



Superintendent turnover in Montana : case studies of small, rural schools
by Annette Marie Carson

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Doctor of Education in
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Abstract:

The study utilized a qualitative multiple case study approach to investigate superintendent turnover in five small, rural school districts in Montana, which showed a historically low rate of superintendent tenure over the last 21 years. All five schools historically employed a superintendent in the dual role of principal and superintendent, and were agricultural and geographically isolated. Three groups of informants were interviewed face-to-face. Informants were school board chairpersons, district clerks, and superintendents. In all, 38 interviews were held. Two key informants assisted in selection of the five school districts studied. Interviews were analyzed using content analysis in two ways: (a) idiosyncratic analysis within each case and within each group of informants, and (b) cross-case analysis using nomothetic analysis between and across perceptions of those cases and groups. Constant comparative analysis was applied to generate grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

The guiding theoretical construct used to investigate superintendent turnover in this study was a modified version of one advocated by Miskel and Cosgrove (1985).

Research questions revolved around four topics: (a) career paths of superintendents, (b) superintendent selection processes, (c) role perceptions and expectations, and (d) reasons for superintendent turnover.

Major findings from the study were tied to sociological descriptions of the rural context and its role in superintendent turnover in small rural schools. The rural context is characterized by themes of culture maintained by solidarity. Solidarity is the sharing of a common identity through use of sacred symbols. Frequent informal interactions across a variety of contexts builds solidarity. Solidarity is maintained by establishing a boundary which imposes sanctions against those who violate sacred symbols. Those who violate sacred symbols are often viewed as suspicious newcomers. Schools are seen as the primary way that rural communities transmit their legacy and culture to their children. The bureaucratic arrangement of the school in the rural community and the expectation of the superintendent as an educational expert often conflicts with the rural context. Informants' descriptions of the career aspirations and career paths of superintendents was found to conflict with their descriptions of the ideal superintendent to serve in their schools.

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APPROVAL

of a thesis submitted by

Annette Marie Carson

This thesis has been read by each member of the thesis committee and has been found to be satisfactory regarding content, English usage, format, citations, bibliographic style, and consistency, and is ready for submission to the College of Graduate Studies.

Dr. B. Keith Chambers

B. Keith Chambers 3/25/99
(Signature) (Date)

Approved for the Department of Education

Dr. Gloria Gregg

Gloria Gregg 3/26/99
(Signature) (Date)

Approved for the College of Graduate Studies

Dr. Bruce McLeod

Bruce McLeod 4-6-99
(Signature) (Date)

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ABSTRACT

The study utilized a qualitative multiple case study approach to investigate superintendent turnover in five small, rural school districts in Montana, which showed a historically low rate of superintendent tenure over the last 21 years. All five schools historically employed a superintendent in the dual role of principal and superintendent, and were agricultural and geographically isolated. Three groups of informants were interviewed face-to-face. Informants were school board chairpersons, district clerks, and superintendents. In all, 38 interviews were held. Two key informants assisted in selection of the five school districts studied. Interviews were analyzed using content analysis in two ways: (a) idiosyncratic analysis within each case and within each group of informants, and (b) cross-case analysis using nomothetic analysis between and across perceptions of those cases and groups. Constant comparative analysis was applied to generate grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

The guiding theoretical construct used to investigate superintendent turnover in this study was a modified version of one advocated by Miskel and Cosgrove (1985). Research questions revolved around four topics: (a) career paths of superintendents, (b) superintendent selection processes, (c) role perceptions and expectations, and (d) reasons for superintendent turnover.

