

# Identifying the Factors that Contribute to Involuntary Departures of School Superintendents in Rural America

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*Rural school districts play an important part in the national educational landscape. Not only do they provide nearly one in four U.S. children with many skills, including those needed to enter college, but they also act as an economic stabilization force for the communities that they serve. Superintendents of rural school districts, as the leaders of these institutions, play an important role in fostering these objectives. Rapidly changing political, social, and economic landscapes, however, present a new array of challenges and occupational pressures to today's rural superintendent. Superintendents now must navigate more turbulent environments shaped by the ever-increasing demands of internal and external stakeholders in an era of tight fiscal constraints. Few studies have attempted to link the occupational pressures faced by rural school superintendents with ways in which these pressures increase the probability of a superintendent's experiencing an involuntary departure. This study attempts to fill that gap. Using data compiled from 618 rural superintendents across 48 states, this study shows that political conflict, insufficient employment contract provisions, internal and external stakeholder pressures, and fiscal stress can affect rural school superintendent turnover.*

Rural school districts play an integral role in the communities that they serve. Beyond providing students with the basic education and training that are important for securing an economic livelihood, rural school districts also provide economic support and serve as a cultural center in the community. Many researchers have suggested that the survival of rural communities depends on creating and sustaining collaborative partnerships with schools (Hobbs, 1991; Miller, 1993; Spears, Combs, & Bailey, 1990). It follows, therefore, that rural superintendents, acting as the face of their school districts, play a critical role in fostering these joint partnerships.

Superintendents' efforts, however, do have an associated cost. Specifically, superintendents must navigate turbulent environments involving elected boards, faculty and staff,

community stakeholders, and fiscal constraints (Allen, 1998; Hodges, 2005; Hoyle, Bjork, Collier, & Glass, 2005; Glass & Franceschini, 2007). McCurdy and Hymes (1992) proposed that the demands of the position may be such that many superintendents are worn down and leave their jobs under duress or by nonrenewal of their employment contracts. Either of these scenarios is potentially detrimental to a school district's stability and, in turn, can negatively affect its short and long-term performance (Alsbury, 2008; Grissom & Anderson, 2012; Natkin, Cooper, & Alborano, 2002).

Few studies have focused on empirical testing of factors that contribute to superintendent turnover, including rural superintendent turnover (Grissom & Anderson, 2012). This absence has led researchers to suggest a further need for studies, using recent data to establish a well-developed research base (Fusarelli, 2005; Natkin et al., 2002; Petersen & Fusarelli, 2008). This study attempts to further the body of knowledge into the relation of occupational factors that increase the probability of a rural superintendent experiencing an involuntary departure.

The study model was estimated using partitioned data of 618 rural school district superintendents from 48 states who participated in a larger nationwide survey of 4,028

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school superintendents across all 12 urban-centric locale categories as defined by the National Center for Education Statistics (Provasnik, KewalRamani, Coleman, Gilbertson, Herring, & Xie, 2007, p. 2). Logistic regression was chosen as the basis for modeling the relation. The dependent variable was a dichotomous measure that indicated whether a superintendent experienced a push or pull-induced departure. The independent variables were measurements thought to accurately capture the occupational pressures encountered by rural superintendents.

### **Examining Push and Pull Factors and Rural Superintendent Turnover**

There are many reasons superintendents leave their positions other than termination by the school board (Grissom & Anderson, 2012). For example, Glass, Bjork, and Brunner (2000) found that many superintendents change jobs because of career advancement. McCurdy and Hymes (1992), on the other hand, cited a multitude of occupational stresses from internal and external sources as primary reasons for superintendent departures.

Much of the career movement research in the past 20 years suggests that leadership turnover is affected by what are called *push* and *pull* factors<sup>1</sup> (Tekniepe & Stream, 2012), an underlying assumption of what this author proposes as *Push-Pull Career Movement Theory*. Push factors are most commonly associated with pressures that force leaders from their current positions. Push factors that affect rural superintendents can include conflict with the school board, pressures that originate from inside the organization, pressures from within the community, or simply negative perceptions of the superintendent's ability to adequately manage the fiscal affairs of the district. Pull factors, in contrast, are those typically facilitating his or her opportunity for professional, financial, or personal advancement to another jurisdiction.

