

# **School Board Presidents Describe Critical Incidents with Superintendents**

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## **ABSTRACT**

*The purpose of this study was to identify what school board presidents perceived to be critical incidents with their superintendents. Eighty-seven percent (87%) of school board presidents in Nebraska responded. Of these 239 superintendents, 68 (28%) experienced a critical incident and 60 (88%) agreed to discuss the incidents. Incidents were grouped into 11 categories: Communication/human relations, staffing, ethics, competence, personal issues, finance, athletics, credentials, policy, New Age Church, and board members. The findings of this study have implications for the field of educational administration, preparation programs, state and local professional associations, and superintendent and school board member roles.*

## **SCHOOL BOARD PRESIDENTS DESCRIBE CRITICAL INCIDENTS WITH SUPERINTENDENTS**

School boards are central to the governance of one of the essential components of American society. Kerr and Gade (1989) in *The Guardians* describe the board-administrator relationship as being analogous to Siamese twins.

Lay control of schools is unique because it is both inside and outside of the organization. Thus, boards have the capacity to look both ways (Kerr & Gade, 1989).

This study is a sequel to previous research concerning superintendents' perceptions of critical incidents with school board members (Grady & Bryant, 1990). One of the recommendations that emerged from the study of superintendents was that a comparable study should be conducted with school board members as the subjects. This study is a response to that recommendation.

The literature that formed the context for this study focused on the tension between the school board and superintendent, and governance and administration (Hunkins, 1949; Hosman, 1989). A major topic in education journals between 1980 and 1989 was the relationship between the school board and the superintendent (Ayalon, 1989; Cunningham & Hentges, 1982; Shannon, 1989; Tallerico, 1989; Trotter & Downey, 1989).

The purpose for conducting this study was to identify what school board presidents perceived to be critical incidents in their work with superintendents. For the study, school board presidents responded to the following:

1. Describe a critical incident you have experienced with a superintendent.
2. What were the consequences of the critical incident?

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## PROCEDURES

Both quantitative and qualitative methods were used to address the purpose of the study. All 275 school board presidents of K-12 school districts in Nebraska received a letter explaining the study. The board presidents responded to two questions: have you experienced a critical incident with a superintendent; and, if you have, would you be willing to discuss the incident? The researchers intentionally refrained from defining what was meant by critical incident in order to allow each responding school board president the freedom to determine what was and was not critical.

After two mailings and follow up telephone calls, 239 (87%) of the school board presidents responded. Of the respondents, 68 (28%) experienced a critical incident, and 60 (88%) agreed to discuss the incidents.

Fifty-nine school board presidents (98%) were available for telephone interviews during Summer 1990. The school board presidents answered ten open-ended questions in sequence during interviews of 30-40 minutes in length. The 59 school board presidents described 75 incidents with superintendents.

Each researcher independently reviewed the transcripts of the interviews and identified the critical incidents. The researchers compared their findings to verify accurate identification and naming of the incidents. Independently, the researchers developed categories of incidents. The researchers then compared the categories and developed the final typology of incidents. The results are reported in the following section.

## RESULTS

The interviews provided a rich data base representing 75 incidents school board presidents experienced with superintendents. The incidents were grouped into 11 categories that appear in Table 1. The 11 categories and their frequencies were: communication/human relations, 28 (37%); staffing issues, 11 (15%); ethics, 8 (11%); competence, 6 (8%); personal issues 5 (7%); finance, 5 (7%); athletics, 4 (5%); credentials, 3 (4%); policy, 3 (4%); New Age Church, 1 (1%); and board member, 1 (1%). Each of these categories is described in the following sections.

### *Communication/Human Relations*

The most frequently cited critical incidents concerned communication/human relations. Twenty-eight of the 75 incidents (37%) were in this category.

The school board presidents referred to these incidents as communications or human relations issues. The school board presidents described superintendents who were intimidating, reluctant to share information with the school board, publicly argumentative, and unwilling, or unable, to get along with people both in the schools and in the communities.