Major findings from the study were tied to sociological descriptions of the rural context and its role in superintendent turnover in small rural schools. The rural context is characterized by themes of culture maintained by solidarity. Solidarity is the sharing of a common identity through use of sacred symbols. Frequent informal interactions across a variety of contexts builds solidarity. Solidarity is maintained by establishing a boundary which imposes sanctions against those who violate sacred symbols. Those who violate sacred symbols are often viewed as suspicious newcomers. Schools are seen as the primary way that rural communities transmit their legacy and culture to their children. The bureaucratic arrangement of the school in the rural community and the expectation of the superintendent as an educational expert often conflicts with the rural context. Informants' descriptions of the career aspirations and career paths of superintendents was found to conflict with their descriptions of the ideal superintendent to serve in their schools.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The public school superintendent has been the focus of many studies. Superintendent career paths, mobility patterns, ability to cope with stresses of the job, role perceptions, competency areas, selection processes and reasons for turnover have all been investigated. The broader relationship between the superintendency and its societal context has received somewhat less attention. This study focuses on the small school superintendent in rural communities which have histories of excessive superintendent turnover, investigated by means of a qualitative case study approach.

Montana has 473 school districts, with 72% considered rural according to the National Center for Educational Statistics. In a pilot study (Carson, 1998) conducted in preparation for this research it was found that from 1977/78 to 1997/98, the annual average turnover rate was 20%. For small, rural school communities with a school district population under 1,000, the annual average turnover rate was 27% from 1977/78 to 1997/98. During this time the state-wide average length of

time a superintendent spent in one district was 5.1 years. For small, rural school districts the time spent in one district was four years. While there is a great deal of anecdotal folk wisdom among professional educators regarding the apparent volatility of the superintendency in smaller districts, systematic study of the phenomenon has been lacking.

Questions and rumors persist among professional circles regarding an alleged cadre of superintendents who consistently move from one small, rural district to another, and why these districts continue to hire these roaming superintendents. Questions are also asked about why several small, rural school districts are "volatile" for anyone in the role of superintendent, since no single superintendent seems to stay in those particular districts for any length of time. This study questioned whether existing theories are adequate to explain the complex phenomenon of superintendent turnover in the context of a small, rural school district.

The School Board

One aspect of schools that has changed very little over time is the local nature of control over schools. Local communities in the United States historically have maintained control of schools through their local school boards. Before the 1900s the school board's responsibilities were primarily those of policy and decision making. During the 1800s school boards were also known as school committees. In most of the large cities

these committees were made up of members elected from city wards. Since there were many wards, there were many members on the school board. The primary aim of each member was to look out for the ward which he or she was elected to represent. This was a form of grassroots politics that made the position extremely political, and which critics of ward politics said tended to lead to corruption. Through their political representatives, wards vied for sites of school construction, and in antebellum times wards advocated applied political pressure to ensure that veterans from their wards be appointed as teachers. Wards competed to secure financial gains by ensuring that merchants from their ward be appointed to outfit schools with supplies. These ambitions often superseded the central task of ensuring quality classrooms for their children according to critics like Cubberley (1927).

Small schools had similar problems. Small rural schools were believed to be inefficient. Vocal city superintendents and professors in university research institutions advocated consolidating these schools in order to make them more cost efficient while improving educational standards. After consolidation, students would be exposed to a broader curriculum, better facilities, and would be taught by more qualified teachers.

A wide disparity existed in the quality of small rural schools. For example, in one particular school district there could be dozens of small schools each struggling with their individual governmental and curriculum problems. Standardized administrative procedures and centralized decision-making was viewed as a means for resolving the chaos.

Seeing various problems with traditional administrative mechanisms, Cubberley, an advocate of the efficiency movement, had a vision for the future school that was quite different. His plan was not a district plan of administration but rather a county-wide plan. He believed his plan would solve the problems of the small rural school by consolidating them into one that was centrally administered. This county plan would also eliminate problems with the local school board largely by by-passing local politics altogether. About the only "rights" these people would give up would have been, "the right to elect a horde of unnecessary school trustees, and often in addition to mismanage the education of their own children" (p. 233). Such was Cubberley's sympathy for democratic localism.