Researchers have successfully applied Push-Pull Career Movement Theory to the career movement of top executives in the private sector (Hall, 1989; Helmich, 1974; Lundberg, 1986). Push-Pull Career Movement Theory has also been successfully used in studies of career movement in the public sector (Clingermayer, Feiock, & Stream, 2003; Feiock & Stream, 2002; Tekniepe, 2014; Tekniepe & Stream, 2010, 2012). However, researchers have yet to attempt to apply Push-Pull Career Movement Theory to the career movement of rural superintendents.

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<sup>1</sup>This theorization on occupational movement borrows from theory in demography and regional science regarding the factors shaping residential movement and migration. See Lee (1966); Greenwood (1975); and Guest and Cluett (2006).

### **Factors Contributing to Rural Superintendent Turnover**

Factors contributing to involuntary (push-induced) turnover can generally be grouped into four broad domains: political conflict, internal pressures, external (community) pressures, and fiscal stress. The model in this study incorporates various factors thought to be representative—but not inclusive—of these four areas. The model also incorporates a fifth domain that has not yet been fully explored in superintendent turnover research, specifically whether superintendent employment contract provisions are sufficient to prevent politically driven terminations.

### **Political Conflict between School Boards and Rural Superintendents**

School board relations with superintendents as a predictor of push-induced superintendent turnover have been a topic of research for many years (Rey, 2008). According to Allen (1998), political conflict is one of the principal factors that contribute to the involuntary departures of school superintendents. This finding has led other researchers to conclude that superintendents must be constantly vigilant toward maintaining a good working relationship with board members because this practice could factor into a superintendent's eventual success or failure (Rausch, 2001; Williams, 2010).

Political conflict can arise from many sources. For example, when new board members are appointed or elected, power struggles within the school board can arise (Byrd, Drews, & Johnson, 2006; Fusarelli, 2006; Thomas, 2001). In turn, these power struggles can usher in a new set of relationships between board members and the superintendent. For the most part, school boards support the ideas that superintendents have upon their arrival, but later in a superintendent's tenure, disagreements crop up, relationships chill, and trust fades (Byrd et al., 2006; Fusarelli, 2006). This led Rey (2008) to conclude that disagreement between school board members and the superintendent directly influences a superintendent's decision to seek employment elsewhere. In one sense, a preemptive move may be strategic on the part of the superintendent—i.e., to leave before the level of conflict with board members reaches the "firing point." Research by Glass et al. (2000) appears to confirm this notion, finding that a lack of school board support was a deciding factor in superintendents' leaving their positions.

Micromanaging or meddling by the school board in the administrative functions of the school district has also been found to be a contributing factor in the push-induced turnover of superintendents (Harvey, 2003; Mountford, 2004; Rey, 2008). As Farkas, Johnson, Duffett and Foleno

(2001) suggest, a majority of superintendents feel frustrated with the political interference placed upon them by the school board.

### **Insufficient Contract Provisions to Prevent Politically Driven Terminations**

Researchers have, to a limited extent, attempted to link insufficient employment contract provisions to push-induced superintendent turnover, specifically investigating whether contract provisions can sufficiently prevent a superintendent from a politically driven termination by the school board. Traditionally, the occupation of superintendent is one of limited job security (Cooper, Fusarelli, & Carella, 2000). Coupled with single-year employment contracts, little protection is given to contemporary superintendents to avoid involuntary dismissal (Vaughan, 2008). Superintendents typically face a vast array of occupational pressures and challenges, and single-year employment contracts only add to some superintendents' belief that their role in the institution is just a temporary assignment. In fact, single-year contracts may reflect a board's nonsupport of the direction in which a superintendent is taking the district, as well as the board's lack of commitment toward providing stability in the superintendent's leadership.

Multi-year employment contracts, in contrast, provide for a more stable environment and lessen future employment upsets on the part of superintendent. Many superintendents, however, speculate that school boards prefer single-year contracts over multi-year contracts simply because they want leaders whom they can control (Farkas et al., 2001).

