



"Tom"

Daniel J. Brown
University of British Columbia

Educational Issues As Seen By The Greater Superintendency

Abstract

The purpose of this paper was to determine if the educational issues during retrenchment faced by persons in key central office roles are the same or different from those which are present in more normal times. Also, the similarity between the issues and priorities of persons in the greater superintendency is explored. Questionnaires were distributed to personnel in central offices in British Columbia when the full force of retrenchment was underway and an 87% return rate resulted. Those in the superintendency had about the same personal profile as reported in the literature on superintendents elsewhere. Issues appeared to be the same as those in other places and times. But the issues did not match with priorities — issues were more political; priorities more task-oriented. Implications for more analytic research and policies on decentralization are explored.

It is axiomatic to state that retrenchment makes difficult times in education. Whether resulting from declining enrollments or a recession, retrenchment invariably means reduced resources and environmental turbulence for school districts. It follows that the outcome of retrenchment is a new set of issues for executive educators to tackle, those issues which grow out of the gap between resources needed and resources received, and those issues which arise from the context of legislative and policy changes in which districts become engulfed. The emergence of new issues would suggest a fresh look and analysis of what those issues are. New administrative skills would be required, and perhaps revisions in the substance of administrator preparation implied. Even new talent could be required for tasks which demand different understandings and different responses.

However, evidence gleaned from a decennial poll of American superintendents would indicate that the issues which face the administrators of local school systems have remained invariant across many years and differing circumstances (Cunningham & Hentges, 1982). While minor issues rise and fall, the major preoccupations of those at the apex of school districts have changed little. Concerns about funding and policies remain paramount. If constancy of issues is the case, then different strategies are implied. It is the old issues in a different form which require analysis. Skills needed are not particularly new ones, and the use of new talent may not be needed. Rather, inventive strategies and longer-term perspectives may be more appropriate. Clearly, these two views appear to be inconsistent.

Another facet of retrenchment is the idea that local administrators are diverted from their normal tasks. They are seen to preoccupy themselves with a defense of their "turf," to attempt to minimize the pain of contraction, and thus to find themselves distracted from priorities which they believe to be in the general educational interest. An alternate view would suggest that they take pride in rendering the best service possible under bad conditions and see their main priority as protecting and maintaining the institutions of education under their domain.

And just who are "they?" The superintendency has changed from the single school inspector of the past to a cluster of central office staff led by the chief executive officer today. Yet we know little about the persons who inhabit the greater superintendency. They may or may not resemble the American superintendents. It would seem important to know more about these people in view of the critical role these teams play in the formulation and execution of educational policy and administration at the local level.

The purposes of this paper are: to provide some data on persons who inhabit the superintendency and compare them to that reported in the literature; to determine if the issues facing them when under retrenchment are the same or different from those known from other settings and times; and to see if the issues which are addressed in hard times are coincident with the priorities which these persons have for the educational enterprise. The case of British Columbia will provide the Canadian perspective to help us address these implied questions.

Some Relevant Literature

Perhaps the members of the greater superintendency resemble superintendents *per se*. James (1981) believes that most central office administrators aspire to be superintendents one day. Thus, it may be useful to compare the profiles, views on issues, and priorities of those in the superintendency with the earlier findings on superintendents themselves.

The American Association of School Administrators (AASA) has commissioned a study on superintendents each decade for a number of decades. Cunningham and Hentges (1982), in the most recent version, reported on the profiles of superintendents in the United States, addressing background, education, and experience. They also considered the issues of concern to superintendents in the United States. Their findings have been incorporated when the outcomes are reported below.

In Canada, the Province of Alberta decided to have superintendents employed by local government units in 1970. As a consequence, Downey Research Associates (1976) undertook a study of superintendents per se and reported data on their education, experience, and present position. Their factual findings are compared when results are reported below.

Another study conducted in Canada and the only one on the greater superintendency which could be located, attempted to answer the "who are they?" questions addressed above. Auster and McCordic (1980) produced a report for the Ontario Ministry of Education and other agencies, including the Ontario Association of Education Administrative Officials. They focused on facets of the profile and roles of what they call "supervisory officers" in both public and separate school boards. Such persons included the "area superintendent" (who is labelled "assistant superintendent" in other jurisdictions), the "senior school business official" (sometimes called the secretary-treasurer elsewhere), and the "director of education" (almost always termed the "superintendent" in other places). While these roles and how they are carried out are the chief focus of their report, some profile data are presented which can be compared to the data gathered by this current research.