Despite educational visionaries who argued for changes in school governance, strong vestiges of local district governance remains today. Such a form of governance is not without certain inherent problems, however. Perhaps no one has been more affected by these problems than

the school superintendent. Until the social dynamics in these school districts have been thoroughly analyzed and mapped it will remain a mystery why school superintendents come and go as they do. The study must be able to take into account not only the professional duties of the superintendent but the more subtle social, cultural, political, and historical dimensions of the communities these individuals are supposed to serve, and nowhere is this broader, naturalistic perspective more necessary than in small districts where, to an extent not often appreciated, the school is the very heart of the community. Superintendents who expect to treat the position of superintendent merely as a job may often discover that their failure to connect with the community itself is their greatest point of vulnerability. While this assertion has often been made, it has not to date been systematically studied.

The District Superintendent

The role of the superintendent has evolved into something entirely different from what it was initially (Callahan, 1962). Originally the role of the superintendent was close to that of a schoolmaster, a supervisor of teachers and students, with the board of education making all the major decisions. The growth of the superintendency has been linked to the evolution of the school board. Early superintendents were vocal defend-

ers of the common school movement, and approached their mission with a kind of messianic zeal.

The first designated superintendent of schools was an educational advocate named Gideon Hawley. Hawley's position as a state superintendent was the forerunner of the position of city superintendent. He was appointed in 1812 as a state officer of New York "to look after the establishment and maintenance of all the schools throughout the State" (Cubberley, p. 158). His appointment was short-lived due to the fact that he "gave such offense to the politicians of the time". He was removed from office and in 1821 the position was eliminated. Nonetheless, in 1854 New York again established the office of Superintendent of Public Instruction and by 1867 Vermont, Louisiana, Pennsylvania, Tennessee and Illinois had also established the state office. The kind of volatility Hawley experienced in his position seems to have been a hallmark of the superintendency at many levels ever since.

A lack of consistency in schools was a fact that Horace Mann (1796-1859) uncovered in his investigation of Massachusetts' schools during the mid 1800's. His findings contributed to a broadening of the superintendent's functions to include, among other things, requiring some form of a teacher's certificate, ensuring that school subjects re-

quired by law were taught in the schools, and ensuring that schools were opened at least for the amount of time required by the law.

Cubberley (1927) states that by 1861 thirty-four states had also created an office for a county superintendent of schools. Additionally, twenty-five cities had created a city superintendent of schools by 1861. These positions were at one time filled by election, and some still are today. Superintendents of schools' main responsibilities were collection of statistics and exhorting the people to maintain and support schools. Early school superintendents also had the responsibility of attempting to institute some semblance of standards in the schools.

This role, for which laypersons were once elected, evolved into one that could only be filled by a person having professional training and knowledge. Of particular significance in the early 1900's were the effects that the emerging "scientific management" principles had on the superintendency. Highly centralized, bureaucratic and hierarchical school organizations were formed to transform schools along the lines of the industrial model. Scientific management promised highly efficient organizations with increased "production" levels. Superintendents took over many of the decisions that school boards had made. The industrial model of management remains prominent in the governance of schools, even today.

The status of the superintendency changed after World War II. Callahan (1962) explains that the major events that jolted the educational leaders in the 1950s included the threat of communism, the launch of *Sputnik*, the Supreme Court ruling that separate schools for blacks and whites were inherently unequal, and lastly, the large yield of children from the baby boom and the demand for increased funding for schools. With the increased emphasis on bureaucratic and industrial management models of governance, and the increasing financial commitment communities made to their schools, the superintendent's role changed from that of an educational expert who operated independently of the political turmoil around him to a role that is inextricably political in nature.

Throughout the years that followed, the superintendent had to deal with increasingly vocal demands from various societal groups. Democratic processes that began with the Civil Rights movements of the 1960's have created a society in which all constituents understand their right to be heard. The superintendent faces more and more pressure from groups demanding representation and desire for control over the public schools. In time these groups have garnered political clout necessary to elect their own representatives to the school board. This happens in the politics of large schools systems, but it also happens in small dis-

tricts where the constituent groups may not be as clearly delineated from the view of the casual observer.