### **Internal Pressures from Principals and Teachers' Associations**

Researchers have suggested a linkage between internal pressures that emanate from principals and teachers and push-induced superintendent turnover (Hoyle et al., 2005). It is clear that superintendents must cope with a gamut of unique challenges in their interactions with senior administrative staff members and teachers. These challenges may be partially due to administrative staff members' and teachers' advocacy of shared governance. In turn, shared decision making may place additional stress on a superintendent and make his or her role as leader of a district more difficult. As Petersen and Short (2001) explained, superintendents require interpersonal skills that bring all internal stakeholders together to support policy decisions that affect the district. Superintendents who lack the interpersonal skills to build constructive relationships with internal stakeholders may place themselves in an unfavorable light with school board members, and possibly position themselves for nonrenewal of their employment contracts or push-induced departures.

Superintendents also must make decisions that involve personnel matters, such as staff reductions or program eliminations. More often than not, decisions that negatively impact individual departments and/or schools can produce despondent staff. This type of friction between principals, teachers, and the superintendent can ensnare the superintendent in internal conflict and potentially lead a superintendent to seek employment elsewhere.

### **External Pressures from Community Stakeholders**

Research suggests that rural superintendents serve a uniquely public and high-profile role (Arnold, Newman, Gaddy, & Dean, 2005; Lamkin, 2006; Theobald, 2005). That is, their job requires close-knit relationships among community stakeholders (Lamkin, 2006). Researchers have also posited that external pressures from community stakeholders may increase the incidence of push-induced superintendent turnover (Alsburly, 2003; Glass et al., 2000; Hodges, 2005). To some extent, this trend may be due to community stakeholders' attempts to influence how a superintendent manages his or her school district. As Campbell (2001) explained, community stakeholders, special interest groups, and the pressures that they exert can complicate a superintendent's ability to direct the administrative operations of a school district. Therefore, superintendents who are skilled in responding to community and political pressures—with an aim toward mutually beneficial outcomes—might be more likely to avoid a push-induced departure. A superintendent who does not display the ability to adequately manage the diverse demands of community stakeholders will be at risk of involuntary departure; discontented community stakeholders may exercise their political will on the school board to remove the superintendent from office (Alsburly, 2003).

As Fullan (1998) suggested, a degree of dissatisfaction will always exist among community stakeholders with respect to a superintendent's leadership and performance. One way a superintendent can minimize the possibility of an involuntary departure, however, is to foster an environment of connectivity between the community and school district, as well as to be an active participant in the community and community civic functions (Kowalski, 1995, 2006).

### **Fiscal Stress**

Rural superintendents traditionally operate within a community and school organization characterized by resource scarcity. Recent research on superintendent turnover has suggested that a connection exists between a school district's fiscal performance and push-induced superintendent turnover (Glass et al., 2000; Glass & Franchesini, 2007; Grissom & Anderson, 2012). Superintendents, once expected to focus solely on the

educational needs of the student population, now must be responsible to and accountable for the fiscal management of the district as well (Petersen & Fusarelli, 2004; Petersen & Young, 2004). This scenario has presented new challenges for superintendents, especially those in districts with limited access to strong local tax support, requiring them to acquire new and expanded fiscal leadership skills. As Glass and Franchesini (2007) pointed out, superintendents perceive the lack of adequate financial resources as the single most important problem facing school districts today. Houston (2001) supported this view by concluding that financial resources available to school districts are almost always insufficient relative to a district's financial demands.

Undoubtedly, the demand to accomplish more with less can eventually take its toll on a superintendent. This consequence would suggest that school boards and superintendents should develop goals that are realistic in terms of timeframe and anticipated resources. To do otherwise would place the superintendent in an untenable position that can lead to involuntary departure.

### Research Design

The target population of this study was rural superintendents. There is no exact record of how many superintendents are in the United States, let alone rural superintendents (Kowalski, McCord, Petersen, Young, & Ellerson, 2010). The number of rural school districts was, therefore, used as a proxy for the target population. According to the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (2011), there were 7,857 rural school districts in the United States during school year 2010-11.

The American Association of School Administrators (AASA) is the professional organization for superintendents of public school systems in the United States. Using AASA membership information, a convenience sample listing of e-mail addresses was compiled of 4,028 active school superintendents from all 12 urban-centric locale categories. Of the 4,028 e-mail addresses obtained, 2,384 were addresses of rural school superintendents (or 30% of the target population). Next, an electronic Internet-based survey questionnaire was developed (in March 2013) using information gathered from contemporary superintendent turnover literature and input from a random cross-sample of 15 school superintendents.

