Direct election of education superintendents in Korea: dilemmas and improvement strategies

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Abstract
Purpose – This study analyzes the advantages and disadvantages of the electoral mechanism of local education superintendents in South Korea, draws conclusions and makes suggestions for future reforms.
Design/methodology/approach – The research method of this study included document analysis and interviews. Document analysis was used to collect and analyze the relevant official documents of education superintendents across countries. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with four professors and two superintendents.
Findings – The results of the interviews indicate the following: 1) Korean stakeholders are getting more familiar with the direct election of superintendents, as the interviews indicate a more mature direct election system due to previous experience and public officials taking direct election into account; 2) The direct election of superintendents has advantages and disadvantages. The advantages include increasing the participation of the general public in education, and the disadvantages include conflict between the central government and local superintendents belonging to different political parties. However, the current system is likely to be retained; 3) The superintendent systems in various countries differ due to their respective traditions and social contexts. However, the authors can always learn lessons and implications from foreign countries if the authors compare their education systems with their foreign counterparts.
Research limitations/implications – As far research limitations, although this was a small study, it shows the importance of collecting multiple stakeholders’ views on the direct election of education superintendents as a basis for future reform of education management.
Practical implications – The Korean system for electing superintendents provides a good model for other countries reflecting on the educational autonomy and accountabilities of their own systems.
Social implications – The direct election of superintendents provides an example of professionalism, independence and political neutrality in education that other countries can learn from. The separation of general and educational administration in Korea through direct elections protects educational activities from political influence.
Originality/value – In terms of originality/value, this study adds a new perspective to the debate about whether the general public should directly elect education superintendents, as well as to the literature on local education management.
Keywords Education superintendent, South Korea, Direct election system, Decentralization

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Background and purpose
Since 2007 the general public has been electing superintendents of education in South Korea, an innovative system meant to implement decentralization, increase local participation and make the educational administration independent of the general administration. As far past research on superintendents of education, a four-year study by Alsbury and Whitaker (2007) on how school leaders in various locations and contexts describe their perceptions of and experiences with educational leadership found that superintendents understand and practice a more inclusive form of social justice, sometimes having to control and filter majority stakeholder inputs to achieve more ethical and socially just educational decisions.

In addition, a comparative study of China and the United States focusing on leadership challenges and the role of school superintendents was conducted by Przybylski et al. (2018). Another international study compared the influence of educational reform on superintendents (Björk et al., 2014). In addition, an international study of superintendents by Bredeson et al. (2011) identifies the specific factors that influence superintendents' leadership and examines how superintendents respond to these factors. Their findings show that the work of superintendents is paradoxically similar but different. Superintendents described common priorities, challenges and contextual variations which influence their work. However, differences in district size, organizational culture, community characteristics and geographic location significantly influence their leadership practices. Despite their challenges, all superintendents responded to and shaped the context of their work.

Concerning the election system for superintendents in Korea, a study by Huang and Wang (2020) found that: 1) The electoral system for electing superintendents in Korea has evolved from positions appointed by the president of the central government to decentralization where local governance was in place, and finally to direct elections by residents; 2) The current system for electing superintendents combines local governance and direct elections by residents; 3) The existing electoral system reflects the representativeness of residents and their right to participate in local education. It also avoids interest entanglement between members of the board of education who vote in indirect elections for superintendents; 4) The defects of the existing electoral system include the facts that the election system keeps changing, resulting in opportunism, that residents need to be roped into the election, wasting both resources and money, that the elections have become politicized, depriving the election of educational professionalism, and that conflicts exist between general administration and educational administration. Another relevant study by Jun and Min (2017) found that being listed first is a boon for most candidates, especially when the electorate is less educated and in election without an incumbent or strong candidate.

Another study on Korean superintendents focused on stakeholders' perceptions of superintendent elections in South Korea. The results show that stakeholders are generally dissatisfied with the current practice through which superintendents are recruited. According to the findings, the superintendent position in South Korea has yet to be well recognized. Accordingly, the issues surrounding the competencies and qualifications required of superintendents and recruitment methods have yet to be fully discussed (Kim et al., 2014).

From the above, we may summarize three important points: 1) The election system for superintendents in Korea is innovative and aims to implement decentralization, increase local participation and make educational administration independent of the general administration. However, there are some defects in the system, such as opportunism, wasting resources and money, and politicization of the electoral system, depriving it of educational professionalism; 2) Superintendents in Korea practice a more inclusive form of social justice and sometimes have to control and filter majority stakeholder inputs to achieve more ethical and socially just educational decisions. The work of superintendents is paradoxically similar but different, with differences in district size, organizational culture, community characteristics and geographic location significantly influencing their leadership practices; 3) Stakeholders in Korea are generally dissatisfied with the current system through
which superintendents are elected, and there is a lack of recognition of the superintendent position. The issues surrounding the competencies and qualifications required of superintendents and recruitment methods have yet to be fully discussed.

