

Rural Superintendents View Their Role: Ranking the Issues

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This paper describes the results of a survey of superintendents, who were asked to identify the most critical issues in managing and running small rural school districts. Thirty superintendents in southeastern Nebraska participated in the study. The problem of finances was the superintendents' greatest worry. They were also concerned about regional economic conditions, state regulations, salaries, and providing an adequate variety of classes. Superintendents feel that adequate financing of schools is based upon a positive perception of schools by community members, and that school boards are primarily interested in school curriculum. They are positive in their assessment of the overall quality of teachers they employ.

Considerable media attention has been focused upon the perceptions of politicians, investigative commissions and the general public regarding the public school. The purpose of this study is to examine the most critical issues in managing and running a school district, as perceived by superintendents of small districts in southeastern Nebraska.

Research indicates that superintendents in rural school settings perceive policy making and policy administering in much the same way that superintendents in urbanized school settings perceive these two processes [1; 3]. Furthermore, superintendents from differing size school districts generally do not vary in their perceptions of the competency areas [2]. Therefore, the implications of this study should have direct implications to all size school districts. Generally, superintendents perceive lack of finances as being their most difficult problem [4].

METHOD

Subjects

Thirty-five superintendents in rural Nebraska participated in the study. The school districts ranged in size from 31 students to 2,106 students with over 50 percent of the districts having under 300 students. The school districts border the states of Kansas, Missouri, and Iowa and represent an agrarian economy and way of life. The largest city has a population of about 12,000 people and the total land area is approximately 40,000 square miles.

Instrument

A questionnaire of 14 items was used to collect the data. In the questionnaire, the respondent was asked to rank the items from the highest to the lowest by placing a 1 in front of the item which was viewed as the most

critical concern and by placing a 14 in front of the item which was viewed as the least critical concern. The questionnaire was originally validated, and used for a study with superintendents in rural New Mexico (Ferre, 1972). Thirty superintendents responded for an 86 percent return rate.

Results

School finance was identified most often as the most critical concern of these rural school superintendents with 84 percent of the superintendents ranking it first or second (See Table 1). Seventeen superintendents ranked

TABLE 1
Ranking of questions,
in order of importance to Superintendents

	Ranking	Rating means
School finance	1	1.92
Regional economic conditions	2	4.44
State regulations	3	5.40
Salaries	4	5.65
Curriculum development	5	6.04
School board	6	6.14
Federal regulations	7	7.46
Facilities	8	7.61
Community pressure	9	7.86
School community relations	10	7.90
Coping with children having exceptional needs	11	7.96
Quality of faculty and staff	12	8.23
Social change	13	8.83
Enrollment patterns	14	9.57

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it first (81 percent) and four superintendents ranked it second (19 percent). Regional economic conditions ranked second. Three superintendents ranked it first (27 percent) and eight superintendents ranked it second (73 percent). Six superintendents (17 percent) ranked facilities as a major concern and the rest of the respondents ranked it extremely low. The mean for adequate financing was significantly different from all other categories indicating its extreme importance to superintendents.

DISCUSSION

The study shows that superintendents feel the community is primarily concerned about the quality of faculty and staff. Superintendents, however, feel they are doing a good job of hiring good teachers as evidenced by their low concern in this area (ranked 12th).

Superintendents see school finances as being highly related to school-community relations and felt that school financing was related to how the community views the school. They are also concerned about state regulations. Superintendents are most unhappy about unnecessary federal and state intervention in education and the filling out of "endless" reports.

The aging of rural areas, depressed economics, and the way people live are affecting the rural way of life. Of surprising importance was the lack of concern for declining enrollments.

Superintendents felt that the school board was primarily interested in the curriculum or programs of the school district. The development of adequate school programs and pupil progress was viewed by superintendents as one of their main goals in maintaining a smooth working relation with the school board.

CONCERNS

This survey raises some questions about the public concern over the quality of education and educational standards. Are superintendents preoccupied with financial questions to the possible detriment of academic issues? The superintendents would like to function in the role of academic leaders but see their greatest problem as finances. The conflict between perceived role and actual concerns is putting a great deal of pressure on chief administrators today.

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