EDITORIAL

In attempting to understand the many aspects of effectiveness in distance education, some researchers have focused on participants’ attitudes toward distance education. Understandably, early studies on this topic focused on the attitudes expressed by students and teachers. More recently, the focus on attitudes has expanded to include those involved at the administrative level of educational provision: principals, superintendents, deans, etc.

In this article, Margaret Haughey and Tara Fenwick discuss the perceptions of high-school superintendents responsible for implementing a province-wide distance education initiative in Alberta, Canada. Interested readers also may want to examine two related articles: "Distance Learning in North Dakota: A Cross-technology Study of the Schools, Administrators, Coordinators, Instructors, and Students" (V. Hobbs 1990; ED 328 225) and "What Library Schools Teach About Library Support to Distant Students: A Survey" (M. Kascus 1994; The American Journal of Distance Education 8(1).

SUPERINTENDENTS’ PERCEPTIONS OF A DISTANCE EDUCATION IMPLEMENTATION INITIATIVE

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INTRODUCTION

In Alberta, in 1989, the provincial government spearheaded an initiative to decentralize the provision of distance education programs in order to improve the access of rural secondary students to a complete high school curriculum. Revisions to the high school diploma requirements meant that many rural or smaller schools were finding it difficult to offer the broad range of courses required by students. The purpose of distance education was defined as a means to "enable the school to provide courses not otherwise available by traditional delivery methods due to (a) insufficient student numbers in these courses, or (b) absence of an on-site specialist to deliver these courses" (Alberta Education 1990a, 2).
To assist jurisdictions in implementing this initiative the government made available a Distance Education Grant to all eligible schools (those with fewer than 150 students, offering at least one distance education course, at least 30 km. from a high school with 150 or more students, and with a jurisdiction assessment per student of less than $100,000). Schools which met these criteria could receive a one-time equipment accession and installation grant, and a yearly operating grant based on the number of distance education student credits offered. Alberta Education also expected that jurisdictions would contribute to the cost of their own distance education programs from local resources. The equipment grant was most often spent on the purchase of the mini-VAX computers to run the data bases of test items, on audioconferencing equipment which would allow for real-time interaction among students and teachers, and on facsimile machines to reduce cost and time in postage and to provide quick student feedback.

Alberta Education's Distance Learning Centre continued to develop distance education course materials and these were made available for purchase to school jurisdictions. They were mainly print based but the senior-level mathematics and science courses include videotapes, and some courses—for example, mathematics—were available through computer-managed learning which provided a data base of test items. And the test banks were also available on CD ROM. Each jurisdiction was responsible for developing an appropriate infrastructure which would provide tutoring, marking and student support. Some superintendents chose to provide the services by developing linkages among schools within their own jurisdictions. Many jurisdictions formed consortia which were responsible for the coordination of these services. Most often, the tutor services were provided through some combination of presently employed teachers and retired teachers in the local community, the former involved as part of extra-curricular expectations, or to make up a full-time assignment.

Despite the short time frame for implementation, the initiative could be considered a success given the increased numbers of students who registered for distance education courses and the remarkable completion rate from approximately 30% when students accessed courses through the provincial correspondence school to 90% when they registered through their local school (Alberta Education 1990b). The people who had major responsibility for the implementation of this initiative were the school superintendents. The support they provided for the initiative and their presentations to their own school boards were crucial in influencing the extent of participation and willingness of school staffs to work with the "messiness" inherent in any change process.

In most jurisdictions, the superintendent was responsible for encouraging schools to offer the distance education programs and determining how the district would organize itself for implementation. He or she would negotiate collaborative arrangements with other districts if the decision had been made to join a consortium and take part in policy-making and management committees representing the consortium. Most importantly, superintendents often accepted responsibility for communication: articulating the potential of distance education to school boards, staff, and parents, and maintaining close communication with other districts.
This three-year study explored the perceptions of Alberta superintendents regarding the distance education initiative. We were interested in discovering the ways they had decided to organize and manage the new distance education programs, the kinds of results they were observing among staff and students, as well as some of the issues that were emerging. We also wanted to explore superintendents' own feelings and attitudes about the innovation and whether those changed over time.

This paper documents our study of superintendents' perceptions of distance education, explaining the methods we used to explore superintendents' perceptions, our findings and analysis of the data, and the implications of our conclusions for the future of distance education in school districts in Alberta.

METHODOLOGY

Basing our questions on case study data (Gonnet 1991; Haughey 1990; Hough 1992) and on conversations with government officials responsible for assisting in the implementation of the initiative, we developed a 64 item survey. The questions sought to determine superintendents' extent of understanding of distance education, the involvement of their jurisdictions, and their concerns regarding implementation. Each item statement had a Likert scale response option from 1 to 5 with 1 labeled "Low" and 5 "High".

