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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

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### Superintendents' Attitudes toward Public Education in North Carolina

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This study examined the perceptions of North Carolina's school superintendents related to current educational issues. A total of 67 superintendents (64% return rate) responded to an online survey about national and state educational concerns. In general, the superintendents do not believe that some of the recent statutes, policies, and educational initiatives will serve to improve schools or student learning. They indicated that the most significant priorities that need to be addressed were teacher morale, inadequate funding, and teacher pay; and, that the primary purpose of teacher evaluation should be to help teachers improve their ability to teach and that it should be based on student performance. Almost all superintendents did not want to use armed security guards or arm teachers and/or principals to ensure safe schools. They believe that the increase in charter schools and tuition support for students to attend private schools will hurt school systems, but online courses for earning high school credit were supported. Most superintendents reported that high-states testing has had mixed results on improving education; and, they did not believe that the cost of testing was worth the money spent. All superintendents wanted more local control of the school calendar. They also reported that the Common Core State Standards would improve education in North Carolina.

*Keywords:* School superintendents, educational policies

For those school superintendents who lead public schools today, the milieu in which they carry out their role is often described as turbulent, stressful, and rewarding (Boyland, 2013; Byrd, Drews, & Johnson, 2006; Glass & Franceschini, 2007; Jurkovich, 1974; Kowalski, McCord, Peterson, Young, & Ellerson, 2010). Leading large and small organizations that exist in rapidly changing and dynamic conditions make planning difficult and the leader's job increasingly more complex. Arguably, a public school superintendent's job is more challenging today than it has been since the position was established in public education. Particularly, during the last thirty years, initiatives to improve PK-12 education have been taken at both the federal and state levels. While these efforts have been ongoing during the last three decades, they accelerated after Congress passed the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act in 2001. Since NCLB focused attention on failing schools and carried sanctions and penalties for them, it forced educational policy makers at all levels to give priority to improving public education.

In addition to federal and state mandates, school superintendents face other challenges. In post Great Recession 2011 there were 220,000 fewer teachers in America's classrooms than in 2009. This decline in the number of teachers increased the student-teacher ratio by 6% (Greenstone & Looney, 2012). Other issues superintendents have faced include, but are not limited to, dealing with changing student demographics, growth in numbers of charter schools, school voucher programs, post-recession funding cuts, implementation of the common core state standards, pressure to improve graduation rates and college and career readiness of disadvantaged students, high dropout rates and teacher turnover, and closing achievement gaps between minority students and their non-minority peers to name a few; and, the list grows longer and longer with each new school year.

National surveys provide some insight into superintendents' perception of important educational issues. In a survey of 2,586 K-12 school districts, superintendents were asked about governance at the board level, school safety and bullying, student outcomes, and K-12 collaboration with higher education institutions (Kappan, 2013). Most superintendents were not confident that school districts are well governed at the board level. School safety was a primary concern for almost all the superintendents. Very few of the superintendents believe that value-added models of student achievement to measure teacher's performance are effective. Most superintendents report that the school districts are the leaders in designing educational opportunities that prepare students for college.

For almost four decades, Phi Delta Kappa (PDK) International and the Gallup Organization have surveyed Americans about their attitudes toward the public schools. In 2013, PDK/Gallup poll examined Americans' views on teacher evaluation, charter schools, school safety, Common Core Standards, standardized tests, and other current educational issues (Phi Delta Kappa, 2014). Poll results provide important insight into the opinions of Americans about public education. Results suggest that charter schools are viewed by most Americans as providing a better education than traditional public schools. Most Americans reported that students were safe at school and did not want teachers or principals to have guns on school property. Most Americans do not know about the Common Core Standards and if they are aware, they do not understand the standards. Results indicate that Americans believe that standardized testing has significantly increased and has had no impact on improving schools. And finally, Americans believe that students' standardized scores should not be used to evaluate teachers.

School superintendents in North Carolina (NC) are facing many of the same challenges as their peers in other states. Changes made in the NC 2013 Legislative Session have significantly impacted teacher pay and have laid the ground work for the elimination of tenure by 2018. The cap limiting the number of charter schools was eliminated, and with the action approved by the NC State Board of Education in January 2014, the state now has 153 approved charter schools.

