

MISSOURI SUPERINTENDENTS' PERCEPTION OF A SENSE OF URGENCY TO  
IMPROVE STUDENT ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

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ABSTRACT

This exploratory study examined the relationship between superintendents' perceived sense of urgency and student academic performance. More specifically, the study examined the leadership of Missouri superintendents based upon a district's Annual Performance Report. The Missouri Annual Performance Report ranks districts from highest to lowest with the following designations: performance with distinction; full waiver; limited waiver; provisionally accredited; and, unaccredited. This study focused only on the sense of urgency in the districts performing with distinction, performing with a full waiver, and performing with a limited waiver due to limited sample size in the lower levels of provisionally accredited and unaccredited. A total of 98 superintendents in Missouri were included in this study. Quantitative data were collected using survey responses. Superintendents responded to items about their perceptions of their own sense of urgency to improve student academic performance, the source of their urgency, their purposeful communication of urgency, their perceptions of change of urgency in district stakeholders, and the strategies used to communicate the urgency. Data from the surveys were analyzed using analysis of variance, analysis of covariance, and step-wise linear regression.

Superintendents in districts performing with a limited waiver reported a

significantly stronger sense of urgency to improve student academic performance than did superintendents in districts performing with distinction at the end of the first year in their position as superintendent. Superintendents in districts with a limited waiver also reported a significantly stronger sense of urgency to improve student academic performance than did superintendents in districts performing with distinction at the time of the survey. Superintendents in districts with a limited waiver purposefully communicated significantly more often than superintendents in districts performing with distinction with boards of education. In addition, superintendents in districts with a limited waiver purposefully communicated significantly more frequently with all district teachers than superintendents in districts performing with distinction. Superintendents leading districts performing with a limited waiver and superintendents leading districts with a full waiver identified an impending crisis to communicate a sense of urgency to improve student academic performance significantly more often than superintendents leading districts performing with distinction.

Through regression analysis, Providing Opportunities for Success, Identifying an Impending Crisis, Setting Goals and Targets, and Utilizing Data were communication strategies significantly associated with the degree to which the sense of urgency to improve student academic performance increased throughout the district. Regression findings also implied that utilizing the communication strategy “providing opportunities for success” could increase the sense of urgency for boards of education, district administrators, building principals, teacher leaders, all district teachers and the media.

Throughout this study it was evident that superintendents leading districts with a limited waiver, which indicates lower student academic performance, reported a stronger

sense of urgency to improve student achievement than did their counterparts in higher performing districts. These superintendents purposefully communicated a sense of urgency more often and they used the communication strategy of “identifying an impending crisis” more frequently to increase a sense of urgency across their districts than did superintendents in districts with higher student performance. In addition, when superintendents utilize the communication strategy of “providing opportunities for success,” which includes actions such as articulating a vision and implementing a purposeful school improvement process, an increase in a sense of urgency to improve student achievement is more likely to occur.