

Identifying Perceptions of Superintendent Internship Site Supervisors on the Relevance and Impact of Internship Activities

Thomas W. Harvey

Lamar University

Michael Schwanenberger

Northern Arizona University

Jimmy Creel

Lamar University

Johnny O'Connor

Lamar University

Gary Martin

Lamar University

Robert Nicks

Lamar University

This study explored the perceptions of district superintendents in Texas and Arizona concerning the internship activities of superintendent candidates they supervised. Twenty superintendents agreed to participate in interviews. Five uniform questions were presented during the interviews. A qualitative analysis of interview responses is shared, and conclusions are provided.

Keywords: Internship, Superintendent Preparation, District Leadership

School district leaders play a critical role in improving student outcomes, ensuring quality instruction, and the ability to turn around struggling public schools (Scott, 2017). They must do this, despite other people and events that might be in opposition. There are virtually no documented instances of troubled school districts being turned around without intervention by an effective leader. Many other factors may contribute to such turnarounds, but leadership is the catalyst (Leithwood, et al. 2004). Superintendent preparation programs, therefore, have a significant responsibility in their admissions, training, and approving of candidates seeking superintendent licensure. Preparation program completers must be able to meet the current political, social, and economic environments and have the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to meet the demands of the superintendency. Preparation programs that provide relevant field experiences activities help interns understand and relate to the superintendent's role and responsibilities (Thiede, 2020).

Interns must meet the requirements of the university or program supervisor and district site supervisor. They are observed, mentored, and assessed by both. The intern and program and district site supervisors become accountable for the breadth, depth, and rigor of the experience. It is the site supervisors, however, that allow certain activities and opportunities to be afforded in their districts. Research in this area indicates the best manner of improvement is found through an exchange process in which the superintendent, building administrators, teachers, board of education members, and the community simultaneously work with each other (Petersen & Barnett, 2005). The internship is a culminating experience for most educational leadership preparation programs. It is an approach to learning that McCarthy (2010) termed a "merging of experience, cognition, and behavior" (p. 131).

The National Educational Leadership Program (NELP) standards require programs to assign or approve site or district intern supervisors that have demonstrated effectiveness as an educational leader within a district setting; understand the specific district context; is present for a significant portion of the internship; is selected collaboratively by the intern and is provided with training by the supervising institution (NPBEA, 2018). These site supervisors are typically superintendents (small districts) or assistant superintendents (large districts) and vary greatly in experience, commitment, and ability to provide meaningful opportunities for the intern. Given this dilemma, this study sought perceptions from the vantage point of experienced and successful site supervisors.

Purpose of the Study

There is a scarcity of research on superintendent preparation. Despite state, national, and program standards, these bodies seldom, if at all, cite detailed intern activities to be undertaken. The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of superintendent internship site supervisors regarding activities they found to be meaningful and relevant, activities that were not meaningful or relevant, activities that should be required as part of the internship, activities that should be avoided, and advice for future internship site supervisors. The significance of the study is to provide pertinent information to superintendent preparation programs for program improvement.

Research Questions

This study was guided by the following research questions given to experienced superintendent internship site supervisors as interview questions:

1. What internship activities were most relevant and meaningful to interns?
2. Were there any internship activities that were not relevant or meaningful to interns?
3. What activities should be required for all superintendent interns?
4. What activities should be avoided during the internship?
5. What advice should be given to new superintendent internship supervisors?

Methods and Procedures

The authors from this study collaboratively developed interview questions regarding perceptions of the superintendent internship. These questions were developed prior to the identification of those to be interviewed. The survey questions were considered valid as they solicited open-ended perceptions of internship activities that had been observed.

Twenty school district superintendents, deemed as district level experts, who had experience as a superintendent internship site supervisor were identified in Texas and Arizona and agreed to be interviewed in this study. The authors appointed four interviewers from the team to conduct the interviews. Each interviewer had experience as a district superintendent and experience at a university assisting interns during internship activities. One interviewer was certified as an internship field supervisor.

The same questions were asked to each interviewee and the responses to the interview questions were recorded/documented. Extended discussions related to each interview question were considered acceptable during the interviews. Interviews were conducted in person or on the telephone during the spring, 2022.