Thus this study analyzes the advantages and disadvantages of the electoral mechanism of local education superintendents in South Korea, draws conclusions and makes suggestions for future reforms.

**Literature review**

*The role of superintendent of education*

Regarding the theory of education superintendent, a dissatisfaction theory was used to examine superintendent turnover and its influence on student achievement (Alsbury, 2008). The dissatisfaction theory contends there would only be a reason to change leadership if the stakeholders were dissatisfied with the school, and that community dissatisfaction with the current school policy will eventually result in voters’ increased involvement in local school elections (Alsbury, 2003).

Concerning the practice of education superintendent, five role characterizations were developed by scholars in the United States who grounded their work in historical and empirical evidence (Björk et al., 2014), including teacher-scholar (1850 to early 1900s), organizational manager (early 1900s to 1930), democratic-political leader (1930 to mid-1950s), applied social scientist (mid-1950s to mid-1970s) and communicator (mid-1970s to present). These five role characterizations help understand superintendents’ work in the USA as well as other countries (Björk and Browne-Ferrigno, 2016).

According to Peterson (2014), the three essential qualities of a superintendent are: 1) Shared Vision: The superintendent promotes the success of all students by facilitating the development, articulation, implementation and stewardship of a vision of learning that is shared and supported by the school community; 2) Culture of Learning: The superintendent promotes the success of all students by advocating, nurturing and sustaining a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional development; 3) Ethics: The superintendent promotes the success of all students by acting with integrity, fairness and in an ethical manner.

From the above, the theory of education superintendent suggests that community dissatisfaction with school policies may result in increased involvement in local school elections. The practice of education superintendent is characterized by five role characterizations, which have evolved over time, including teacher-scholar, organizational manager, democratic-political leader, applied social scientist and communicator. Additionally, according to Peterson, superintendents must adhere to three basic standards, namely, promoting a shared vision, a culture of learning and acting with integrity and ethics. These principles provide a foundation for the work of superintendents in the USA and other countries.

*A brief description of superintendents in Korea*

In Korea, with the enactment of the Local Autonomy Law in 1991, educational autonomy at the local level was increased by implementing new modes of operation. Consequently, educational administration became decentralized. The local government consists of the municipal assembly in the legislative body and the regional government, and the superintendent of education in the enforcement agency. Superintendents of education are representatives of education/arts/sciences of the local government, and they have been elected in various ways, including presidential appointment, election by members of the Board of Education, indirect election by an electoral college, and, since 2007, direct election by residents. The qualifications of candidates for the position of superintendent of education...
include three years of experience in education or education administration and non-affiliation with a political party for the past year. Superintendents are elected every four years through a local election. As of 2016, there were 17 metropolitan and provincial offices of education and 176 district offices of education. District offices of education are considered a local administrative office and are in charge of more than one metropolitan and provincial area and district (Ministry of Education, 2021). The latest local election including education superintendents was held on June 1st, 2022, and was the eighth local election and the fourth direct election for education in Korean history. For the above, it is evident that the enactment of the Local Autonomy Law in Korea in 1991 led to the promotion of educational autonomy at the local level, resulting in the decentralization of educational administration. Superintendents of education are elected every four years through various means, including direct election by residents, and must meet specific qualifications.

An overview of superintendents in selected countries

In the USA, the position of the school superintendent as the leader of the school district is a position that, historically, has been a symbol of respect and authority in the nation’s communities and social structure (Rueter, 2009). As the chief executive officer (CEO) of a school district, the superintendent is the face of the district and is responsible for its success or failure. The role of a school superintendent is broad. It takes an exceptional person with a unique skill set to be an effective school superintendent (Meador, 2019). According to the Idaho School Boards Association (2020), the roles and responsibilities of superintendents are:

1. Implementing board policies and directives as the board’s chief executive officer.
2. Recommending a comprehensive planning process for student achievement.
3. Coordinating the operation of the schools, supervision of the instructional programs and management of district personnel.
4. Providing educational leadership to the board, staff, students and community.
5. Identifying the needs of the district and reporting them to the board.
6. Keeping the board aware of statewide and national educational developments and changes.
7. Continually upgrading his/her professional knowledge and qualifications through membership and participation in professional associations, conferences and workshops.

