

# Do Districtwide Supervisors Make a Difference?

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**An ASCD Task Force is encouraging research and study in an effort to find out—and to inform school boards and administrators.**

During the last decade the number of districtwide instructional supervisors has slowly but steadily declined. Declining enrollments undoubtedly have had a great deal to do with this trend. However, the loss of positions also suggests that a lower priority is being given to districtwide curriculum and instructional leadership. Ironically, this lower priority seems to be inconsistent with mounting demands for increased educational effectiveness.

ASCD is concerned about this development and is seeking to focus attention on the roles, functions, and impact of districtwide supervisory personnel. In October 1982 the ASCD Executive Council appointed a Task Force to study this situation and to generate data that would document supervisory staffing patterns, the effects of different supervisory approaches on education, and the implications of these findings for the development of more effective schools.

First, the Task Force surveyed the data already available. This included a search of ERIC data, solicitation of input from each state's chief school official, and inquiries to several educational research and development laboratories. This effort revealed that objective data on the role and importance of districtwide supervisors are largely unavailable. However, these efforts enabled the committee to formulate some specific questions and hunches to serve as the focus for new research about districtwide supervisors.

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The Task Force hopes that these impressions will serve to encourage others to become involved in the project by sharing any experiences, knowledge, and research data that might more clearly establish the role and importance of districtwide supervisors.

*Supervisors: A neglected, forgotten, lonely group.* The committee's initial investigation yielded no documented evidence that supervisors do make a difference. More startling, however, is the discovery that there is no system in effect for collecting data about effectiveness and influence of supervisors. Their roles, expectancies, and job descriptions are often vague. They are expected to play a low-key role and to make others—teachers and administrators—"look good." Thus, they receive little credit for or feedback about their accomplishments. Because central office supervisors' job descriptions are poorly defined and their role misunderstood, teachers often form negative concepts about their usefulness. Supervisors' time and energies are often used, and sometimes abused, by district administrators. Superintendents ask them to deal with tedious paperwork, to generate data to justify and support central office causes, and to help maintain their positive image in the view of the board and the public. Principals often use them to evaluate and assist in dismissing incompetent teachers. These circumstances tend to interfere with the helping relationship needed to work productively with other staff members.

Supervisors' jobs are constantly in jeopardy at the bargaining table, but they seldom have an advocate during the negotiating process. When claims are made that there are "too many administrators up in the central office," the "excess" supervisory personnel are usually the first to go.

*Why would anybody want to be one?* In spite of the ambiguity, delayed grati-

fication, and job insecurity, there are certain joys in being a supervisor. The position is often sought by "upwardly mobile" educators, who use it temporarily as a stepping stone to a position of higher authority and influence. More often, however, the position is valued by "consultative types," who find stimulation in working with teachers to improve student learning and who value the autonomy of setting their own schedules and the freedom of pursuing their own interests. They thrive on self-improvement and professional growth opportunities that come with working on "cutting edge" developments in educational organizations and in working with other personnel in similar curriculum and instruction positions.

*Who are they?* The labels given to people who perform curriculum and supervisory functions are varied. They seem to fall into two broad categories: line and staff. Some typical *line* titles are:

Assistant Superintendent for Instructional Programs  
Assistant Superintendent in Charge of Curriculum  
Director of Curriculum  
Director of Instructional Services  
Director of Instructional Materials  
Director of (Elementary) (Secondary) Programs

Some typical *staff* titles are:  
Supervisor  
Coordinator  
Consultant  
Director of Categorical Programs (Gifted, Special Education, Migrant, and so on)  
Resource Teacher  
Specialist  
Staff Developer  
Subject Matter Specialist

*More questions than answers: a needed research agenda.* To accomplish their assignment, the Task Force is in need of answers to, and means of collecting data on such questions as:

1. What are curriculum and instructional supervisory functions?
2. How are school districts organized to perform these functions?
3. What are the consequences for curriculum and instructional effectiveness when these functions are not performed or are shifted to others?
4. Historically, what have been the role and contributions of central office supervisory personnel? Compared with the present, how have the job descriptions and staffing patterns of supervisory personnel changed over the past five to ten years?

To answer these questions, the Task Force is pursuing some research and hopes to encourage others to conduct more. Reviews of research on central office supervisor roles, staffing patterns, and effectiveness need to be located and synthesized. Surveys of selected school districts representing various sizes and geographic distribution need to be performed. To determine how supervisory functions have changed, comparisons need to be made between how districts were organized five to ten years ago and how they are presently organized. Studies need to be performed of how supervisory systems operate. Superintendents, principals, and teachers should be asked to describe their most influential supervisory experiences and to identify the qualities and characteristics of the most effective supervisors. The effects on schoolwide curriculum and instruction in those districts that have lost their supervisory/consultant staff need to be determined. "Effective" vs. "ineffective" schools and school systems need to be compared in relationship to supervisory effectiveness and staffing patterns.

To stimulate this needed research, the Task Force is allocating some of its funds for mini-grants to encourage doctoral students and others to pursue these questions. The committee is developing proposals for funding from other foundations and agencies and will be offering

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honoraria to conduct case studies and analyses. Interested ASCD members who wish to find out more information about involvement in this project may contact the committee chairman: Robert H. Anderson, c/o the ASCD headquarters office, 225 N. Washington St., Alexandria, VA 22314, or any of the committee members: Arthur Blumberg, Syracuse University, New York; Arthur Costa, California State University, Sacramento; Carl Glickman, University of Georgia, Athens; Charles Guditus, Lehigh University, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania; Louise Herot, Barlow High School, West Redding, Connecticut; Alice Houston, Seattle Public Schools, Washington; or Judy Minnehan, Oldham County School, LaGrande, Kentucky.

If it can be shown that central office supervisors do make a difference in the quality of curriculum and instruction, then school boards will need to reexamine their staffing priorities. □

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