Adding to the challenges in NC is the "boom or bust" in student enrollment that some school districts are facing. Some districts are experiencing sharp declines in student enrollment, while others are facing the challenges of overcrowded classrooms, schools resulting from steep increases in student population.

A legislative requirement to issue letter grades for each public school in NC has raised concerns about accountability and the use of new tests that would be rolled into a grade as a single score to describe student achievement and student academic growth. At best, statewide testing is an indicator of economic status and further rewards the schools who have demographics that have parents who can provide strong support systems for their children.

The penalties for failing NC schools, defined as schools where the majority of students are performing below grade level or failed to meet the minimum growth standards specified by the State Board of Education, range up to the dismissal or removal of personnel, including teachers, principals, and the superintendent (North Carolina General Statute 115C-105.39)<sup>1</sup>. If the superintendent is removed, an interim superintendent is appointed. This shows that superintendents' feet are held closely to the fire in terms of accountability for student achievement, along with other school personnel. School superintendents in NC, like their counterparts across the nation, are facing the dichotomy of school districts that are straining with the challenges of growing student populations, or the opposite issues of having to deal with declining enrollments and the need to consolidate or close schools.

## RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY

Since limited research could be found about NC superintendents' opinions and perceptions about the changing educational environment, the researchers concluded that it would be prudent and informative to conduct a study surveying all superintendents across the state. We reasoned that the study results would be valuable for several reasons. First, we believe it is important for superintendents in the state to see how they collectively perceive current state educational initiatives, challenges, and state laws affecting public education. Second, we believe periodic reports of perspectives of key educational leaders can inform the work of the academic community, policy analysts, and policy makers. Third, we believe knowledge about how key educational leaders view the "state of education" will be useful to legislators and state education policy makers in making, revising and evaluating education statutes and policies. Lastly, we believe the findings will be useful to university faculty members interested in identifying field-based focus areas to be emphasized in the curriculum for students preparing to become superintendents.

## METHOD

The purpose of this study was to document and review the perceptions of superintendents related to current educational issues facing schools in NC. A descriptive study, using (Gallup, 2013a,b) survey research methods, was used to document NC superintendents' perceptions.

### Participants

This study's target population consisted of public school superintendents from NC who responded to a web-based survey. Superintendents were identified using information from the NC Department of Public Instruction website. The survey link was sent to 115 public school superintendents, with 17 reported as not deliverable. After searching school systems websites, six correct email addresses were found, which resulted in 104 superintendents contacted.

Superintendents in 67 of the 104 (64%) local education agencies (LEAs) in 8 regions of North Carolina participated in the survey (see Table 1). There was not a statistically significant

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<sup>1</sup> N.C. Gen. Stat. 115C-105.39

difference between the percentage of respondents in the regions and the percentage of districts in the region. Of the five large school districts (i.e., greater than 50,000 students enrolled), three superintendents participated. The respondents' average reported student enrollment for the 2013-14 school year was 12,358 ( $SD = 25,336$ ,  $Range = 600$  to 152,000), while statewide the average daily membership was 12,411 ranging from 500 to 149,127. The average reported percent eligible for free or reduced-price lunch by respondents was 60% ( $SD = 13$ ,  $Range = 28\%$  to 91%), while statewide the average free or reduced-price lunch was 56%, ranging from 27% to 91%. The sample characteristics are similar to the statewide characteristics and suggest that results are representative of North Carolina superintendents.

TABLE 1  
Distribution of Responses across Regions of the State

Region	Survey Sample		Statewide	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Northeast	13	19.4	15	13.0
Southeast	10	14.9	14	12.2
North Central	4	6.0	14	12.2
Sandhills/South Central	5	7.5	12	10.4
Piedmont-Triad/Central	7	10.4	15	13.0
Southwest	8	11.9	9	7.8
Northwest	11	16.4	19	16.5
Western	9	13.4	17	14.8
Total	67	100.0	115	100.0

*Note.* Accept ( $p > .05$ ) null hypothesis that regions occur with equal probability.