In Canada, according to Alberta Education, Office of the Registrar (2018):

1. A superintendent establishes a welcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning environment by building positive and productive relationships with members of the school community and the local community.
2. A superintendent engages in career-long professional learning and ongoing critical reflection, identifying and acting on research-informed opportunities for enhancing leadership, teaching and learning.
3. A superintendent engages with the school community in implementing a vision of a preferred future for student success based on shared values and beliefs.
4. A superintendent establishes and sustains a learning culture in the school community that promotes ongoing critical reflection on practice, shared responsibility for student success and continuous improvement.
5. A superintendent establishes the structures and provides the resources necessary for the school community to acquire and apply foundational knowledge about First Nations, Métis and Inuit to benefit all students.
6. A superintendent directs school authority operations and strategically allocates resources in the interests of all students and alignment with the school authority’s goals and priorities.
7. A superintendent of schools, as referred to in the School Act, as chief executive officer of the Board and chief education officer of the school authority, provides the Board with information, advice and support required for the fulfillment of its governance role and reports to the Minister on all matters required of the superintendent as identified in the School Act and other provincial legislation.

In Japan, at the prefectural level, there is a board of education composed of five members appointed by the Governor for four years. The Governor appoints these members with the
consent of the assembly of the prefecture. Cities, towns and villages have municipal boards of education consisting of three to five members. They are appointed by the mayor with the consent of the municipal assembly and hold office for four years. The superintendent of a municipal board of education is appointed from among the board members, with the approval of the prefectural board of education (Muta, 2000; National Center on Education and the Economy, 2020).

From the above, it can be concluded: 1) In the USA, the role of the school superintendent is critical to the success of a school district. Their responsibilities range from implementing board policies to providing educational leadership to the board, staff, students and community; 2) In Canada, the role of superintendent includes establishing a learning culture in the school community that promotes ongoing critical reflection on practice, shared responsibility for student success, and continuous improvement, as well as directing school operations and strategically allocating resources in the interests of all students; 3) In Japan, at the prefectural level, the board of education is appointed by the Governor, while municipal boards of education are appointed by the mayor. The superintendent of a municipal board of education is appointed from among the board members with the approval of the prefectural board of education.

Research design and implementation

Research method

The research method of this study included document analysis and interviews. Document analysis was used to collect and analyze the relevant official documents of education superintendents across countries. Document analysis is often used to analyze education policy (Amirov, 2020; Carmen Maria Ortiz, 2020; Fackler and Sexton, 2020; Gro, 2021; Joanna and Suskya, 2021; Kim and Dreamson, 2020; Mohammad et al., 2021; Owen, 2014).

Interviews are a valuable and practical method in education research (Appleton, 1995; Devon, 2018; Marina, 2016; Wilson, 2004; Yang and Goodwin, 2019). Each interviewee participated in one semi-structured interview using a standard open-ended format (Marshall and Rossman, 1999). There are a few studies on education stakeholders with interviews. One study is about different stakeholders in education. The study reports on research in different geographical contexts and covers many educational stakeholders, including school principals and researchers (Janmaat et al., 2016). Another study is about attitudes toward evaluation. The study explores students’ and stakeholders’ attitudes toward evaluation. The study suggests that empirical studies concerning different groups’ attitudes toward evaluation are scarce (Schultes et al., 2018). In addition, another study is about employability in higher education and reviews vital stakeholders’ perspectives on employability (Cheng et al., 2022). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with four professors and two superintendents. The interview questions are as follows: 1. How do you feel about this year’s superintendent election? Is it different from the previous ones? 2. What is your opinion on the Korean superintendent’s role in politics? 3. What is your opinion on the relationship between the superintendent of education and general regional administrative leaders? 4. What are the advantages of the Korean superintendents being elected by the general public? 5. What are the disadvantages of Korean superintendents being elected by the general public? 6. What can other countries learn from Korea’s experience in directly electing superintendents?

One difficulty often encountered in an interview is a lack of accurate and complete answers. Interviewing is a complex and demanding technique (Frey and Oishi, 1995). In general, every interview method has its advantages and disadvantages. The main advantage of an interview is that it allows questioning to be guided as necessary to investigate points that need clarification, in contrast to mailed questionnaires (Frey and Oishi, 1995). However, the interview’s success depends on the respondents’ willingness to give accurate answers.
Results and analysis

The interview questions and a summary of the responses are as follows:

1. How do you feel about this year’s superintendent election? Is it different from the previous ones?

According to one interviewee, we are likely to have a more mature direct election system due to previous experience:

After experiencing the superintendent election three times nationwide, now that it is the fourth time, I am thinking more deeply about the direct election system (interviewee No. 3).

Besides, public officials have begun to pay more attention to the direct election than before:

Another good change in education is that the superintendent of education’s direct election system has led the public officials of the Office of Education to have a much broader outlook than in the past (interviewee No.1).