Two difficulties make such comparisons uncertain, however. One is the inclusion of business officials, a group not a part of the present paper because of their separate status and career tracks. The other is that data in Auster and McCordic (1980) are often shown without indicating the total number of persons who responded to a specific question. When this is the case, comparative percentages can only be estimated, particularly since the overall response rate was 33.9%. Moreover, they did not address the larger issues of concern or the high-level priorities of those in the superintendency. While mostly descriptive, their report is an extensive one (423 pages in all) and is recommended to those who seek a factual account of life in the superintendency in Ontario.

Research Methods

The instance of British Columbia was chosen because that province had felt the recent worldwide recession severely and the government was

faced with a sizeable revenue shortage. The decision was made to reduce expenditures in the public service. An immediate result was some severe reductions in the amount of resources available to school districts. Issues surrounding schools were highlighted in the media and many educators made a number of public statements concerning the provincial policies and their effects.

The research plan proceeded as follows: A questionnaire was drafted, based upon a search of the literature on the characteristics of superintendents and the issues and priorities of concern to them in other jurisdictions. Questions were compiled by Edgar M. Carlin, then a superintendent, and some items based on his personal expertise were incorporated. Bailey's (1982) guidelines for questionnaire use were followed. Endorsement and input were received from an advisory committee of the Association of British Columbia School Superintendents, a group whose membership includes senior district personnel with titles such as "superintendent" and "assistant superintendent." Alterations were made to include the committee's suggestions and further changes resulted in all responses having simple, numerical categories except where space was allotted to voluntary remarks concerning the issues mentioned. Wherever possible, standardized responses were requested.

The questionnaires were sent by mail to the superintendents in the 75 school districts in British Columbia. Each superintendent was asked to forward other questionnaires to the designated members of his or her superintendency in turn. A large number of questionnaires were returned within a month of mailing and superintendents were reminded by phone after this time when it became evident that no responses had been received from their districts.

While a total of 181 instruments were sent out, the rate of participation was very high, with 87% being returned. This rate compares very favourably with that of Cunningham and Hentges (1982) who report a percentage of 40 to 67 depending on their subsample, and with the 34% returns of Auster and McCordic (1980). The working sample size was 158.

Results

Professional and experience profile

The findings reported here are part of a study by Carlin and Brown (1985) which is available in unpublished form from the junior author. Persons in the greater superintendency in British Columbia are an average of 47 years old, with a range of 34-64 years. Auster and McCordic (1980) note that the modal age is between 46 and 50. Since teachers start their careers at about 22, those in the superintendency have spent their "time in the field."

Only five percent of members of the superintendency are women, a figure comparable to that in Ontario. While the reason for this disproportion in the number of males and females has not been explored, it appears that women have either not sought or been encouraged to apply for key central office positions.

English, social studies, mathematics, and science were the dominant choices as teaching majors for members of the superintendency. This pattern may be compared to a shift away from social studies and athletics coaching among superintendents in the U.S. and a shift towards English, drama, and mathematics (Cunningham & Hentges, 1982).

Persons having obtained the master's degree are also frequently occurring, evidenced by the fact that 91% attained this level of education. It would appear that the superintendency contains a well-educated set of professionals. Since the average year of graduation was 1971 and the range 1955-1983, some may not have undertaken much graduate-level work for a number of years after their teaching careers were underway.

A sizeable percentage of respondents (52%) have pursued their graduate work outside the province, more than in Ontario (estimated at 31%) or Alberta (reported at 40%). While master's degrees are often undertaken in the United States, doctorates are frequently from outside North America. Resoundingly, a master's degree in **educational administration** was reported by 71% of participants in the study. The relevance of coursework and the quasi-credential status of such a degree may be its attractive features. A modest percentage of persons (31%) have trained or practised a vocation outside education. This outcome would indicate that not all educators in the central office have had only one career.

When the responding central office personnel were former teachers, 58% marked that they practised as secondary, 39% as elementary, and 3% both in equal amounts, showing the partial dominance of secondary backgrounds. This result contrasts with that of the Ontario study, where according to Auster and McCordic (1980), 40% were secondary, 47% elementary, and 13% were both. In the United States, the pattern is more toward having those with elementary experience moving into the superintendent's role, according to Cunningham and Hentges (1982).

The average person who enters the superintendency has had 13 years of experience at the school level, somewhat longer than in Ontario. An overwhelming 85 percent of persons in the central office have held an elected position in a local teachers' association, while a relatively small percentage (23) have held such a post at the provincial level. It could be that many view the benefits of involvement in teachers' activities on a district-wide basis as instrumental in the career prospects of those now in the

superintendency. Somewhat more than half (55%) have been appointed from outside of their own districts, although this was much more true for superintendents (76%) than for other ranks (37%).