Instances of intimidation included a superintendent whose method of handling disagreements with people was "intimidation, he would yell at people." Another superintendent, described as strong willed, held a philosophy of "my way or no way" and used intimidation to achieve his objectives. One board president reported a superintendent who "more or less likes or tries to intimidate. We've lost some very qualified people that were paranoid about their positions because of him."

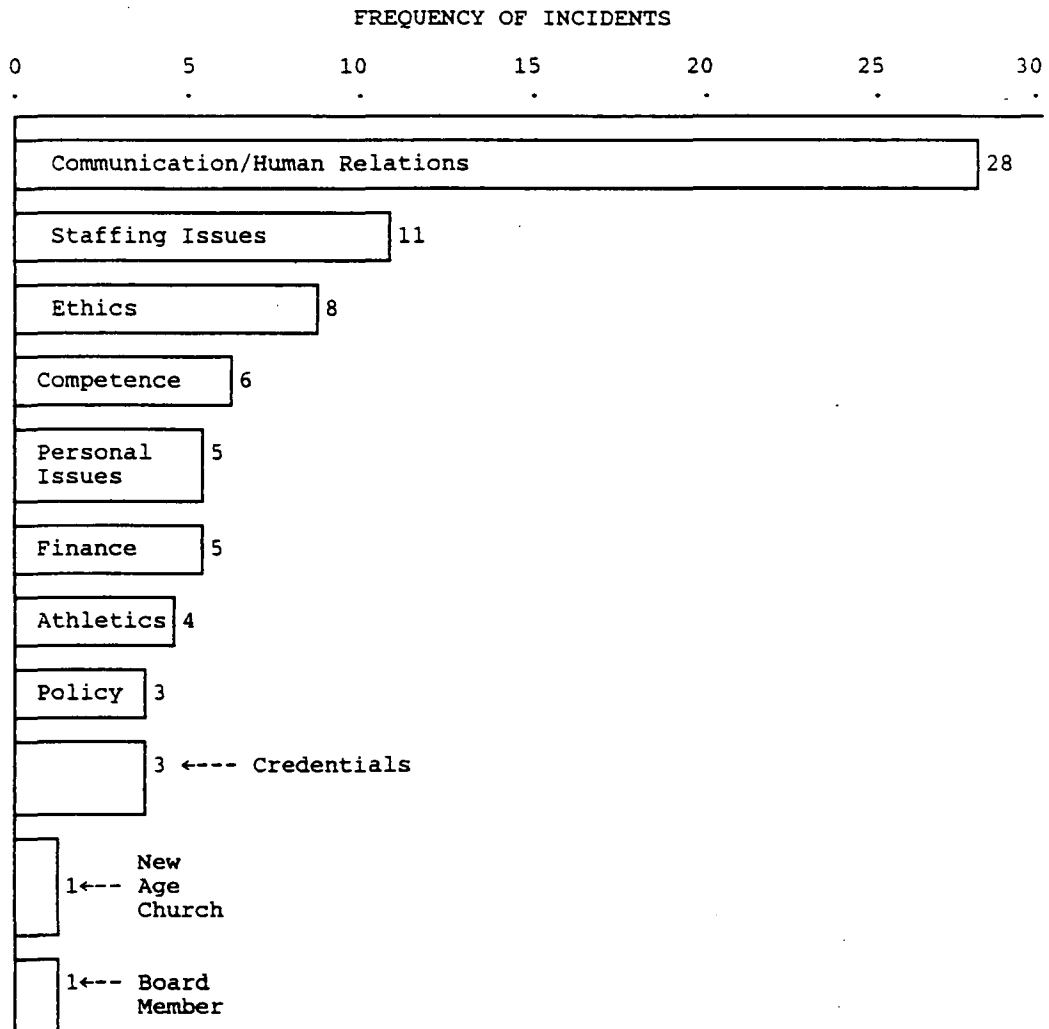
Examples of the withholding of information included the following. One school board president said: "People felt they did not get a clear answer from him." Another board president reported that "the whole system was kept from the school board members. They weren't aware of how or where the money was spent." Another incident included a superintendent who "withheld information, wouldn't answer questions, kept the board president in the dark."