Documentation from the 20 interviews was provided to each author on the research team. Two of the authors analyzed the interview documentation and constructed a compilation of the data. Each interviewer confirmed that the compilation of the data accurately represented their individual interviews thereby affirming the validity of the research.

Literature Review

Central to all leadership preparation programs is the internship that is typically taken during or following required coursework. The importance of internship field experiences for aspiring superintendents cannot be understated. Clinical experiences in these programs must be integrated, authentic, and reflective of the real life of a school leader (Browne-Ferrigno & Muth, 2004). Martin et al. (2022) summarized the internship in the following manner:

The internship is both a capstone of an educational endeavor and a beginning experience in meeting the demands of a new position and new role in educational leadership. It is assumed that prerequisite knowledge, skill, and disposition are at an adequate level for entry into a new initial leadership experience. The internship requires a high level of readiness knowledge, skill, appropriate disposition, and effort. Gaining further from the experience of initial leadership and experience is the internship goal. For the internship to be effective, the intern must assume

responsibility and take the initiative to create meaningful experiences that build leadership capacity. The intern will develop, refine, improve, and incorporate leadership skills into their repertoire, along with gaining new knowledge and mindsets across a spectrum of school district contexts including various departments, community stakeholders, individual schools, and the larger state and national governing bodies (p. 9).

Numerous topics or knowledge and skill areas are articulated in national standards and presume internships will allow opportunities to take a leadership position in the areas. The American Association of School Administrators (AASA) National Superintendent Certification Program focuses on the following:

1. Transformational leadership
2. Understanding and developing board-superintendent relations
3. Ensuring equity
4. Navigating community, state, and national politics
5. Budgeting and economic pressures
6. Instructional leadership
7. Effective communications
8. Serving effectively as CEO in the district and community (AASA, 2019).

The NELP standards, however, require that the internship provides candidates with coherent, authentic, and sustained opportunities to synthesize and apply the knowledge and skills identified in NELP Standards 1–7 in ways that approximate the full range of responsibilities required of district-level leaders. These standards provide a greater breadth of skill areas that include vision, culture, community involvement, and building relationships. Standards 1-7 cover the following areas:

1. Lead, design, and implement a district vision and mission
2. Advocate for ethical decisions and cultivate professional norms and culture
3. Develop and maintain a supportive, equitable, culturally responsive, and inclusive district culture
4. Evaluate, design, cultivate, and implement coherent systems of curriculum, instruction, data systems, supports, assessment, and instructional leadership
5. Understand and engage families and communities and advocate for district, student, and community needs
6. Develop, monitor, evaluate, and manage data-informed and equitable district systems for operations, resources, technology, and human capital management
7. Cultivate relationships, lead collaborative decision making and governance, and represent and advocate for district needs in broader policy conversations (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2018, p. 29)

The National Educational Leadership Preparation (NELP) standards are research-based and were developed to assist with the preparation of district leaders. NELP Standard 8 discusses a relevant and impactful superintendent internship. The standard mandates that superintendent candidates complete district level activities under the supervision of practitioners who are experts in their field. Candidates must participate in authentic internship activities within a district environment. Furthermore, candidates should also be engaged in multiple district environments that provide opportunities to interact with stakeholders. Standard 8 of the NELP

standards describes the intent of the internship of turning applied knowledge as an aspiring leader into informed practice.

- Candidates are provided a variety of coherent, authentic, field, or clinical internship experiences within multiple district environments that afford opportunities to interact with stakeholders and synthesize and apply the content knowledge and develop and refine the professional skills articulated in each of the components included in NELP district-level program standards 1–7.
- Candidates are provided a minimum of six months of concentrated (10–15 hours per week) internship or clinical experiences that include authentic leadership activities within a district setting.
- Candidates are provided a supervisor who has demonstrated effectiveness as an educational leader within a district setting; understands the specific district context; is present for a significant portion of the internship; is selected collaboratively by the intern, a representative of the district, and program faculty; and is provided with training by the supervising institution (National Policy Board for Educational Administration 2018, p. 29).

Although there is a large body of research on each of the skill areas listed and a general consensus that an internship must be required and supervised by competent and experienced mentors, there are few, if any, studies on what specific internship activities should be recommended, required, or avoided.