The rank of central office positions is reflective of their role labels: 42 percent are superintendents *per se* and 38 percent are assistant superintendents, with the remainder in other categories. The profile across the province for each district is one superintendent and one assistant superintendent, close to the Ontario results.

Generally, members of the higher-ranking central office staff have about the same personal profiles as do superintendents *per se* in other regions and times. They have two other striking commonalities. One is the kind of master's degree: in educational administration. It seems fair to ask how well such programs have prepared them for their central office roles. The other is the high proportion of persons who have served their local teachers' association in an elective capacity. Perhaps such offices are proving and recruiting grounds for those who aspire to senior administrative positions.

Issues in the superintendency

Persons in the superintendency in British Columbia school districts were presented with a series of problems gleaned from the literature on past studies and from a knowledge of recent events in the province. Respondents were asked to react to a total of 73 issues which were judged of potential importance. Each of these was rated on a scale from 0 to 5 with the attached labels: 0 – no concern; 1 – minor concern; 2 – some concern; 3 – moderate concern; 4 – sizeable concern; and 5 – major concern. Note that the midpoint on this scale is 2.5. The standard deviation of all respondents' scores (a measure of the spread) was calculated and may be interpreted as an indicator of *disagreement*. No missing values were encountered, which suggests that all persons answering the questionnaire were unusually conscientious in their willingness to share their views. Also, space was provided adjacent to each question which permitted written comments concerning it.

Ten issues

When the top ten issues were ranked in order of extent of concern among the personnel in the greater superintendency, the following issues emerged:

The first was provincial funding policies with a mean of 4.2 and a standard deviation (s.d.) of 1.0. The salience of this issue may be a product of the major retrenchment plans which were announced in July, 1983. It is

noteworthy that this issue received the highest level of agreement as to its importance among the leading problems. Some comments included: "policy is fairly sound; levels of support are (deleted)"; "intent is very fuzzy; don't always agree." But "financing schools" was also the major concern among superintendents *per se* in the United States, according to the survey conducted in 1982 by Cunningham and Hentges. Thus the recent legislation in British Columbia might not have been the factor that caused this outcome to be number one in rank. In fact, dollars have almost always dominated the list of concerns among district administrators.

Number two among leading issues was **present provincial legislation**, with a mean of 4.1 and a standard deviation of 1.1. This problem competed closely with the first, since it was only separated by a very small distance on the scale. It also may have been reflective of the same policy changes which were widely viewed as centralizing the locus of power to the Ministry of Education. Remarks included: "who writes that stuff?" and "has us in the tar-pits."

Third was the **provincial fiscal framework**, the name given to the method by which funds are allocated from the province to districts. This issue was given a mean concern of 3.7 with a s.d. of 1.3. The degree of concern seems almost universal. In the United States, planning/goal-setting was number two. Some comments were: "great for accountants and districts with heavy duty computers" and "needs polishing."

Next in the order of problems was **financial planning**, given an average concern of 3.6 and a disagreement score (s.d.) of 1.1. Some written notes were: "hard when the goal posts keep moving" and "every day is budget day under restraint."

The issue ranking fifth was **longterm educational planning** with a mean of 3.6 and s.d. of 1.2. Remarks were: "no evidence at the provincial level" and "how do you do this?" Note that the top five issues suggest a preoccupation with matters relating to the senior government in Victoria.

Sixth was **process necessary to dismiss an incompetent teacher** which had a mean of 3.5 and a s.d. of 1.3. This is the first problem dealing more with district management than with provincial policy. Staff and administrative evaluation ranked number five in the United States study (Cunningham & Hentges, 1982). Some comments: "some principals won't bite the bullet" and "process ok but takes too long."

Issues ranked seven to ten were also stressed quite strongly by the members of the British Columbia superintendency. Number seven was **quality of ministry support**, given a mean of 3.5 and a s.d. of 1.5. Remarks included: "Ministry what?" and "we have lost our advocate." As the issues

diminish in emphasis from first to seventh, the extent of agreement weakens since the standard deviation moves from 1.0 to 1.5. Eighth was **centralization of decision-making** at a mean of 3.5 and a s.d. of 1.4. Again, the concern seems to be with the recent policy changes. Remarks: "Ministry can't get its own act together, let alone run our show" and "we should be thinking about decentralizing."