## Procedure

After obtaining approval from the IRB, all eligible superintendents were emailed a letter of invitation to participate in the study. In addition, nine directors of the NC Regional Education Service Alliances were called to inform them of the survey and asked to inform and encourage superintendents to participate. Participants were provided a link that directed them to a place to provide their informed consent, and if they agreed to participate, they were then directed to the survey. There was no identifying information collected in the survey. The survey was available from three weeks, February 24, 2014 to March 17, 2014.

The survey used in this study was developed specifically for NC Superintendents. There was a total of 20 items that required superintendents approximately 5 minutes to complete. Items were developed by the authors based on similar work completed by education subgroups associated with Phi Delta Kappa International, Gallup, and Education Week organizations (Gallup, 2013a,b; Phi Delta Kappa, 2014) and current legislation and policies being adopted by the North Carolina State Board of Education and Department of Public Instruction. After items were developed, the research team eliminated items to shorten the length and hopefully increase the response rate. After settling on 20 items, the survey was reviewed by two ex-superintendents and one legal expert. Minor changes were made to the items for clarification purposes only. All items were evaluated using a Likert-type scale that varied by item (see results section for variations).

## RESULTS

Results are delimited in the following sections using descriptive statistics.

### Most Significant Problems

Superintendents were asked to rank what they believe are the *most significant problems* facing NC school districts for the coming year. Table 2 displays the percentage of responses for each rating, and the results are ranked from the highest to lowest percentage of “high” and “very high” rating. Over 90% of the respondents report that teacher morale, inadequate funding, and teacher pay were either the high/very high priorities for their district. The next highest priorities were unfunded state mandates (88%), school safety (77%), teacher recruitment (75%), and lack of autonomy (71%). Approximately 50% or fewer respondents rated testing regulations (54%), teacher pay-for-performance (41%), or class size (41%) as high/very high priorities.

TABLE 2  
Superintendents Rating of Most Significant Problems NC School Districts

Area	Priority				
	Very Low %	Low %	Moderate %	High %	Very High %
Teacher Morale	0	0	1	30	69
Inadequate Funding	0	0	2	19	79
Teacher Pay	0	0	5	25	70
Unfunded State Mandates	0	0	12	31	57
School Safety	2	3	18	39	38
Teacher Recruitment	0	5	20	42	33
Lack of Autonomy	1	1	26	39	32
Testing Regulations	2	11	33	35	19
Teacher Pay-for-Performance	18	15	25	16	25
Class Size	3	10	45	25	16

*Note.* Based on 67 superintendents.

### Teacher Evaluations, Pay and Incentives

Respondents were asked to rate four items that explored aspects of teacher evaluation (see Table 3). Almost all respondents (97%) reported that the primary purpose of evaluating teachers is to improve teaching. Concerning the use of student results on standardized tests for evaluating teachers, about 50% of respondents reported that less than one-third of the teachers' evaluation should be based on student performance, while the other 50% reported that one-third to two-thirds of teachers' evaluation should include student performance. There was no clear consensus on respondents' perception of teachers *having no right to a hearing* if teachers are recommended for non-renewal or having *automatic grounds for dismissal* for teachers receiving ratings below proficient.

TABLE 3  
Level of Agreement Concerning Teacher Evaluation  
Questions and Percentage Rating for Teacher Evaluation

	%
What do you think should be the primary purpose for evaluating teachers?	
helping teachers improve their ability to teach	97
establishing teacher salaries based upon their skills	0
documenting ineffectiveness that could lead to dismissal	3
What percentage of a teacher's evaluation should be based on how well his or her students perform on standardized tests?	
less than one-third	51
between one-third and two-thirds	46
more than two-thirds	3
To what extent do you favor <i>no right to a hearing</i> if teachers are recommended for non-renewal?	
Strongly Disagree	14
Disagree	38
Undecided	17
Agree	26
Strongly Agree	5
If teachers are rated less than proficient, to what extent do you favor <i>automatic grounds for dismissal</i> ?	
Strongly Disagree	4
Disagree	45
Undecided	18
Agree	27
Strongly Agree	6

Superintendents were asked about factors that should be considered for teachers' pay increase (see Table 4). Almost all factors were rated as *important* to *very important*, with the exception of non-instructional duties.