Superintendent Tenure

In his book, Call School: Rural Education in the Midwest to 1918, Paul Theobald (1995) examines characteristics of the rural school. The underlying assumption about the ideal rural teacher, in the view of the typical board of education in the early 20th century, was an individual who "kept excellent discipline, made do with whatever books or equipment were on hand, maintained a secluded personal life in the community, and moved on to a different school when the term was over" (p. 100). Of course, the rural teacher in those days was the sole professional responsible for the small rural school.

As this study will show, there is an analogous perception today, not only by rural school boards, but also by superintendents who serve them. Superintendents are often viewed as transient figures. According to Carlson (1972), superintendents are caught in a dilemma concerning a long tenure in the position. They realize a superintendent cannot always act in a manner that assures re-election year after year, and at the same time maintain a quality standard of education in their district.

A story written in 1916 and published in the American School Board Journal (Anonymous, 1916) captures quite nicely the conditions of the superintendency. The cover of the issue was appropriately titled, "The Sword of Damocles in the Schoolroom", and was illustrated by a picture of a teacher with a sword hanging above her head. The sword was embellished with "Dismissal or Re-election?" The author of an article included in this issue called himself, A Veteran Fighter in the Field of American Education and titled the article "Why Superintendents Lose Their Jobs". In the article the Veteran Fighter described the informal conversations between superintendents that took place at a national school superintendent convention in Detroit. The author explained that the one topic of interest to all superintendents, raised informally quite often but never addressed in the formal meetings, was the crucial problem of the superintendent's tenure of office. The author pointed out several times that, "*nothing, absolutely nothing*, was of more vital consuming interest to the average superintendent of schools than the tremendously important question of whether he will be retained in his present position for the coming year" (p. 18). The story continues with the author describing a conversation held among four of the superintendents who spoke with sincerity concerning their tenure in office.

Said one, "Are you going to remain in _____ next year?"

"No, I'm not," replied the one addressed. "The floral tributes are now being prepared."

. . .The third man volunteered the information that at the last election of his board of education, the balance of power which had for the past several years enabled him to retain an eyelid hold on his position, had been disturbed. The odd man was now against him. The petitions for his retention were being circulated, but the obituaries were even then under way.

. . .The fourth man drew from an inside pocket a small morocco bound note book. "Gentlemen," he said, "your conversation is full of information. I have in this little book the reasons, compiled at some expense of trouble and correspondence, for the enforced resignation of school superintendents in my state for the past ten years. While sympathizing with your several misfortunes, I have the strong interest of a professional collector in your experiences. With your permission I shall record the details of your official executions in my directory of the professional defunct."

Nothing ever assailed me with such violent tenacity as my curiosity to see the contents of that morocco-bound book. The thought immediately entered my mind that here was an object of educational interest. . .I knew this man possessed information of consuming interest to the thronging thousands in attendance at the convention. (p. 18)

A comparable interest can be found today among superintendents.

This study focuses on the superintendent in the small rural school in Montana and the reasons behind high superintendent turnover.

Jurisdiction of the Study

The aims of this study are to investigate conditions and reveal patterns surrounding superintendent turnover in selected small, rural K-12 school districts in Montana. Five small rural school districts with ex-

cessive superintendent turnover were selected for study from among the pool of districts that have shown a historical pattern of volatility for superintendents.

Significance of the Study

A 1992 study of the American superintendency showed that most superintendents spend 15 years as superintendents in no more than three districts, with three-fourths of the superintendents having served in their current position for at least five to six years (Glass, 1992). This national study, conducted every ten years by the American Association of School Administrators, found in 1990-91 the average tenure of a superintendent to be six years. Broken down by enrollment of districts, the study found that the average tenure was 5 years in districts with 300 or fewer students, 7 years in districts with between 300 to 3,000 students and 6.6 years in school districts with between 3,000 and 25,000 students. The 1982 ten year study found the average length of superintendent tenure to be 5.6 years. In the 1971 ten year study the average tenure was six years. At the national level, Feistritz (1988) found the average tenure of a district superintendent to be 6.7 years.