At the time of the first survey, April 1991, the distance education initiative was completing its second year. In April 1993, when we repeated the survey and did follow-up interviews, a cut of 8% in the distance education grant had been announced. We wondered whether superintendents were still enthusiastic about the initiative or whether given the restrictions on resources they were less willing to support the implementation of distance education in their jurisdictions.

In 1991 and 1993 there were 146 jurisdictions in Alberta but only 121 superintendents, since some provided leadership for a number of small jurisdictions. In 1991, the response rate was 83%, and in 1993, 77%. Telephone interviews were held with fifteen superintendents chosen from those who agreed to a further discussion of distance education. They represented a sample of urban and rural districts located in various regions of the province and engaged in different stages of implementation of distance education. The interviews were free-flowing conversations based on open-ended questions following up some specific areas of the questionnaire.

Typically, superintendents talked about the advantages and disadvantages of distance education as they experienced it in their districts, what they perceived to be the impact of distance education on teachers and students, their attitudes towards working with a consortium of other districts to deliver distance education, and their sense of what might happen in the future with respect to distance education implementation in their districts. The findings of the two surveys and interview results are described in the next section. In reporting data, the percentages refer to 1993 data unless specified and are a combination of responses for either the first or last two response options on the scale.
DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The sources of superintendents' knowledge and understandings about distance education appeared to vary. All had records of student course completion rates and achievement in distance education courses to compare with student scores from regular classrooms. Some had completed district-wide surveys of student and staff attitudes to the new programs. A few had visited distance education classrooms and talked with teachers and students involved in implementation.

Although not questioned directly about their own role in the distance education implementation, those superintendents who were interviewed talked of themselves as active "cheerleaders," but not as "champions" of the innovation. Nor were they disposed to make the innovation mandatory in their schools. As one superintendent stated: "We've been encouraging, we've been prompting, we've been supporting any kind of initiatives that we can get, but we have not said we're going to compel." Most were quite open about the limitations in their understandings, and readily discussed their own perceived lack of sufficient knowledge about the technology involved in their current distance education implementation.

Despite some of their concerns and criticisms, most superintendents (85%) supported distance education and there had been an increase in the use of distance education between 1991 and 1993. While a quarter of superintendents in both years made extensive use of distance education, the percentage of those indicating some use rose from 55 to 61%. In 1993, over half (57%) of the superintendents said that distance education was expanding in their jurisdictions while 75% said that there had been no reduction of services.

Most agreed that a major advantage of Alberta's distance education courses was that these programs offer significant flexibility to smaller high schools. The majority felt that the distance education programs offered not only an increase in course options but also in quality of education for students in small schools, but fewer agreed that course options and quality were enhanced in larger schools. Perhaps as a result of their experience, many more superintendents (from 10% in 1991 to 34% in 1993) agreed that for small schools distance education provided educational opportunities equal to those in large schools. However, only 40% thought that distance education was absolutely essential in order for students in small schools to satisfy the diploma requirements. In contrast, one superintendent suggested that certain small schools in his district would have been threatened with closure if they hadn't been able to offer the distance education courses purchased from Alberta Education.

TEACHING

Over 60% of superintendents believed that distance education would change both the concept of teaching and of school and that it provided an opportunity for teachers to restructure their teaching role and place greater emphasis on the facilitation of instruction. In the interviews, it became apparent that while many superintendents shared a vision of significant changes to the teacher's future role, most did not view these changes as imminent.
Most interviewees reported their belief that teachers in their districts were still integrating distance education materials into their classrooms in conventional ways. However, some superintendents felt that the course modules had changed teaching practice from a focus on moving groups of students through a curriculum, to enabling a focus on individual student growth. The distance education program "forces the teacher to know where each individual student is. They're not teaching classes, they're teaching individual kids."

In the interviews, superintendents reflected varying attitudes towards their teachers. While many praised teacher initiatives, some were somewhat pessimistic about the intransigence and traditional teaching styles of staff members. This issue was identified as one of professional development: helping teachers gain enough knowledge about the distance education programs and enough confidence with the technology to integrate it comfortably into their instruction. One superintendent felt a real need to "constantly educate some of our teachers," because he perceived that "a lot of our [classroom] teachers think distance education is an easy way out." The teachers in his district who had had the opportunity to work closely with distance education programs realized "the amount of work and effort that must go into the course completion and the organizational skills the student must have," and they had become "strong advocates" of the innovation.

Others perceived that while some teachers in their districts felt anxiety about the technology ("this fancy Digital stuff, it scares... them") or were worried about changes to their assignments, most teachers became more positive and even enthusiastic after working with the programs:

I think there was a fear it was going to replace them, and we noticed that our teachers have changed, have adapted and have accepted distance education and are more cooperative now in monitoring; many of them even want to be distance learning teachers.