To meet the expectation of real and authentic activities, internships are conducted in the schools and therefore, must confront current local, state, and national social issues. Given the current political polarization, discord, and violence observed in American culture, it is not surprising to see such issues manifesting themselves on the campuses, in board rooms, and administrative offices of school districts across the country. Some educational researchers have referred to this phenomenon as “the educationalization of social problems” (Sullivan, 2018). Indeed, for more than a decade, researchers have been referring to this tendency to place social problems on schools, and the research on this topic is significant (Kantor, 2013), (Bridges, 2008), (Sullivan, 2018). A few examples of the issues manifesting themselves in schools throughout the nation include the appearance of radical political agendas in student curriculum and classrooms (Beienburg M. , 2021); the value, manners, and morality of America’s youth (Farkas, 2001); policies and protocols related to transgender and non-gender conforming students (Ingrey, 2018); gun control and its effect on school shootings (Gius, *The Effects of State and Federal Gun Control Laws on School Shootings*, 2018); and school safety and security (DeMatteis, 2020).

Findings

The following findings are structured and aligned using the research questions. Within these findings, the authors sifted comments from the site supervisors into themes to organize or bundle related activities. The authors also identified some independent activity recommendations from site supervisors that were worthy of discussion even though they did not fit into a theme.

Themes Aligned to Research Questions (supported by comments from site supervisors)

RQ1 – What internship activities were most relevant and meaningful to interns?

Site supervisors find leadership activities that acquaint interns with the fiscal aspects of a superintendent's responsibilities most meaningful and relevant.

- The budget process is a meaningful component of the internship. Superintendent interns are less confident about their mastery of the budget and the budget process than any other area of leadership. This includes internship activities that strengthen and reinforce knowledge of the basic formula, grants, and budget accountability.
- Participation in activities that require proximity and collaboration with district level leaders are extremely relevant. An interview with the Chief Financial Officer is an especially relevant activity and tends to help interns gain confidence in their ability and knowledge to manage school district finances.
- Site supervisors should acquaint interns with the district budget process. Most interns have experience at the campus-level, and they need district-level experience.

RQ2 - Were there any internship activities that were not relevant or meaningful to interns?

Site supervisors find that clerical tasks associated with the internship can become irrelevant with little impact on the development of the intern.

- Internship paperwork can get in the way of learning activities. Internship is not about checking boxes on forms.
- Too much time can be spent on paperwork and documentation.
- Check in the box activities.... Surveys for the university... Clerical activities that tie up or overly involve the school superintendent and other personnel are often irrelevant to the internship.
- Avoid time consuming clerical assignments that take away time for hands-on experiences. It is not a research class; it is a practitioner preparation experience.

RQ3 - What activities should be required for all superintendent interns? (Authors found two themes.)

- a) Site supervisors find that interns should be required to be involved in leadership activities that acquaint them with how to communicate and work with stakeholders including the board of trustees, community organizations, and patrons.
 - Candidates should be exposed to communicating with the general public. Most of the superintendent interns whom I have supervised are campus level administrators and they are generally do not have experience in communication

with the general public. This includes constituents who may not have kids in the school district, leaders of business and industry, special interest groups, and others in addition to parents, grandparents, and guardians of students engaged in our schools.

- Interns should have some experience in public presentation or response to public inquiries regarding sensitive and significant issues. Activities that allow opportunities for interns to respond to public inquiry in a public setting in which they must be very careful of the words chosen and the message communicated are very important activities for an aspiring superintendent. Providing some experience in the development of a sensitive public statement in a positive, concise manner is invaluable to the superintendent intern.
- My superintendent interns made presentations to the district level committees and to the board of Trustees. Because of the internal consideration given to this issue by the board and by local constituents, this was a very relevant experience for these interns.
- While I do not think direct communication with an individual board member regarding school business is a good idea, attendance scheduled at board meetings should be required during the internship.

b) Site supervisors find that interns should be required to be involved in leadership activities that acquaint them with district operations and practices.

- Candidates should be required to be involved in activities associated with operations of the school district – transportation, maintenance etc.
- Candidates need exposure to real-world central office activities related to maintenance and custodial, child nutrition, transportation, facilities and construction, long-range planning, HR practices, and supervision of employees.
- Candidates need to be required to acquire knowledge about unique district characteristics (such as learning about the operation of a wastewater treatment plant).
- The internship should be required to target activities regarding facilities (safety, construction, maintenance), HR practices and leadership, policy reviews, and articulating the district vision for student learning.