The board presidents described displays of temper, yelling and shouting, and other forms of argumentative communication by superintendents. One board president reported: "He was mad that I confronted him. From that point on it was a constant battle. He was fighting mad if I disagreed with him. That was how he handled people. This went on for four years until he finally resigned."

Another board president described the following incident.

This was a reaction to a statement I made at a board meeting. I think it had to do with a computer purchase. I made the comment offhandedly about one of these days having to close the school down because we'd end up computerized. He got outraged and flew off the handle. He said, 'if you

Table 1  
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 with Superintendents



sons of bitches don't want to go along with things' and on and on. I feel I was caught with my pants down. He was screaming and yelling . . . He gets upset when we voice opinions that are contrary to his. He takes things personally and thinks we're against him.

The school board presidents described superintendents who were unable to get along with others both

in the schools and in the community. One board president referred to a superintendent "who didn't like to socialize or mingle with people. He had very little personality and didn't get involved in the community."

Another board president reported a general lack of communication. "He doesn't get out and work with staff to promote harmony. He stays apart from them, keeps his distance."

Another example included a superintendent who "basically had a problem with public relations. He

seemed to have a little fire going with someone all the time. After awhile the staff got very irritable with him. They grew uncomfortable with him and resented him because he was on them all the time . . . . He had a problem communicating with the community. We have 275 students and 500 population in town. Everyone becomes friends. He didn't get along with people. He had a gruff way about him."

Another board president described a superintendent who's "relationships with the teachers and other faculty became almost adversarial. He didn't support them. He was anti-teacher in his talks and whenever he'd bring issues to the board he spoke negatively about teachers. The morale was so poor and relationships with teachers was so bad we decided we needed to let him go."

Fourteen of the 28 incidents (50%) described as communications/human relations problems resulted in the resignations or terminations of the superintendents. The incidents described by the board presidents in this category were not discrete, well-defined situations. Instead the incidents were more complex and reflected the cumulative effect of long-term poor communication and human relations skills.

### **Staffing Issues**

The second category of incidents concerned staffing issues and included 11 of the 75 incidents (15%). The school board presidents described instances of superintendents' personnel recommendations not being supported. In four incidents the superintendents attempted to terminate teachers without the support of the school board. None of the four teachers were terminated.

In one incident the superintendent wanted to select three activities directors for the schools. The board authorized only two. The board president described the superintendent's current behavior as both immature and vindictive because of the board's failure to support the staffing recommendation.

In three incidents, superintendents ignored the directives of the school board in hiring selections. One superintendent attempted to hire a very experienced teacher who was his friend, rather than two inexperienced teachers as requested by the board. The teacher was not hired and the superintendent resigned because of the incident. Another superintendent offered a coaching contract to a newly hired teacher without the approval of the school board. The coaching contract was withheld.

Two school board presidents described superintendents who were lax in their supervision of staff. One superintendent failed to terminate an athletic coach in spite of board directive to do so. Another superintendent was told to supervise a principal more closely to improve his performance. In each of these instances, the superintendents were described as lazy.

A final incident in this category occurred when a staff member was told to catheterize and diaper a special education student. The staff member protested against the assignment. The incident emerged without board awareness. The school board president described the situation as being particularly difficult because the district became involved in a grievance procedure.

