

## CHAPTER ONE

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# *Introduction*

*There is no better place to be than where you are, and no better time than now to make a difference.*

—Jim Kelly, member of the NFL Hall of Fame

The local school district, governed by community members and supported primarily through taxes, is a concept that originated in America more than 350 years ago. This unique pattern of providing education began in the Massachusetts Bay Colony in the mid-1600s and spread throughout the young colonies. During the Westward Movement, settlers formed small, isolated communities, and one of their first concerns was to build a school. The framers of the U.S. Constitution knew that if democracy was to survive, the masses must be educated. They did not, however, specifically mention education in the federal Constitution. Consequently, it is up to each state, through its constitution and statutes, to provide for the education of its citizenry, which has resulted in significant local control of the schools. And whose job is it to lead this critical effort on the local school district level? The superintendent, of course, is charged with this very challenging role of maximizing student learning.

### **ROLE OF THE SUPERINTENDENT**

Houston (2006) notes that “the golden era for the superintendency lasted from the beginning until the middle of the 20th century, with

a generation of community leaders who were respected for their business acumen and their moral courage in taking care of the nation's future through its common schools" (p. 2). Since the turbulence of the 1960s, the authority of the superintendent has lessened despite the increasing complexity of the superintendent's role. He or she is often subject to public criticism, for it is the superintendent who is the "face" of the school district and, as such, is charged with providing instructional leadership and with orchestrating the daily operations of one of the largest "businesses" in the community.

## **QUALIFICATIONS FOR THE SUPERINTENDENCY**

Douglas Reeves (2004) described a qualified superintendent as a person who has managed an entrenched bureaucracy; who has developed a multimillion-dollar budget; who knows how to deal with a demanding community and an aggressive press; who has a mission, leadership skills, political smarts, and management prowess; who will improve teacher quality but is also an inspiring leader; and who is committed to the advancement of all children. He then noted that we want our leaders to be folk heroes who have the "insight of Lao-tzu, the courage of a New York firefighter, and the work ethic of Paul Bunyan" (p. 57). Additionally, the literature suggests that, to be successful, superintendents must understand instruction, know how to use data, be able to interpret accountability measures, provide resources, be visible, empower risk takers, encourage collaboration, lead diverse groups of stakeholders (Lashway, 2002), be devoted to students, have strong interpersonal skills, build community relationships (Cooper, Fusarelli, & Carella, 2000), and work with the school board (Dahlkemper, 2005). In short, the wisdom of Lao-Tzu, the courage of New York firefighters, and the work ethic of Paul Bunyan just might not be enough to do the job today!

## **PURPOSE OF THIS BOOK**

As a former superintendent, I often felt overwhelmed and knew there was not enough time in the day to discover everything I needed to know and do to be most effective. Many times during the more than

twelve-hour day (a typical workday for superintendents) when confronted with challenging issues, I would wonder what other superintendents would do in this situation. My purpose in writing this book, therefore, was to discover from award-winning superintendents what they feel has helped them successfully lead their schools. Over the past eighteen months, I have contacted over 100 superintendents who have been recognized for their effectiveness in leading students in their school districts to new levels of achievement. Twenty-two practicing and former superintendents responded by sharing some of their most effective practices. Collectively, these superintendents represent over 250 years of experience. Whereas many were selected to participate because they had been recognized for their professional leadership as superintendents, others were selected because their districts had been recognized for outstanding achievement during their tenures as superintendents. Some of the award-winning superintendents who participated in this project listed many of their recognitions; others listed only a few. They have led schools in sixteen states: Alabama, Connecticut, Delaware, Kansas, Illinois, Indiana, Massachusetts, Michigan, Missouri, Nevada, Oklahoma, Oregon, New York, Texas, Virginia, and Wisconsin. They have shared well over 100 good ideas for you to consider, revise, and implement.

I emailed award-winning superintendents inviting them to contribute to this book by detailing what they considered their best practices. My request was open-ended. I simply asked the superintendents to share those practices they considered to be most responsible for their effectiveness as leaders. After reading carefully through the submissions, I categorized the practices that were submitted into five primary areas based on the main theme of the articles' contents: Leadership That Transforms Schools, Community Building, Changing Times, School Reform, and a general advice section that I call More Creative Ideas That Work. There is much overlap in these themes as many submissions cover more than one topic area. In fact, leadership, community building, changing times, and school reform are so closely related that, in some cases, submissions actually discuss all of the topic areas. My rationale in placing submissions within a specific chapter was based on the following belief: *leadership* that transforms schools must be in place to *build community* within the schoolhouse and the larger community in these *changing times*, which are exacerbating the

need for *school reform*. Edits were made in each submission, and I often divided longer submissions by topic area and placed them in different chapters. Using a fieldbook format, I attempted to keep the voice of the superintendents distinct and individual throughout the book; thus, the reader will notice a variety of writing styles.

At the end of each chapter (for chapters 2–5), I have included a brief summary of the research on that chapter topic and a summary of the award-winning practices superintendents shared with me. By glancing at the bulleted summary lists, the reader can quickly review the most effective practices included in that chapter. Reflection questions are included as well since learning about the most effective practices of others is important, but the real challenge is to take those ideas and revise and refine them to fit other school situations. The chapters conclude with a list of online resources to help readers gather extra information about supplemental ideas mentioned by the superintendents. Chapter 6 includes general advice, a recommended book list, and brief words of wisdom from the participating superintendents. Superintendents who responded to my query about their most effective practices represent an array of school districts with diverse populations, school sizes, and communities. The leaders are just as diverse in their experiences, yet all have been recognized many times for their strong, effective work as educational leaders.

Superintendents are not mythical heroes; instead, they are flesh and blood examples of heroes. I recently saw a sign that read something like, “If Celebrity were Integrity, . . . you would know our names.” That sign could well have been about school superintendents. I have heard it said that a candle loses nothing when lighting another candle, instead, the room becomes brighter. So it is with sharing good ideas. We lose nothing by sharing; instead, the world is a better place when good ideas are shared, implemented, revised, and refined—over and over again.