RQ4 - What activities should be avoided during the internship?

Site supervisors believe that interns should be protected politically during the internship.

- “Do no harm” - the internship experiences should never be harmful to the intern, superintendent, or district.
- Site supervisors must protect the intern both personally and professionally.
- Interns should not be engaged in activities that may place them in a position of advocating a district position or initiative that could prove to be very unpopular in the community or

within the district with the intern having no real voice in the district's implementation or chosen position on the issue.

- Interns should not be engaged in activities that would place them in the middle of a conflict or communication between board members or between the board and the superintendent that could be divisive or derisive.

RQ5 - What advice should be given to new superintendent internship supervisors?

Site supervisors recommend that new internship supervisors collaboratively develop an internship plan with the intern that provides relevant activities aimed at meeting identified individualized needs.

- The site supervisor must commit time and resources to support an individualized relevant internship plan.
- Interns must complete a self-evaluation in an honest and professionally challenging manner and focus on activities which are most beneficial to the individual candidate.
- Activities should be built around individual needs. Some interns have more background than others.
- Interns and site supervisors need to analyze the intern's background and provide activities that address specific needs.
- The site supervisor and intern need a clear understanding of national leadership standards and develop activities that address those standards.

Other Recommended Activities from Site Supervisors Worthy of Discussion

- Activities that have an emphasis on instructional improvement. Interns should be required to facilitate a meeting or lead a committee or conduct an evaluation of a program or otherwise participate in an activity that helps them to focus on their role as an instructional leader.
- The superintendent interview is an important activity for all interns. I cannot overemphasize my belief that this activity has great value in the growth of the intern.
- I would advise a new superintendent internship supervisor to approach the role with no egos. The goal of the site supervisor is not to boast or flaunt your position or your authority. The goal is to help the intern gain experience and knowledge that will help them be better prepared to lead a school district.

Conclusions

A wide range of professions require an internship as an integral part of the preparation and training to practice. In addition to education, internships are common in business operations, marketing, engineering, sales and business development, media communications, and healthcare (The New York Times, 2017). In general, internships are designed to allow an aspiring practitioner the opportunity to work closely under the guidance of an expert in the field, to gain some limited experience in the unique intricacies and challenges of the field, and to develop the

proficiencies, attitudes, and communication skills that are necessary for success in a particular field (Guerrero, 2022).

The authors of this study have extensive experience in the leadership of a school district and in the supervision of internship programs designed to prepare educators to lead a school district as the superintendent. Additionally, the authors of the study strongly agree that the “real world” experiences gained during the internship are key to the success of beginning superintendents. In viewing the findings of this study through the lens of experience, the authors arrived at a number of salient interpretations and implications. For example, since the licensure of a school superintendent is a state function and programs that offer internships must meet professional standards that are developed and monitored by professional organizations, all internship programs must comply with state and federal laws and should reinforce the standards outlined in the educational entity’s accreditation standards. Equally important, the internship experience should provide opportunities for the intern to interact with laws, regulations, and professional standards and to participate in decisions and leadership opportunities that ensure compliance with laws and regulations related to education. We also recommend that the internship experience be designed to provide occasions during which an intern might meet and establish a relationship with state and federal education oversight officials and with officers and directors of the various professional organizations that wield influence over the preparation of educational leaders. Indeed, the opportunity to expand and strengthen one’s professional network is a noteworthy event in one’s preparation to lead and the authors see the internship as a vital contributor to this important endeavor, as the politicization of the superintendency is ever expanding.

Most people who have any experience in education would not argue with the adage that the school business is a “people” business, even as online student opportunities increase. In order for people to survive and thrive in any human initiative, it is imperative that relationships be developed, strengthened, and maintained. The development of relationships and the strengthening of relations and associations among constituents of the educational enterprise should be reflected heavily and consistently in the internship activities. The site supervisor can contribute to this strategy of relationship-building by honoring and enhancing his/her relationship with the intern. Trust between the intern and intern supervisor leads to an expansion of internship opportunities for the intern. Time for conversation and mentoring of the intern should be prioritized in the site supervisor’s schedule. When meetings or conversations or mentoring sessions are scheduled, the site supervisor should view such activities as a high priority on his/her calendar. A pathway of communication between the intern and the site supervisor must be opened and maintained so that the intern feels comfortable in sharing concerns and asking questions and seeking guidance from the leadership expert. Site supervisors are often the ultimate leader of a school district or, at least, a significant leader in the school district hierarchy. The site supervisor’s commitment to making time available for the purpose of meeting, mentoring, and counseling an intern who is someday likely to assume a senior leadership position should be viewed as a contribution not only to the development of the individual intern, but also as an investment in the profession. An “unintended consequence” of such an investment could be the development over a period of time of relationships, trust, and confidence in junior district administrators to the point that the district is able to grow its own