One respondent who felt that distance education teaching involved more work than did regular classroom teaching, noted that his staff had been very supportive of the new program, committing time to develop the innovation and make it work. Another superintendent felt that distance education was a welcome resource for most teachers, who were genuinely struggling to meet individual student needs:

Teachers in high school in particular would like to see their students be successful, graduate and achieve their goals and objectives, and I think it's always a source of frustration for teachers when students either fail a course or have to drop a course. . . . So I think the provision of distance education programs relieves teachers of some of that concern and worry and provides them with the perspective that the school they work in is doing everything that it can to assist students in being successful.

In comparing the differences between regular classroom instruction and distance education, several superintendents referred to limited student opportunities for discussion as a key disadvantage of distance education. Teleconference discussions, some noted,
were difficult to organize among students in schools governed by different timetables. Many superintendents felt strongly that distance delivery of humanities courses like Social Studies, Language Arts, and Career and Life Management was inferior because of their perception of a lack of discussion mediated by a teacher. Students had a less satisfying experience and learned less, thought superintendents, although students typically could "crack off" the distance education course in a relatively short period of time. At the same time, many of them acknowledged the quality of the distance education materials and one described how teachers not in distance education sought to obtain copies of the materials as a source of "well-thought out activities that relate directly to the curriculum." Monitoring as well as motivation of students appeared to be a key concern of superintendents, requiring a "caring, concerned teacher who is prodding kids along," as one respondent put it. Teacher tutor-marker contact with students was perceived by superintendents to be essential for motivating and assisting students at a distance in problem-solving. This contact was, in some districts, less frequent than superintendents would like and some had begun to make tutoring part of regular teaching assignments so that students had someone they knew by name to talk to and share their enthusiasm and frustrations. When the tutor made personal, frequent, face-to-face contact with students, the perception was that students learned more and generally had a more positive experience with distance education. Some superintendents felt that their in-school distance education facilitators provided the necessary encouragement, assistance, and guidance that learners, separated from their tutor-markers, needed. Others expressed concerns that this in-school facilitator could not provide the support that a classroom teacher specialist could:

They'll have a class of 25 kids which could be on 15 different subject areas, some of which this [in-school facilitator] doesn't have a clue about. And so, as far as being able to motivate the kids and inspire them on the subject, is pretty tough. They can guide the kids to resources, but usually the resources aren't there either.

Despite their support for distance education in general, less than half of surveyed superintendents (45%) viewed distance education as a desirable replacement for traditional classroom instruction in their district's schools. Many comments in interviews echoed the following superintendent's remarks: "Maybe it's an old-fashioned concept, but we feel that the best opportunities for students are in a classroom with a teacher," because this situation offers "immediate feedback and immediate assistance." The majority of respondents simply felt that "face-to-face" contact between teachers and students was the best way to mediate learning effectively. In one district where students were enrolling enthusiastically in distance education programs, the superintendent found himself trying to limit the number of distance education credits that students were allowed to take, because he was concerned that, with all the distance learning, they were missing out on valuable classroom instruction and teacher interaction. Another, reflecting the views of colleagues, noted," We get regular classroom, face-to-face first, and then if we can't get it, or there's some timetabling difficulties or even some personality conflicts, then [we] access the distance education component."

STUDENTS
Over 90% of superintendents saw distance education as appropriate for high-school students while only 36% would support its use with junior-high students. A small but growing percentage (from 6% in 1991 to 14% in 1993) believed that distance education materials were appropriate for elementary children. We wondered if this was partly due to the impact of home schooling, a rapidly growing alternative in the province. Not surprisingly, over 90% saw distance education as very appropriate for the more able student and 81% thought that there should be post-secondary courses provided for high school seniors.

Half of the superintendents thought that distance education was not suited to less able students. However, they also admitted that many of their distance education students were in this category. Alberta high-school courses in the "non-academic" stream typically have the lowest enrollments, so in smaller schools, logically these would be the courses that would be offered to individual students using distance education. This situation was a concern to several superintendents, who perceived that "less able" students were less capable as self-directed learners, and needed more direct help from a teacher than they had access to in a distance learning situation.

There were exceptions to this view, since 30% of superintendents saw distance education as appropriate for less able students. One superintendent claimed that these "less able" students "learn to adjust and adapt and over a period of time . . . become rather self-disciplined learners." Another felt that the "less able" students, those that have experienced difficulties learning in regular class settings, are more successful in distance education than the "high achievers" because they're always being measured against the top end. Now all of a sudden [with distance education] there's no comparison made . . . the slow learners want to continue taking distance education when they have success with it.