Next was **expertise of the ministry in its advisory role**, which was given a mean level of concern of 3.4 and a s.d. of 1.4. Over the years, school district administrations have turned increasingly to lawyers and each other for advice. The importance of the Ministry of Education may have diminished also because of the local appointment of superintendents themselves. Comments were: "there is no one to advise" and "we ignore them."

Number ten made reference to **British Columbia Teachers' Federation policies** and probably reflected the teachers' strike which had occurred a few days before. The United States study rated "administrator-board relations" sixth. Cunningham and Hentges (1982) also reported that "Issues such as negotiations, strikes, and other forms of teacher militancy" were the top issues most likely to "drive superintendents out of their positions" (p.42). The average concern was 3.4 and s.d. 1.3. Remarks: "do they have any?" and "no longer child oriented – serious politics."

One general observation on the top ten issues might be made here. It is that issues directed at relations with the Ministry of Education in British Columbia are, overall, at a higher level of concern than those addressing the local delivery of educational services.

Also, it should be noted that there is some lack of congruence between the American series of studies and those from British Columbia. Cunningham and Hentges (1982) note that "assessing educational outcomes" ranked third and "accountability/credibility" ranked fourth in the United States. The absence of these issues from among the top ten may reflect the condition of retrenchment or it may come from a lesser concern about outcomes than is evident across the continent.

Observations

A small excursion into the data also produced some possibly notable results. It was possible to make some comparisons between the responses of the superintendents themselves and the other ranks. Two observations seem justified. One is that there was a substantial overall accord between the superintendents and the rest of the superintendency. The primary issues of concern were shared. And the very highest were fairly well agreed upon.

There is only one case of slight disagreement, and that is the process necessary to dismiss an incompetent teacher. Here, superintendents *ranked* it higher but *rated* it much the same concern on the scale from 0 to 5. The other observation is that in the scale ratings, almost all of the top ten issues were rated lower by the chief superintendents than they were by the others. In short, there may have been a greater level of anxiety about current and long-standing developments in British Columbia education among those in the superintendency's other roles than among those who served as chief executive officers.

Some aspects of the British Columbia context of public education may help the reader to interpret these results. When the data were collected, restraint legislation on all of the public service was in place. This included salary reductions and personnel layoffs. School board local taxing ability was frozen. Normal teacher layoff provisions were suspended; personnel could be laid off without cause; budgets were under severe central control and changed frequently. The Fiscal Framework, which works like a fairly precise cost-accounting mechanism, had been introduced, along with other financial devices which further centralized control in Victoria. A month before the data were collected, British Columbia experienced a controversial teachers' strike, and principals, as Teachers' Federation members, were forced to choose their loyalties between the Federation and their management responsibilities. It is most difficult to say how greatly the above results were influenced by those events.

Priorities of persons in the superintendency

Respondents were polled to uncover their concerns in a rather specific way on each of 73 issues, as discussed above, and in a fairly general way on a set of nine priorities. These general priorities were derived from a reading of the literature on superintendents and from a familiarity with events in British Columbia in the mid-1980s. It should be stressed that issues and priorities are different in key ways. The foregoing *issues* relate to problems confronting those in the superintendency. Further, they can be short-term in nature and change according to the latest crisis (with some exceptions such as the problem of the incompetent teacher). *Priorities*, in contrast, represent solutions to the on-going needs of the school systems. They are longer-term and address institutional requirements related to major trends in the larger society.

Each person was given 27 points, akin to \$27 million, to address the problems which were of the greatest magnitude to him or her. While some "spent" their allocation on one priority, almost no one distributed the "resources" uniformly. However, there was some evidence to indicate that not all persons understood the allocation scheme intended, so that corrections were made on a pro-rata basis when needed. For this reason,

results pertaining to priorities should be considered somewhat more tenuously than those on issues.

Priority rankings

The top priority was the **mandate**, described as action to "Review the mandate of the school system in order that there be a clarity of purpose and a priority of function for our schools." The mean for this priority was 3.72, which is not distant from that which would be produced by a uniform allocation (or chance) at 3.00. Its standard deviation (s.d.) was 2.4, which is again a measure of *disagreement* but which cannot be compared to the figures given for issues above since the scale here is from 0 to 27. It may be that concern about the mandate for public education is reflective of the level of debate about it across both Canada and the United States. Five ministers of education in the past eleven years have promised a review of the mandate for education in British Columbia. In fact, some mandates have been drafted and then laid aside. The rating for **mandate** may be a result of these intentions.

Second in the rank of priorities was **instruction**, indicated to be "The implementation of instructional strategies that lead to a mastery of knowledge for all students and a downplaying of the bell-curve." Instructional problems were given a mean of 3.65 (close to the mandate) and a s.d. of 2.4.