### **Ethics**

Eight incidents (11%) formed a third category labeled ethics. The school board presidents identified incidents as ethical issues ranging from "covering up mistakes" to removing \$700 from a cash drawer. Two board presidents described incidents that emerged when superintendents did not report mistakes or errors to the school board. One superintendent used a school vehicle and school equipment for personal use, even though specifically directed not to do so by the school board. This same individual planted one of the trees specially purchased for the school grounds on his property.

One superintendent, with the help of his secretary, advanced his own salary for several months before the situation came to the school board's attention. The superintendent eventually declared bankruptcy.

A superintendent's wife dipped into a drawer that contained money collected for gymnasium use. When the missing \$700 was discovered, the superintendent was blamed. The superintendent resigned because of the incident.

One superintendent backed out of a contract two days after he was hired. Only when the school board contacted the individual was this breach of the contract reported.

Another superintendent falsified reports to the Department of Education. An inquiring parent seeking testing data discovered the discrepancy.

Five of the eight incidents described by the school board presidents as ethical issues resulted in superintendent resignations.

### **Competence**

Six incidents (8%) formed a fourth category labeled competence. Five of the incidents described by the school board presidents concerned superintendents who did not have "basic understanding" of the work of the superintendent. The board presidents noted that these superintendents did not know enough about their work to ask for help. Symptoms of lack of competence for the position became apparent when reports were not submitted by deadlines, when the financial status of the school district was misrepresented, or when staff evaluations were not conducted in the districts. Four resignations resulted from these incidents.

One superintendent who was too sick to accomplish the work of the district was forced to resign. The incident was particularly difficult because the superintendent had been employed in the district for 28 years. According to the school board president, "the superintendent was not aware of his incapacity." The school board president noted that the incident became critical when "we realized he hadn't been doing any of the work."

### **Personal Issues (Life in the Public Eye)**

Five incidents (7%) concerned personal issues. Of these, three involved the use of alcohol and two involved extra-marital affairs. In one incident, the superintendent of a school district left a professional meeting intoxicated. The superintendent struck a parked car but fled the scene of the accident. The incident was reported in the press.

Another school board president described a new superintendent who was unable to report to work because of his alcoholism problem. After two months, the superintendent voluntarily resigned because he was unable to work.

A third board president described a superintendent noted for his public drunkenness as well as his drunkenness on the job. The school board president stated: "He's been on the job too long (20 years). He'll never leave. The board will never fire him as long as he's friends with three."

One superintendent's car was at school but the superintendent did not appear for work. In the late morning, the secretary became concerned and notified the school board president. "When the superintendent showed up in the evening he was quite upset that we'd been concerned." Both the superintendent and the school staff member involved in the affair with this married superintendent resigned.

In a similar incident, the superintendent was having an affair with his secretary. The school board president said: "It was pretty obvious that it was occurring . . . I made the decision to handle this discretely. My approach to the board was that it was time for a change in superintendents but I did not reveal information about the affair to them. The board agreed. From there I talked with the man and confronted him. He was very concerned about how this would affect his marriage. He ended up deciding to resign."

### **Finance**

The fifth category included five (7%) incidents related to finance issues. One school board president reported that the superintendent did not understand the financial affairs of the district. The situation became particularly apparent during the month in which the bills for the district totaled \$40,000 more than was available.

In another incident, four members of the school board proceeded to negotiate the purchase of a building without the knowledge of the superintendent or the other members of the board. Although the purchase of the building was not completed, the superintendent resigned because of the incident.

An eight million dollar bond issue failed by 42 votes in one school district. According to the school board president, this incident was critical for the school district because the school enrollments had increased 25-30%. Another incident concerning spending and taxation resulted in a recall election. Four board members, described by the board president as members of the John Birch Society, were recalled because of their views on cutting taxes and reducing spending.

A school board president described a complex incident that occurred when a superintendent did not understand the budgeting process. According to the report, the superintendent permitted funds to be combined. Ultimately, this resulted in the withholding of \$300,000 in federal funds. After an audit and a new superintendent the financial affairs of the district were restored to order after ten months.