TABLE 4  
Factors for Determining Teachers' Pay Increase

Factor	Not Important	Important	Very Important
	%	%	%
Classroom Observations	2	40	58
Teacher Attendance	5	55	40
Teacher effectiveness scores	8	63	30
Master's Degree	8	61	31
Principal recommendation	8	48	44
National Board Certification	12	55	33
Student Performance on Tests	12	66	22
Years of Experience	13	72	15
Non-instructional duties	49	45	6

Superintendents were asked to respond to two questions related to the effects of current legislative issues in NC, pay-for-performance and the elimination of teacher tenure (also known

as career status) (see Table 5). In NC, the legislatively required pay-for-performance plan provides for offering 25% of teachers four-year contracts with a \$500 annual bonus in exchange for relinquishing career status. About half of the respondents reported that this would hurt education and the other half reported it would have mixed results on education. None of the respondents reporting believing this method of increasing pay would help education. The NC General Assembly decided to eliminate career status by 2018, including removing career status from those who had already achieved it or were in the pipeline. Career status, which provided basic procedural protections before dismissal, disciplinary actions or salary reductions, was replaced with 1, 2, or 4-year contracts. Concerning the elimination of career status, about half of the respondents reported that there would be mixed results on education with only 12% of respondents reporting that it would help education.

**TABLE 5**  
**Pay-for-Performance and Elimination of Teacher Tenure Impact on Education**

	%
What will be the effect of the current pay-for-performance recommendations?	
improve education	0
not effect education	6
hurt education	49
mixed results	45
What impact will the elimination of teacher tenure have on education?	
improve education	12
not effect	16
hurt education	22
mixed results	49

## School Safety

Survey respondents were asked about their needs for addressing school security (see Table 6). Most respondents indicated that they needed or very much needed, in both elementary and upper level buildings, school resource officers and screening procedures similar to those used in government buildings. Almost all did not support allowing teachers and administrators to be armed, and there was little support for employing armed security guards.

**TABLE 6**  
**Superintendents Needs for School Safety**

Statement	Not Needed	May Be Needed	Very Much Needed
Elementary schools should employ armed security guards.	69	28	3
Middle/junior high schools and high schools should employ armed security guards.	63	29	8
Elementary schools should allow teachers and administrators to be armed.	100	0	0
Middle/junior high schools and high schools should allow teachers and administrators to be armed.	99	1	0
Elementary schools should have screening procedures similar to those used in government buildings for anyone who wishes to enter the school.	20	49	31
Middle/junior high schools and high schools should have screening procedures similar to those used in government buildings for anyone who wishes to enter the school.	15	48	37
Elementary schools should have police resource officers.	12	43	45
Middle/junior high schools and high schools should have police resource officers.	0	13	87

### Charter Schools, Tuition Support for Private Schools, and Online Courses

When asked about the impact of charter schools and tuition support for private schools, almost all superintendents indicated it will hurt the school system, with no respondents believing it would help their school districts (see Table 7). Most superintendents (76%) favored students earning high school credits online.

**TABLE 7**  
**Percentage for Effects of Charter Schools, Tuition Support, and Online Learning**

Items	%
Generally speaking, the impact of increasing the number of charter schools will...	
hurt school system	93
have no effect	7
help school system	0
Generally speaking, the impact of tuition support for students to attend private schools will...	
hurt school system	99
have no effect	1
help school system	0
There are increasing opportunities for students to earn high school credits online over the Internet.	
Generally speaking, do you...	
Favor	76
Oppose	15
Do Not Know	9



## Standardized Testing

Most respondents reported that high-stakes testing has had mixed results (63%) in improving education, with 27% reporting there has not been any improvements. Very few respondents (12%) believe that high-stakes testing is worth the money (see Table 8).

TABLE 8  
Impact of High-Stakes Testing on Education

Items	All %
High-stakes testing has...	
improved education	10
had no effect	0
not improved education	27
had mixed results	63
The cost of high-stakes testing is worth the money.	
Strongly Disagree	26
Disagree	46
Undecided	16
Agree	12
Strongly Agree	0

## Common Core State Standards and Local Control

A large majority of superintendents (82%) agree or strongly agree that the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) will improve education in NC. All of the superintendents indicated that it was somewhat (9%) to very important (91%) for them to have local control of the school calendar.