The next three priorities in rank were not far apart in terms of their averages of 3.55, 3.50, and 3.47. These were **finance**, **politics**, and **curriculum**, respectively. Priorities six and seven were **leadership** and **legislation**, rated at 3.21 and 3.10. A large drop in the means attached to the two remaining priorities was evident. **Traditionalism** and **participation**, at 1.78 and 1.05 respectively, are clearly low in the level of importance accorded by respondents.

It is interesting to note that members of the superintendency gave the *issue* of **centralization of decision-making** a high level of concern but considered the **participation** on the part of parents and citizens a *low priority* in their own districts.

When compared to the overall issues seen to be critical by members of the superintendency, the leading priorities showed a focus on "getting the job done" (mandate and instruction) more than on relations with the Ministry of Education (finance and politics) which are ranked third and fourth. This represents an inversion with the issues and may indicate members of the greater superintendency were not addressing the priorities they believed to be highly important.

Summary and Discussion

What is the personal profile of a member of the superintendency? This person: is a male; is age 47; has a master's degree in educational administration from outside the province; has 13 years of school-level experience; was once a secondary school teacher; has never been trained in or practiced a vocation outside education; has held an elected position for a local teachers' association; was appointed from outside the present district; and has spent 4.6 years in the present job. Generally, these characteristics correspond quite closely to those reported on superintendents and other senior educational personnel across the United States and in Ontario and Alberta.

What issues dominate in the superintendency? **Provincial funding policies and present provincial legislation** were the two leading issues rated of highest concern to members of school district central offices. When one compares the issues of most concern in British Columbia with those reported for the United States by Cunningham and Hentges (1982), there appears to be considerable agreement, especially among the top ten issues. In spite of the heated concerns of the moment, superintendents and their staffs shared similar problems with their counterparts in America. It would appear that overall, when under retrenchment the issues are not fundamentally new ones. Resources remain a high preoccupation and level of concern with legislation and policies of the government is high.

However, when asked about their priorities, those in the greater superintendency chose the need for a provincial **mandate** first, which may have indicated their wish to pursue the tasks of education. They may have perceived a discrepancy between the issues presented to them and the priorities which they would like to see addressed, since the issues were dominated by provincial policy matters while the priorities were more directed towards the delivery of educational services. Another way of saying this is that they appear to have been distracted from the need to "get on with the job."

What are some research implications for the results? A simple possibility is that persons in other roles, such as school board members, principals, teachers, students, and parents could be polled to solicit their views on the key issues facing education. Thus the scope of the study could be enlarged and the stability of issues under retrenchment could be tested for others as well. Another variation might be a more direct comparison of issues in places which have distinctively "good" and "bad" times, respectively. Such a comparison would avoid the present difficulty of having good and bad times mixed into the results currently reported in the literature. But the most informative direction would probably be a move from this rather descriptive study to a more analytic one. Particularly,

questions such as why some persons feel more concern about certain issues than others emerge as routes to explore. For instance, how do persons in the greater superintendency differ on the basis of their demographics, education, experience, and present roles with respect to their views on issues? If there are systematic variations, then it may be possible to account for them in this way, as is begun in this paper by the comparison between superintendents and those in other ranks.

Are there some policy implications? If the findings indicating that issues do not vary under retrenchment conditions are correct, then a number of possibilities and policy directions are evident. One is that the general public may have difficulty discerning between the usual level of concern about dollars and policies and the similarly-sounding concern registered by educators when under retrenchment conditions. The themes are the same.

Another implication is that preparation for retrenchment conditions need not be distinctive from education or training for "normal" times. Under both, leaders at the apex of school district administration will continue to work with financial and policy issues, and hence their preparation for those roles would logically include an exposure to the major options evident in the study of educational finance and policy. Among those options is the possible need to gain some degree of financial independence from senior governments so that when revenues from that source become severely reduced, other sources can maintain the delivery of education. Thus the search for alternative resources may be a major option for the future of education.

The outcome that priorities become different from issues under retrenchment suggests that defence of local education is a more immediate matter than the improvement of schools. Educational leaders may be distracted by the "terror of the moment." They may perceive large-scale, centralized contraction as producing local chaos. Yet it is important to consider the long-term options even under conditions of disarray. One suggestion pertaining to possible local improvement is the adoption of some degree of decentralization within districts, thus permitting all personnel to share in the decision-making. Whether under adversity or not, the involvement of school-level personnel in decisions about resources may provide one way to improve the quality of decisions so that the education of children can be maintained or enhanced.

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