### **Athletics**

Four incidents (5%) involved athletics. One incident emerged when a plan to develop cooperative athletic programs with another school district fueled a community controversy. One community member distributed inaccurate information concerning the cooperative venture throughout the district. The school

board president noted the power of an individual on issues such as athletics. Ultimately, the cooperative program did not succeed.

Another school board president described a superintendent who was passive in the area of evaluations. In this incident, an athletic coach was the subject of controversy. The coach used profanity and was "a poor role model as the coach of a girls' athletic team." The superintendent was directed to terminate the coach.

One board president described a critical incident involving a superintendent who chose to retain a coach rather than hire a math/computer science teacher. The board president did not agree with the superintendent's priorities. The board president noted that academics should be given priority.

Another incident involving athletics emerged when a superintendent did not control spending by the coaches. The situation became extreme. The school board president noted: "The bill got so bad that a couple of sporting goods companies called board members to find out why bills weren't being paid. The superintendent hated to admit he didn't have control over the coaching staff."

### **Credentials**

Three incidents (4%) concerned superintendents' credentials. In each of these three incidents, the school board president noted that the superintendent's credentials were not thoroughly reviewed prior to employment. One superintendent could not handle the "basic management." The school board president said "the board that hired him should have checked him closer, though he was hiding things." The superintendent did not have administrative certification. The superintendent resigned in mid-year.

One school board president described terminating a superintendent who was using his position for his personal benefit. The superintendent was described as incapable of performing the job. The school board president noted: "the main problem was our board's fault — we didn't check that man out. We didn't spend enough time hiring him and we got burned. Plus he didn't have the kind of skills he needed to be a superintendent."

Another board president described the process of terminating a superintendent within the first year of his superintendency. The school board president said: "We didn't check him out as well as we should have. We did make 1-2 phone calls to former school districts but they didn't give us any indication they had let him go."

### **Policy**

Three incidents (4%) concerned policy issues. In two incidents, superintendents chose to support decisions made by building principals rather than support the school district policies. In one incident, a board policy provided for the selection of a valedictorian and salutatorian. When the principal and superintendent selected two valedictorians and no salutatorian, the board members cited the school district policy. The school board president said: "He didn't listen to the board. He sided with the principal and guidance counselor. He forgot who his employer was." Eventually the principal resigned his position.

In another incident, a principal brought in a family services group to make a presentation to students. The board expected to be notified of the presentation while the superintendent was away from the district. The school board president noted that the principal "was trying to pull one over on everyone including the superintendent." In the end, the superintendent supported the principal.

Another incident involved the school district nepotism policy. When a new superintendent accepted his position, he asked for a job for his wife. The school district's nepotism policy prevented employment of his wife. The superintendent continued to besiege the school board for a job for his wife. The school board upheld the policy. The superintendent resigned.

### **New Age Church**

One incident (1%) concerned the activities of the minister of a local new age church group. Led by the minister, the group forced the superintendent's resignation, citing the existence of satanism in the schools as the key issue. One school board member belonged to the group. The school board president noted, though, that "the preacher instigated it."

### **Board Member**

One incident (1%) occurred when an individual board member made accusations against the superintendent. Although the board president said the accusations were false, eventually after three months the superintendent resigned. The board president noted that "I don't know why this particular board member has something against the superintendent. It's still confusing."

## CONSEQUENCES

In addition to the identification of critical incidents, the investigators inquired about school board presidents' perceptions of the consequences of these incidents. When asked what the consequences of the critical incidents were, the school board presidents identified both tangible and intangible consequences. As a tangible consequence, the school board presidents described superintendents' resignations and terminations. Of the 75 incidents the school board presidents reported, 40 (54%) incidents resulted in superintendent resignations or terminations.

As an intangible consequence, the school board presidents described the negative aura that pervaded staff relationships and the school districts after the incidents. The board presidents also reported distrust and suspicion as consequences of the incidents.

## IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study have implications for the field of educational administration generally, and specifically for the following: colleges and universities that prepare administrators; state and local professional associations; administrators; and school board members.

### *Colleges and Universities*

Colleges and universities should review these findings in relation to the curriculum offered to future administrators. These school board presidents did not report incidents concerning academic or curriculum issues, nor were the issues related to business affairs, legal issues, or legislative issues. Only five incidents were related to finance.

Communication, public relations, interpersonal relations, and human relations were the dominant themes in these reports. Because of the dominance of these issues, a substantial portion of the preparation experiences for would-be superintendents should be focused on helping individuals improve public relations, interpersonal relations, and human relations skills. Emphasis on communication skills, both verbal and nonverbal, should be part of this preparation.

Preparation programs should include conflict resolution skills so that superintendents are able to

resolve some of the incidents described in this report. Superintendents should have the skills to handle conflict. Superintendents' preparation should include coursework in assessing community power structures. A number of these incidents arose because superintendents did not understand the power bases in the communities. Superintendent preparation should include experience in developing a vision and goals for the superintendent's role and for school districts. Many of the reported incidents were not related to the education of children. Superintendents who articulate a vision and clear goals for the education of children may be able to defuse incidents not related to the vision and goals of a school district.

Superintendents need to recognize situations that may lead to superintendent turnover. In this study, superintendent turnovers occurred because of the critical incidents. Identifying the causes of superintendent turnover and developing skills in handling similar situations should be considerations in preparation experiences. The literature on school administration needs to reflect the incidence and causes of superintendent turnover. Superintendent turnover is a typical occurrence precipitated by a complex set of factors related to individuals, governance, and community structure.

Superintendents need to work in settings in which job descriptions, role expectations, and evaluation procedures are clearly established as part of district policies. A number of these incidents may have been avoided if expectations had been clearly specified. Preparation programs for superintendents should include opportunities to review job descriptions and evaluation procedures used by superintendents and school boards to assure that district operations function smoothly. Similarly, superintendents should have an understanding of the role of the school board.

### *Professional Associations*

Professional associations have the opportunity to offer workshops that reflect the contemporary needs of their membership. Once superintendents leave their university preparation programs, they rely on professional associations to assist them in meeting their educational needs. Superintendents may look to their administrative associations for their continuing professional education. Administrative organizations may need to provide opportunities for superintendents to develop their interpersonal, communication, conflict resolution, and community assessment skills. Similarly, the associations might assist superintendents in the development of job descriptions, evaluation proce-

dures and job expectations. The professional associations could also report the incidence of superintendent turnover in the state and region.

### **Board Members**

Based on the findings of this study, school board members would benefit from preparation experiences for their roles as board members. Board members may need a clearer understanding of their roles and responsibilities. Responsibility for providing preparation for board membership may be unclear.

School board members, as elected, unpaid public officials may benefit from a specialized preparation program for their board member roles. Board members have an important public responsibility that they must fulfill often without a clearly defined professional staff to assist them. In some cases the superintendent and other administrators may serve as "staff" to the school board. However, in the incidents described by these board presidents, the superintendents did not serve as "staff" to the board.

In the absence of a paid professional staff, an ideal preparatory experience for a board member would include a required pre-election orientation for board membership. After election, newly-seated board members should be required to attend additional preparation sessions. Annually members of boards should attend workshops designed to emphasize board member roles and responsibilities.

State legislation may be necessary to facilitate the development of an ideal program of board member preparation. Legislators should provide financial resources and policy direction to stimulate development activities. Providers of the board member programs could be state Departments of Education, regional service units, school board associations, or universities.

Who provides the education for board members is a critical issue. Since affiliation with a state school board association is voluntary, the responsibility for providing this education may rest with a state Department of Education since its outreach extends to all schools in a state. Ultimately, the education of board members should focus on the policy making function of the board of education.

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