TABLE 9  
Common Core State Standards

Items	%
The Common Core State Standards (CCSSO) will improve education in North Carolina	
Strongly Disagree	0
Disagree	3
Undecided	15
Agree	51
Strongly Agree	31
How important is it for you to have local control of the school calendar?	
Not Very Important	0
Somewhat Important	9
Very Important	91

## DISCUSSION

In general, the superintendents do not believe that some of the recent statutes, policies, and educational initiatives recently approved by state policy makers will serve to improve schools and student learning. Conversely, their responses indicate that they believe that some of them will serve to hurt the public schools (for example, increasing the number of charter schools, providing vouchers for parents to send their children to private schools, implementing a pay for performance system that arbitrarily limits the number of teachers rewarded to 25%).

Nationally, balancing budgets and the lack of financial support continues to be the biggest problem facing public schools (Gallup, 2013b; Kappan, 2013; Phi Delta Kappa, 2014). North Carolina superintendents also reported that lack of funds was a significant challenge for their districts. In addition, they indicated that teacher morale, teacher pay, and unfunded state mandates were the highest priorities that face the state.

Results from this study somewhat support the use of students standardized test scores to evaluate teacher, which is different from the 2013 PDK/Gallup poll results, which stated that these test scores should not be used to evaluate teachers. Superintendents had varied views of *no right to a hearing* for teachers who are recommended for non-renewal and automatic grounds for dismissal for teachers who are rated less than proficient, although more disagreed than agreed with these recent legislative changes.

All superintendents agree that armed security guards or armed teachers and administrators are not needed to ensure school safety, which is consistent with the 2013 PDK/Gallup poll viewpoint of not allowing armed school personnel. Superintendents endorsed using screening procedures in all schools and police resource officers.

In NC, superintendents overwhelmingly believe that increasing the number of charter schools would hurt their school system. Given that most Americans believe charter schools offer a better education than tradition public schools, future enrollment increases in charter school would have a negative effect on public schools. Superintendents also view tuition support for students attending private school as hurting their school system. There was support for allowing opportunities for students to earn high school credits for online learning.

Few NC superintendents reported that high-stakes testing improved education and the cost of testing is not worth the expense, which is consistent with the Kappan survey that found that the significant increase in testing in the past decade has either hurt or made no difference in improving schools (Kappan, 2013).

In a national PDK/Gallup poll, more than half of the superintendents surveyed indicated that they believe "...the common core standards will improve the quality of education in their community," but "three in 10 (30%) believe that [the standards] will have no effect" (Gallup, 2013b, p. 2). Given the initial and growing equivocation on the value of Common Core State Standards (cf. Gardner & Powell, 2014; Loveless, 2014), it was surprising that almost all the superintendents thought the new standards would improve education in NC. Another important issue that all NC superintendents agreed upon was the need for local control of the school calendar.

## LIMITATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Results of this study provide a narrow snapshot of NC superintendents' perception of some important educational issues in NC. To better understand the state of education in NC, annual surveys should be conducted and annual outcomes compared across the years, which is similar to the PDK/Gallup poll. Many educational issues need much deeper investigations than can be examined using surveys. Superintendent interviews could provide richer information that could be used to improve public education.

In this study, NC superintendents' opinions about local, state, and national education issues were examined. We reasoned that their responses would provide a benchmark for how school leaders in our state perceive their schools and select factors influencing them. As documented in similar surveys (e.g., PDK/Gallup poll), lack of financial support was a core concern and an issue needing the attention of policy makers. If policy makers are perceived to be doing things that are demoralizing teachers while local districts are trying to improve teacher morale and reduce teacher turnover, educational progress may be stifled. If state and local districts are working at cross purposes vis-a-vis the primary education labor force-classroom teachers, educational progress will be restrained. Sharing superintendents' perceptions of current state educational initiatives, challenges, and state laws affecting public education provides perspective in efforts to clarify a need for change and bring about greater success for all students.

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