Studies of superintendent turnover in Montana are less reliable. Mattocks (1987) found that the average length of tenure for a superin-

tendent in Montana to be 2.0 years. From reading the study, it is unclear how this statistic was figured. Erdie (1987) compiled a ten year database of superintendents who served in all Montana school districts. However, no state-wide average tenure was calculated in his study.

According to the Montana School Board Association and the School Administrators of Montana (B. Anderson, personal communication, June 1997), on average, one fourth of all school superintendents in Montana leave their jobs each year, with generally over one half of those being superintendents of small schools who also serve as either a high school or elementary school principal. The Directory of Montana Schools (1996-97) listed 198 school districts that employed a superintendent. Of those districts, 38% of them have historically employed a superintendent in the dual role of both superintendent and either high school or elementary school principal (Carson, 1998). Montana has 473 school districts that are classified as either elementary, high school or as combined elementary and high school districts. Seventy-two percent of all the school districts in Montana are considered rural according to the National Center for Educational Statistics.

In a pilot study conducted in preparation for this research (Carson, 1998), it was found that from 1977/78 to 1997/98, on average the annual turnover rate was 20% for Montana superintendents (Appendix A).

For small, rural school districts with a district population under 1,000, on average 27% of the superintendents left their jobs annually from 1977/78 to 1997/98. During this time the state-wide average length of time a superintendent spent in one district was 5.1 years. For small, rural school districts the time spent in one district was four years. Montana has 75 small, rural school districts. These districts have historically had a superintendent who served in a dual role as both superintendent and either high school or elementary school principal. These districts are also those that historically have had high school enrollments under 100 and were both a high school and elementary school district. In these small rural K-12 districts from 1977 to 1997, 60% of the superintendents stayed for less than four years.

Rural schools are plagued by various problems that can make the role of the superintendent a precarious one. Lack of financial resources, increased state and federal mandates, and heightened parental and community expectations contribute to superintendent instability (Chance & Capps, 1992). A heightened sense of political turmoil, and frequent board turnovers are commonly associated with these problems. Grady (1992) points to critical incidents between the school board and the superintendents as catalysts for turnover.

Superintendent turnover effects are detrimental to the health of a school, especially in the small school where the responsibilities of the superintendent are broadened (Grady & Bryant, 1990). The superintendent of a small school typically wears many hats and is involved in almost every aspect of the school to some degree. The school occupies a central role in most rural communities, which means the school superintendent is in a highly visible role (Schmuck & Schmuck, 1989). Administrator turnover affects school climate, growth, continuity of programs, and the extent of community satisfaction in their schools. Frequent superintendent turnover in small districts creates barriers to the development of trust on the part of the staff. This trust is necessary for successful school renewal efforts. When rapid turnover is endemic, school staff, especially long-time staff, tend to take a pessimistic attitude toward change (Miller & Hull, 1991). What is needed, the authors assert, is a consistent and stable community-supported leadership in rural schools, that grows from an understanding of the history of the school and the community. The superintendent plays a potentially key role in the climate and culture of the school by the example he or she sets. Ultimately it is the children who suffer when there is a lack of educational leadership in their schools, which may also contribute to a decay of community spirit (Grady, 1992).

Wirt (1989) asserts that superintendents of today are caught between old role definitions and new demands, causing them to act in a political fashion, and that this has resulted in a greater rate of superintendent turnover. Research has not provided a fully elaborated picture of the superintendent as a political figure. Sergiovanni, Burlingame, Coombs, & Thurston (1987) advocate for "a sensitive portrayal of the various cultural contexts that influence and are influenced by superintendents". The metaphor used to describe the role of the superintendent in their book, is that of a baseball manager: Superintendents win some and lose some. Sergiovanni, et al. (1987) claim "descriptive studies are lacking that would provide some sense of how superintendents deal with wins or losses" (p. 281). This is one of the reasons this researcher chose to pursue ethnographic study based on case studies.