The questionnaire was especially designed to differentiate between and solicit responses from two subsets of the population: those who had previously held the position of superintendent and those who had not. As such, the questionnaire included a lead question that asked, "Had you ever served in the capacity of a superintendent (or its equivalent) prior to employment in your current position?"

Individuals who answered "yes" to the lead question were automatically taken to Survey 1 and asked to answer the questions in relation to their previous position. Individuals who answered "no" were taken to Survey 2 and asked to answer the questions in relation to their current position. Survey 1 and Survey 2 contained the same set of questions. Additionally, Survey 1 included a question asking why the participant had departed the previous position as superintendent, while Survey 2 included a question asking whether the participant was seeking alternative employment and why. This measure became the dependent variable in the study. The questionnaire was assessed for reliability and validity through a pilot test of 12 randomly selected superintendents. In May 2013, the finalized questionnaire was distributed, and the survey data were collected.

### Research Model

Logistic regression was the method chosen for modeling the relation of occupational pressures encountered by rural superintendents to type of turnover because the dependent variable was binomial, and unlike linear discriminant analysis, logistic regression is more relaxed in its assumptions. Namely, independent variables are not required to be normally distributed or linearly related, nor do they have an equal variance within each group.

### Dependent Variable

The dependent variable was the type of rural superintendent departure, measured as whether a superintendent had experienced a pull or push-induced departure from the previous position or was experiencing a pull- or push-induced departure from the current position. Based on the survey responses, individuals who indicated that their departure was (or is) "primarily due to a career advancement opportunity that more closely aligned with [their] professional, financial, and/or personal objectives" were classified and coded *pull-induced departure* = 0. Respondents who answered that their departure was (or is) "precipitated by differences in style, orientation, and/or policy direction with the school board and/or internal/external stakeholders" were classified and coded *push-induced departure* = 1.

### Independent Variables

The model included eight independent variables thought to accurately measure school board knowledge and training, political interference by the school board, insufficient superintendent employment contract provisions, internal pressures from school principals and teacher associations, external pressures from politician and community business

leaders, lack of connectivity between the school district and personality of the community, and fiscal stress. The independent variables were checked for multicollinearity by examining a Pearson correlation matrix. The absolute value of all Pearson correlations were less than 0.8, indicating multicollinearity was not a problem in the model specifications. Survey question responses were based on a seven-point Likert type scale coded *strongly agree* = 1, *agree* = 2, *somewhat agree* = 3, *neutral* = 4, *somewhat disagree* = 5, *disagree* = 6, and *strongly disagree* = 7. The independent variable labels, associated research questions, and hypotheses are provided in Table 1.

### Results: Accounting for Rural Superintendent Turnover

Of the 2,384 rural superintendents surveyed, 844 (35.4%) returned completed questionnaires. This response

rate provided a 95% confidence level (confidence interval = 4.13, 50%) for inference to the target population. In an attempt to increase the response rate, two follow-up e-mails were sent to the sampled population, thereby decreasing the nonresponse rate. Based on a comparative analysis of responses between individuals who completed the questionnaire based on the initial survey request and individuals who completed the questionnaire based on the latter two follow-up emails, no significant differences were detected. As such, the nonresponse rate is not thought to have any potential to result in bias conclusions.

Among the 844 completed questionnaires, 401 individuals responded that they had experienced a pull or push-induced departure from their previous position, while 124 individuals said they were experiencing a pull- or push-induced departure from their current position. Fewer than half the respondents, 319 individuals were