The issue of independent learning skills was raised by twelve of the fifteen superintendents interviewed. Some felt that regular classroom instruction "spoon-feeds" students too much, and distance education programs helps even passive students to develop self-reliance and become more self-directed, independent, and resourceful as learners. A few indicated that all students should have the opportunity to try at least one course of independent learning for this reason. However, most still were of the opinion that because distance learning, as one superintendent put it, fosters in students "a sense of responsibility for their own fate," regular classroom instruction with its face-to-face advantages is preferable if it can be made available.

Despite their obvious preferences for classroom teaching involving direct teacher instruction, superintendents were pleased that distance education was a positive addition to their jurisdiction's offerings. The most likely reason for the rising positive perception of distance education among Alberta superintendents was increased course completion: most superintendents interviewed in 1993 reported high average rates (as much as 90%) of students finishing their distance education courses. In the early phases of implementation some superintendents indicated that student achievement results were sometimes low. However, by 1993
superintendents apparently were finding that "students do about as well as they would with live instructed courses." In discussing the increase in student achievement, one superintendent explained that "we had to get the bugs out" of the system, referring to tightening up the district's monitoring of students' course completion. Several superintendents indicated that distance education became successful after it was made a district priority, and especially when in-school "tracking" of students was given greater attention.

TECHNOLOGY

Superintendents generally indicated strong interest in educational technology and a willingness to explore and expand its use in schools. The vast majority supported the use of technology as a supplement (82%) or within the regular classroom (84%) and thought that access to the electronic highway would expand distance education options (83%). They saw being involved in distance education as an opportunity for teachers to learn about telecommunications (71%), and agreed that distance education technology could be used to provide inservice opportunities (84%). Three quarters of the superintendents strongly agreed that the distance education materials helped keep teachers up-to-date about curriculum changes but fewer (44%) were as assertive about the materials being a source for model courses and exams for teachers.

One superintendent noted that the new distance education technology raised the status of the school in the perceptions of parents and the local community "as willing to try new technology, being on the edge of development." Their major concerns in this area centered around a perception that "we've only scratched the surface" of integrating distance education technology into schools because of financial constraints and staff reluctance in some cases. As one stated,

To be quite frank, I think that we are still at the horse and buggy stage in the technology part of it, because to be successful we have to deliver somehow through a technological interface that kind of human connection between a teacher and a student where students are motivated to learn by themselves, and that happens in the classroom through the interpersonal relationships.

Some jurisdictions were quite heavily involved in piloting interactive computer conferencing while others used audioconferencing and the computerized test banks, and some depended on fax and phone.

The first thing superintendents chose to discuss when asked about implementation issues was the impact of distance education on their staff and students. They had experienced different responses to the innovations among their own communities and staffs, ranging from very enthusiastic, to skeptical, to apparent resistance. Of particular interest were the superintendents' own responses to what they perceived were the schools' and communities' attitudes to distance education. One superintendent, admittedly "somewhat disillusioned at this point with a lot of this [distance education programs]", described how teachers in his district were "having a tremendously difficult time making the adjustment. . . . Change just takes a long, long time. Parents and students still associate learning as a teacher in front of the class and students sitting down and taking orders." Some superintendents thought that the initial
implementation by their predecessor had been poorly handled and that, as a result, they had to move slowly. One described the variability that could occur within a jurisdiction: "In two of our schools the ownership is excellent--tremendous . . . They tracked students and could keep them on task. In the other two schools, that wasn't done."

Several felt that the key to effective implementation of an innovation like distance education was a champion: "get a good person or two and back them." Two superintendents indicated their belief that implementation was being held up in their districts because no person with the necessary drive and skills had yet stepped forward to lead implementation. The perception seemed to be that if such a person were appointed, implementation would be less successful than if a teacher or administrator voluntarily "picks up the ball and runs with it." Few superintendents perceived themselves as a possible "champion" for distance education implementation in their jurisdictions.

IMPLICATIONS

For Alberta superintendents, reaction to the decentralization of distance education has been generally positive. Those in rural jurisdictions with small high schools are pleased at the increased flexibility in timetabling (scheduling) and in student course options combined with the more cost effective deployment of teachers which distance education has brought. And in some schools, initial enthusiasm had given way to problems and teacher resistance. For some, their staunch beliefs that distance education was a second-best alternative and that student-teacher discussion was integral to any genuine learning were evident barriers which any alternative to the status quo had to overcome. Having obtained their boards' support, superintendents seemed to see the initiative as now being the responsibility of the staff. Nonetheless superintendents were hopeful that advances in technology would allow them to have both direct teaching and distance education.

In 1994, the Alberta government announced a further 8% cut to education budgets, and a reduction in the number of jurisdictions to 60. Such circumstances will test superintendents' commitment to distance education, especially the commitment of those who do not see themselves as championing the cause.

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