and documents such as the school district strategic plan. Strategic plans were useful in identifying participants' perceived positioning concerning accountability pressures and closing the achievement gap. We relied on Merriam's (1998) case study analysis, Strauss and Corbin's (1990) coding strategies, and Spradley's (1980) taxonomic analysis for our analyses. We utilized Merriam's two stages of analysis: the within-case analysis and the cross-case analysis. For within-case analysis, we considered the cases of the superintendents individually, focusing on their views of their roles and their approaches to closing the achievement gap. After each superintendent's case, we started a cross-case analysis in order to build a general pattern of explanation that helped to account for the four superintendents' cases. We incorporated school board and district level team members in the process. During that process, we focused on any differences or similarities in their perceptions of their roles and their approaches to closing the achievement gap.

Results

Research has shown that while some school districts identified as low performing under accountability systems have improved by holding them accountable for student performance (O'Day, 2002), many others have not (Stecher, Vernez, & Sternberg, 2010). Schools in more disadvantaged contexts have had a particularly difficult time responding to school improvement mandates (Holme & Rangel, 2012).

Furthermore, urban schools, high poverty schools, and schools serving large concentrations of students of color are significantly more likely to be identified as "failing" under NCLB and are less likely to ascend out of "needs improvement status" (Hoffer, Hedberg, Brown, Halverson, & Reid-Brossard, 2011; Strecher et al., 2010). While some superintendents

have turned around school districts, what remains unclear is why those school districts are so

rare. In other words, why are organizational structures needed for improvement more difficult to

create in disadvantaged school districts?