Table 1

*Independent Variables, Research (Survey) Question and Associated Hypotheses*

Variable Label	Research (Survey) Question	Hypothesis
POLITICAL1	Do (did) governing board members have sufficient knowledge/training to effectively perform their job functions?	Districts where governing board members do (did) not have sufficient knowledge/training to effectively perform their job functions <b>increase</b> the incidence of a push-induced departure.
POLITICAL2	Does (did) the governing board involve itself (micro-manage) in the internal operations of the school district?	Districts where governing boards do (did) not involve themselves in the internal operations of the school district <b>decrease</b> the incidence of a push-induced departure.
CONTRACT	Does (did) the superintendent's employment contract provisions sufficiently prevent a "politically driven" termination by the governing board?	Districts where superintendent contracts do (did) not prevent politically driven terminations <b>increase</b> the incidence of a push-induced departure.
INTERNAL1	Do (did) teacher associations and senior administrative staff members work together well during labor contract negotiations?	Districts where teacher associations and administrative staff do (did) not work together well during labor contract negotiations <b>increase</b> the incidence of a push-induced departure.
INTERNAL2	Do (did) principals and administration work together well to resolve internal administrative issues and disagreements?	Districts where principals and administration do (did) not work together well during resolution of internal administrative issues and disagreements <b>increase</b> the incidence of a push-induced departure.
EXTERNAL1	Do (did) pressures from politicians and community business leaders have an influence on school district decisions?	Districts where politician and community business leaders do (did) not influence school district decisions <b>decrease</b> the incidence of a push-induced departure.
EXTERNAL2	Is (was) the school district connected to the personality and life of the community?	School districts that are (were) not connected to the personality and life of the community <b>increase</b> the incidence of a push-induced departure.
FISCAL1	Does (did) lower reserve balances in the general operating fund have an impact on formulating fiscal policy and budgeting decisions?	Districts where lower reserve balances do (did) not impact fiscal policy and budgeting decisions <b>decrease</b> the incidence of a push-induced departure.

first-time superintendents and weren't looking for new employment. The 525 individuals who had experienced or were experiencing a push or pull-induced turnover, regardless of whether they had previously held the position of superintendent or not, were the focus of this study.

### Descriptive Data Analysis

The average tenure of rural superintendents who experienced or were experiencing a push-induced departure was six years and eight months. This timeframe compares to six years and four months for superintendents who experienced or were experiencing a pull-induced departure. Of the 155 superintendents who experienced or were experiencing a push-induced departure, 46 (29.7%) were promoted to the position of superintendent from within the school district, while 109 (70.3%) were recruited from outside the district. Comparatively, of the 370 superintendents who experienced or were experiencing pull-induced departures, 92 (24.9%) were promoted from within the school district, while 278 (75.1%) were hired from outside the district. Additionally, superintendents of smaller rural school districts (as measured by the number of enrolled full-time students) appear to have a higher incidence of overall turnover compared to superintendents of larger rural districts (see Table 2).

Table 3 provides a descriptive breakdown of participant responses for each of the survey questions. A mean statistic ( $\bar{x}$ ) of 4.00 indicates a neutral response to the survey question,  $\bar{x} < 4.00$  indicates agreement with the question, and a  $\bar{x} > 4.00$  indicates disagreement with the question. Notably, superintendents who experienced or were experiencing push-induced departures indicated their employment contract provisions *were not* sufficient to prevent politically driven terminations. Many of these individuals also pointed out that governing boards micromanaged the internal operation of their school districts, and that politicians and community business leaders had an influence on school district decisions. These findings suggest there is a higher incidence of push-induced turnover in school districts where superintendents are not afforded contractual protection from involuntary terminations and where political and external pressures exist.

On the other hand, superintendents who experienced or were experiencing pull-induced departures largely indicated that their employment contract provisions *were* sufficient to prevent politically driven terminations. They also drew attention to the fact that governing boards did not overly involve themselves in the internal operation of the school district. These findings suggest that superintendents who have a working environment devoid of political interference, and who negotiate employment contracts that prevent politically driven terminations by the school board, are more likely to avoid a push-induced departure.

### Logistic Regression Analysis

The regression analysis shown in Table 4 incorporates robust standard errors clustered by state to ensure data independence. Regression coefficient estimates assume that the logit transformation of the dependent variable has a linear relationship with the independent variables. Coefficient estimates for each of the independent variables are provided as indicators of the *directional* effect that an independent variable has on the dependent variable. A positive coefficient estimate indicates that an independent variable will likely increase the incidence of a push-induced departure, whereas a negative coefficient estimate indicates that an independent variable will likely decrease the incidence of a push-induced departure.

Odds ratios for each of the independent variables are provided to assist in assessing the *degree* or *size* of effect that each independent variable has on the dependent variable. An odds ratio  $> 1.00$  indicates that an independent variable increases the relative risk of a push-induced departure, and an odds ratio  $< 1.00$  indicates that an independent variable decreases the relative risk of a push-induced departure. Odds ratios equal to 1.00 signify that an independent variable has no effect on the dependent variable.

Based on the goodness-of-fit test statistics ( $R^2$ ), the overall fitted model is shown to be adequate in predicting movement of the dependent variable ( $R^2$  values ranging between 0.244 and 0.398). The predicted effect of each of the eight independent variables on the dependent variable is statistically significant ( $p < .05$ ) and supports the directional effect put forth in the study hypothesis.