legacy of potential leaders to fill top level administrative positions within the district and to send out highly qualified leaders to assume positions of responsibility in other districts as well.

All public-school districts rely predominantly on public tax dollars for funding and even private or religiously affiliated schools have the same fiduciary responsibility to spend dollars judiciously to support student learning and growth and to ensure transparency in the expenditure of district funds. Therefore, aspiring superintendents would do well to participate in internship activities that expose one to the budget process, state and federal laws related to school district finances, prioritization and allocation of scarce financial resources, the relationship between staffing and budget, purchasing protocol, and financial accountability. Internship activities related to budget and finance should be heavily weighted toward the ethics of financial oversight and planning. State funding mechanisms, grant procurement and oversight of grant funds, and general budget accountability may have unique properties from state to state and even from district to district. However, activities that expose the superintendent intern to the development of a district budget, the oversight of district expenditures, the accountability protocol practiced in the district, legal implications of school finance and expenditures and accountability, and other areas of financial credibility should be emphasized in the internship plan.

It is interesting to note the descriptive term used by one of the study respondents when the role of the superintendent was described as “the communicator in chief.” Internship activities that place the intern in proximity to senior level discussion and debate and the development of directives, announcements, and information provided to district employees, parents, students, and district patrons are especially beneficial in helping potential superintendents learn how to utilize various communication strategies and technologies in the dissemination of information and to structure such data in a manner that is most efficient and effective.

Finally, the potentially divisive and controversial issues referenced in the literature review of this article should be kept in mind as the internship is developed and implemented. While prospective superintendents need guidance and experience in dealing with these kinds of issues, interns seeking qualification as a superintendent along with their site supervisors and university professors should exercise caution in placing superintendent interns in decision-making roles or in activities that entail strong public scrutiny and a likelihood for vigorous public debate that often turns raucous, harsh, and disorderly. Many of the polarizing topics impacting education have the potential to set off explosive public confrontations. In view of the vacillating stances of public opinion related to some of these issues and the extremely high potential for some sort of outside intervention, either legitimate or illicit, internship activities should be carefully evaluated as to their value in teaching aspiring superintendents important skills and knowledge that will contribute to their growth and preparation to lead a school district versus an experience that could significantly detract from a intern’s potential leadership of a school district. Such experience, even as an intern, has the potential to have profound effects on the superintendent candidate’s future and one’s ability to procure and maintain a position of executive leadership. One of the internship supervisor’s major responsibilities is to “do no harm” to the intern’s professional career.

A cursory review of the “Findings” section of this article will provide a number of other important topics that one should consider in the development of a meaningful superintendent internship. Certainly, there will always be unique characteristics and circumstances in each

district and even among individual interns and site supervisors that should also be considered in the development and implementation of the superintendent internship. Even so, the superintendent internship should be viewed as a critically important training and development activity that has great potential to prepare one to provide momentous leadership during times of turmoil, crisis, and great challenge. Even as the heart surgeon relies on the experience and training, he/she acquires in the surgical internship, the aspiring superintendent also depends on the training and experience he/she attains in the internship that represents a collaborative effort between himself/herself, the university, and the site supervisor.

Limitations of the Study

The findings of this study were limited to the perceptions of 20 internship site supervisors from two states. Data were not collected on the site supervisors' years of experience in the superintendency or in internship supervision, the size of the districts, or the number of interns supervised.

Future Research

Recommendation #1

Because of the limitations listed above, a similar, but larger study including multiple states would be interesting.

Recommendation #2

It would be interesting to conduct a similar study but gather perspectives from school board members.

Recommendation #3

Given the importance of superintendents needing to address highly political and sensitive issues and the reluctance of site supervisors to involve interns in those type of district activities, it is imperative that further research find solutions to this dilemma.

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