Miskel and Cosgrove (1985) believe that a basic framework is needed to guide research in the area of superintendent turnover which would focus on pre-arrival and arrival conditions, as well as on the effects of turnover on the school district. Pre-arrival factors would include (a) reasons for turnover, (b) selection process, (c) reputation of the new leader, and (d) orientation of the new leader. Arrival factors to investigate would be (a) demography of the organization, (b) organizational structure, (c) school culture, (d) educational programs, and (e) successor actions.

Turnover effects would include changes in the pre-arrival and arrival conditions that could be attributed to superintendent turnover. This structure of inquiry has been used in this study.

This study was designed to contribute to the current knowledge about the superintendency in small schools, in particular by adding to what is known about superintendent/board/community relationships, competency areas and role perceptions, superintendent career and mobility patterns, and reasons for superintendent turnover.

This study was designed to contribute to a better understanding of the relationship between communities, school boards and superintendents, and help to promote an understanding of what is needed for effective board/superintendent relationships (Loashing, 1988). Such research should help to guide school boards, aspiring superintendents, current superintendents, professional superintendent search consultants, and preparatory programs in school administration to better understand the differences between large and small districts, which may impact superintendent and board turnover (Loomis, 1995). Additionally, Loomis said that future research should focus on the role of the board chair in superintendent turnover, and the difference in superintendent turnover between superintendents who also serve as principals and those who do not. Superintendents who have served in a dual role of

both superintendent and principal are one of the groups that will be studied, along with school board chairpersons and district clerks in five selected school districts.

Preparatory programs, aspiring superintendents, current superintendents, school boards, and professional superintendent search consultants would also benefit from research in the area of the ever-changing nature of roles and responsibilities of the superintendent, according to Seybert (1993). His research found that school board members and superintendents have significantly different perceptions toward factors related to success and dismissal of superintendents in Montana. According to Seybert, further research is needed to find out why superintendents in Montana think they are doing a good job in those competency areas important to them, while they are not focusing on competencies their boards of education think most worthy of superintendent attention.

Blankenship (1995) recommended further research be done on superintendent selection after studying the processes and success ratios in Wyoming schools. A better understanding of selection processes and conditions present in small school districts could impact practice. The relationship between success ratios and the type of selection process

used in these small school districts could contribute to the present knowledge base.

Understanding current career patterns of school superintendent mobility in small rural schools, and why such patterns exist, would be valuable to preparation programs for school administrators as well as those aspiring to the superintendency. These programs would benefit from research that explained the complex interaction of various factors, such as lateral and geographic mobility, and the manner in which they influence career patterns (Miklos, 1988). Erdie (1987) recommended additional research is needed on superintendents of either small, medium, or large school districts in Montana. According to Erdie, such a study should be done to determine the effects that lateral mobility of superintendents has on education in Montana.

Importantly, this study focuses on the small school superintendency. Miskel and Cosgrove (1985) state that qualitative case studies in a number of diverse settings have provided excellent insights about the turnover process and organizational leadership. While their reasons seem compelling, no qualitative multiple case studies were found to be done that focused on the superintendency of small rural school districts in Montana which have a history of excessive superintendent turnover. This study seeks to fill that gap. Many of the key ideas and recommen-

dations found in the studies just cited have been brought together into a single, comprehensive research design in order to elicit a clearer picture of life in small schools and the conditions that lead to superintendent turnover.

Definition of Terms

1. Board of Trustees (or School Board): A legally constituted governing body of the local school district in each Montana school district, consisting of three members in the smallest districts to a minimum of seven members in the larger school districts. Small rural school district boards generally consist of five board members. The term *school board* will be used in this study instead of *board of trustees*.

2. District Classification of I, II, III: Montana school districts are classified as I, II, or III according to the population based on census information. This is done every ten years with the most recent being 1990. According to Montana Code Annotated (20-6-201), districts are classified in the following manner: (a) first class, if it has a population of 6,500 or more; (b) second class, if it has a population of 1,000 or more but less than 6,500; or (c) third class, if it has a population of less than 1,000. This classification is used by county superintendents in determining how many school board seats each school district must have.