From the data contained in Table 4, the coefficient estimate ( $\beta$ ) and odds ratio (OR) for each of the eight independent variables can be interpreted as follows.

#### **POLITICAL1: School board knowledge and training.**

The coefficient estimate ( $\beta = 0.192$ ) suggests that for every one unit change in the variable, holding all other variables at a fixed value, the log odds of a push-induced departure increase by 0.192. The odds ratio (OR = 1.21) implies that superintendents who indicated that the school board did not have sufficient knowledge/training to effectively perform their job functions were 21% more likely to experience a push-induced departure.

#### **POLITICAL2: School board involvement in internal operations.**

The coefficient estimate ( $\beta = -0.312$ ) means that for every one unit change in the variable, holding all other variables at a fixed value, the log odds of a push-induced departure decrease by 0.312. The odds ratio (OR = 0.73) implies that superintendents who indicated that the school board did not involve itself in (micromanage) the internal operations of the district were 27% less likely to experience a push-induced departure.

#### **CONTRACT: Employment contract provisions.**

The coefficient estimate ( $\beta = 0.193$ ) assumes that for every one

Table 2

*Descriptive Statistics: School Districts*

	Measurement	<i>Push-induced departure</i>		<i>Pull-induced departure</i>	
		Count	%	Count	%
Enrollment full-time students	1,000 or less	97	62.6	200	54.0
	1,001 – 2,500	40	25.8	132	35.7
	2,501 – 5,000	16	10.3	20	5.4
	5,001 – 10,000	2	1.3	14	3.8
	10,001– 25,000	0	0.0	3	0.8
	25,001 or greater	0	0.0	1	0.3
	Total	155	100.0	370	100.0

Note. School districts ( $n=525$ )

Table 3

*Descriptive Statistics: Political, Internal, External and Fiscal Pressures*

Statistic	Variable							
	POLITICAL1	POLITICAL2	CONTRACT	INTERNAL1	INTERNAL2	EXTERNAL1	EXTERNAL2	FISCAL1
<i>Push-induced departures:</i>								
Mean	3.06	2.83	4.68	3.35	2.35	2.97	2.47	2.42
SD	1.46	1.84	1.93	1.77	1.40	1.46	1.29	1.52
SE	0.12	0.15	0.16	0.14	0.11	0.12	0.10	0.12
<i>Pull-induced departures:</i>								
Mean	2.08	4.54	3.48	2.54	1.72	3.85	1.89	2.82
SD	1.00	1.82	1.80	1.30	0.78	1.69	0.92	1.81
SE	0.05	0.09	0.09	0.07	0.04	0.08	0.05	0.09

Note. Superintendents ( $n=525$ )

Table 4

*Logistic Regression: Predictors of Push-Induced Departures*

Variable	$\beta$	OR	SE	Z-score
POLITICAL1	0.192*	1.21	0.12	1.93
POLITICAL2	-0.312***	0.73	0.05	-4.50
CONTRACT	0.193***	1.21	0.07	3.17
INTERNAL1	0.174*	1.19	0.09	2.21
INTERNAL2	0.337**	1.40	0.17	2.73
EXTERNAL1	-0.166**	0.85	0.06	-2.39
EXTERNAL2	0.248*	1.28	0.16	1.97
FISCAL1	-0.159**	0.85	0.05	-2.59

Note. Superintendents ( $n=525$ ), push-induced departures ( $n=155$ ), pull-induced departures ( $n=370$ ). Log pseudo-likelihood = -240.71, Wald  $\chi^2(8) = 120.61$ , Prob> $\chi^2 = 0.000$ ; Pearson  $\chi^2(513) = 541.62$ , Prob> $\chi^2 = 0.185$ . Goodness-of-fit statistics: Efron  $R^2 = 0.290$ , McFadden  $R^2 = 0.244$ , McKelvey and Zavoina  $R^2 = 0.398$ , Cragg and Uhler  $R^2 = 0.365$ . Robust standard errors are clustered by states ( $n=48$ ). \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

unit change in the variable, holding all other variables at a fixed value, the log odds of a push-induced departure increase by 0.193. The odds ratio (OR = 1.21) denotes that superintendents who indicated their employment contract provisions were not sufficient to prevent a politically driven termination by the school board were 21% more likely to experience a push-induced departure.

**INTERNAL1: *Teacher and administration interaction during labor negotiations.*** The coefficient estimate ( $\beta = 0.174$ ) can be interpreted such that for every one unit change in the variable, holding all other variables at a fixed value, the log odds of a push-induced departure increase by 0.174. The odds ratio (OR = 1.19) means that superintendents who indicated that teacher associations and the administration did not work together well in labor contract negotiations were 19% more likely to experience a push-induced departure.

**INTERNAL2: *Principal and administration interaction in resolving issues.*** The coefficient estimate ( $\beta = 0.337$ ) suggests that for every one unit change in the variable, holding all other variables at a fixed value, the log odds of a push-induced departure increase by 0.337. The odds ratio (OR = 1.40) implies that superintendents who indicated that principals and the administration did not work well together to resolve internal administrative issues and disagreements were 40% more likely to experience a push-induced departure.

**EXTERNAL1: *Politician and community business leader pressures.*** The coefficient estimate ( $\beta = -0.166$ ) means that for every one unit change in the variable, holding all other variables at a fixed value, the log odds of a push-induced departure decrease by 0.166. The odds ratio (OR = 0.85) implies that superintendents who indicated that political and community business leader pressures did not have an influence on district decisions were 15% less likely to experience a push-induced departure.

**EXTERNAL2: *School district connectivity to the personality and life of the community.*** The coefficient estimate ( $\beta = 0.248$ ) shows for every one unit change in the variable, holding all other variables at a fixed value, the

log odds of a push-induced departure increase by 0.248. The odds ratio (OR = 1.28) implies that superintendents who indicated the school district was not connected to the personality and life of the community were 28% more likely to experience a push-induced departure.

**FISCAL1: *Impact of declining reserve balances on fiscal policy and budgeting decisions.*** The coefficient estimate ( $\beta = -0.159$ ) implies that for every one unit change in the variable, holding all other variables at a fixed value, the log odds of a push-induced departure decrease by 0.159. The odds ratio (OR = 0.85) implies that superintendents who indicated that declining reserve balances did not have an impact on formulating fiscal policy and budgeting were 15% less likely to experience a push-induced departure.

### Model Classification

Table 5 provides the confusion matrix data used to assess the model's predictive power and classification accuracy. The matrix—or classification table—incorporates a probability cutoff  $\pi=0.5$  to balance model sensitivity and specificity, and to ensure that the percentage of involuntary departures correctly classified as push-induced is roughly equal to the percentage of voluntary departures correctly classified as pull-induced.

The results indicate 49.70% model sensitivity (push-induced departures predicted correctly) and 91.9% model specificity (pull-induced departures predicted correctly). Sensitivity is the ratio between the true positives (rural superintendents who are correctly classified as push-induced departures) and all superintendents who are positives (superintendents who should be characterized as positives). Specificity is the ratio between the true negatives (rural superintendents correctly classified as pull-induced departures) and all superintendents who are negatives (superintendents who are negatives no matter how they are classified). The predictive value for a positive result (the probability that a rural superintendent actually experiences a push-induced departure) was 72.0%. The predictive value for a negative result (the probability that a superintendent

Table 5

#### *Logistic Regression: Model Classification*

Departure	Total sample ( <i>n</i> )	Predicted correct (%)	Predictive value (%)
Likely to be push-induced	155	49.7	72.0
Likely to be pull-induced	370	91.9	81.3
Total	525	79.4	-

*Note.* Superintendents ( $n=525$ ). Events classified as push-induced departure (true positive) if predicted value of the response variable  $\geq 0.50$ ; otherwise classified as pull-induced departure (true negative)



actually experiences a pull-induced departure) was 81.3%. Overall, the model predicted correctly 79.4% of the time.

## Discussion

Past research of top executive career movement in the public sector found that conflict with governing boards, weak employment contracts, pressures from internal subunits within the organization, community stakeholder demands, and fiscal stress increased a top public executive's likelihood of experiencing an involuntary or forced departure (Clingermayer, Feiock & Stream, 2003; Feiock & Stream, 2002; Tekniepe, 2014; Tekniepe & Stream, 2010, 2012). This study had similar findings applied to the career movement of rural school superintendents.

First, factors related to political conflict have been shown to have an effect on the probability that a rural superintendent will experience an involuntary departure. Specifically, increases in school board member training and knowledge diminish the probability of push-induced departures. When a superintendent views board members as having a sufficient amount of training and knowledge to effectively perform their job functions, adversarial tension and mistrust between the two parties both wane. In the reverse, when a superintendent loses trust in the board's abilities to provide substantive guidance, antagonism between the board members and the superintendent can result, precipitating the board to dismiss the superintendent or encourage him or her to seek employment elsewhere.

On the other hand, when school boards micromanage the internal operations of the school district, the probability of push-induced departures increases. This result is consistent with other studies that found that superintendents are dismissed less often when the school board views their job performance in a positive light. Improvements in the working relations between school boards and superintendents can lead to an increase in leadership stability, but when disagreements between the two parties arise, a board may be inclined to dismiss the superintendent or encourage that person to seek employment elsewhere.

Second, strong employment contracts are shown to reduce the probability of involuntary superintendent departure, while weak employment contracts have the opposite effect—i.e., hasten a push-induced termination. Unsurprisingly, it is becoming more common for superintendents to negotiate employment contracts that provide sufficient protection from politically driven terminations. Contracts that offer this protection are generally multi-year contracts, and while these contracts do not guarantee employment for the full term of the agreement, they do provide stability against the vast array of occupational pressures and challenges that a superintendent may encounter.

Third, internal pressures are linked to involuntary departures of rural school superintendents. A lack of cohesiveness and mutual understanding among principals, faculty members, and superintendents during labor negotiations, labor problems, and other key problem-solving efforts increases the probability of push-induced departures. It takes a superintendent's appreciation of this partnership, interpersonal skills, and experience in labor relations to make for a cohesive partnership. When superintendents do not effectively build constructive relationships with internal stakeholders, it often indicates a leadership style that does not include a commitment to teamwork and collegiality. When internal subunits view a superintendent in this light, that superintendent's decisions can appear ad hoc and even haphazard. This condition can exacerbate numerous other internal and external pressures on the superintendent and, in turn, increase the probability of a push-induced departure.

Fourth, external pressures are interconnected with involuntary superintendent departures. When pressures from community stakeholders (such as politicians and business leaders) are minimized, the probability of push-induced departures decreases, but when the superintendent views the school district as disconnected from the personality and life of the community, the probability of push-induced departures increases. Many times community stakeholders are uninformed about a school district's issues and demand actions solely reflecting their own agenda, whether or not they are in the best interest of the community and district. When a board chooses to allow community stakeholders to have undue influence in change at the superintendent level, the risk of a superintendent's being pushed out of office can increase.

Fifth, fiscal stress has been shown to have an impact on superintendent turnover: Superintendents in school districts in which low reserve balances in the general operating fund impact fiscal policy and budgeting decisions were more likely to experience a push-induced departure. The results of this study suggest that an organization's lack of adequate financial resources can be directly linked to an increased level of stress on the part of the leader. In the case of rural superintendents, limited resources and increased operating costs likely cause high levels of friction among the superintendent, school board, faculty, and staff. Some superintendents may find that providing a satisfactory quality of education under unreasonably tight fiscal constraints is simply too much to endure.

## Conclusion

The outcomes of this study, while interesting in terms of academic research, have larger implications for individuals motivated in becoming, or retaining the position of, rural superintendent. Specifically, the findings can provide

insight into rural school boards in districts where high rates of involuntary departures of superintendents exists. They can also inform future rural superintendents on the factors contributing to potential forced departures.

One important way in which rural superintendents can shield themselves from involuntary departures is to learn how to interpret and predict the political landscape—both internal and external—and adjust accordingly. Another mechanism is to negotiate multi-year employment contracts that provide protection from politically driven terminations—an approach that will undoubtedly be tested in the upcoming years. Lastly, superintendents should become well versed in fiscal management, both to ensure self-survival and to guarantee a solid future for their district in difficult economic times.

To further establish a well-developed research base on rural superintendent turnover, future research should analyze and compare the results of this study to the responses of rural superintendents who were not seeking alternative employment opportunities. Such research would help to determine why some superintendents choose to leave and others choose to stay. Also, the results of this study could be compared to similar research on non-rural superintendent departures to better discern the differences in dynamics between the two groups.

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