Finally, an interviewee compared the current direct election of superintendents with the previous elections and noted that this year many conservative superintendents have been elected in Korea, and the proportion of education superintendents who are politicians is increasing. There is also an increase in the number of superintendents who were previously president of a university, which is expected to lead to more politician-turned-superintendents of education, as in the following response:

Many conservative superintendents have been elected, and the proportion of education superintendents who are politicians is increasing, leading to an increase in politician-turned-superintendents of education. Former university presidents have also joined the race, indicating an increase in superintendents who were previously a university president (interviewee No. 2).

Based on the above, it appears that compared to the previous system, the current direct election system is more mature and receives more attention from public officials. However, there has also been an increase in conservative superintendents, politicians turned superintendents and superintendents who were previously a university president. It also appears that the superintendent election process is affected by political affiliations, with local council members belonging to political parties supporting or opposing the superintendent’s policies based on their party’s preferences. However, the superintendent is not affiliated with any political party, which is seen as both a problem and an ideal situation, as it allows for education policy to be free from political interference.

2. What is your opinion on the Korean superintendent’s role in politics?

Concerning the superintendents and their relationship with a political party, residents vote blindly due to the superintendent’s lack of political affiliation, while local council members with political affiliations support preferred policies. One interviewee had no official link to a political party; however, in the election campaign, candidates may have a political association or party orientation.
Voters lack knowledge of non-affiliated candidates for superintendent; similar political affiliations lead to comparable campaigns. Local council members of the same party support favored policies, while opposing others (interviewee No.1).

Another participant said that “A candidate is not a politician and cannot use a political party, but he/she must be elected in a political election” (interviewee No.3).

The importance of politics in the superintendent election was pointed out by one interviewee:

The politicians’ inability to interfere in the superintendent election is partly problematic, but it’s ideal for education policy (interviewee No. 4).

Finally, an interviewee claimed that politics does not directly impact the elections.

The Gyeongsang-do region is known to be affiliated with a particular political party, but sometimes the superintendent elected is not from that party (interviewee No. 5).

Based on the interviews, it was found that while there is no direct link between superintendents and political parties in Korea, there may be some influence of politics on the election and implementation of policies. It is ideal for education policy to not have interference from politicians, but consistency between the governor and the superintendent can lead to easier implementation of policies. Additionally, voters may lack knowledge of non-affiliated candidates for superintendent, and local council members of the same party may support favored policies while opposing others.

3. What is your opinion on the relationship between the superintendent of education and general regional administrative leaders?

The interviewees indicated there is less conflict between superintendents and local government due to the direct election of superintendents, leading to the clear separation of personnel management between educational administration and general administration:

Before 2010, there was severe conflict between the superintendent and the head of the local government. Education is a significant factor in creating a good environment for residents. The head of the local government has personnel rights over local governments, while the superintendent has personnel rights over local education (interviewee No. 1).

The personnel rights are all separated. The head of a local government has no personnel authority over the principal (interviewee No. 4).

In addition, when the governor and superintendent belong to the same party, they are more likely to cooperate, as was pointed out by one interviewee:

If all of them are Democrats, the Governor of the Democratic Party of Korea comes out, and a similar superintendent agrees, then cooperation is good (interviewee No. 4).

From the interviews, it can be concluded that the direct election of superintendents has led to a reduction in conflict between the superintendent and local government, with a clear separation of personnel management between educational administration and general administration. Additionally, cooperation between the governor and superintendent is likely when they belong to the same party.

4. What are the advantages of the Korean superintendents being elected by the general public?

The direct election system makes the public interested in who the superintendent is. It is best for such a position to be directly elected. One advantage is the increasing participation of the general public in education as indicated by two participants:
Moreover, even though the general public may not be interested in education, if it becomes a direct system, they have no choice but to be interested in who that person is at least once (interviewee No. 2). I think it is best for the superintendent to be directly elected by residents (interviewee No. 5).

Second, it is a democratic system, as can be seen from the following viewpoint:

It is also a way to increase the democracy of education administration (e.g., resident participation), but it is also a worrying system (interviewee No. 3).

Third, one interviewee stated that the direct election has increased the autonomy of education:

We are increasing the autonomy of education, making education a local job by transferring central authority to local governments (interviewee No. 3).

Finally, we have seen increasing interest in education, accountability and community participation:

The direct election of superintendents has increased public interest in education and made the responsible person more transparent. Residents can hold superintendents accountable in future elections (interviewee No. 1).

Based on the above, the direct election of Korean superintendents has several advantages. Firstly, it increases the general public’s interest in education and makes the responsible person more transparent. Secondly, it is a democratic system that promotes citizen participation. Thirdly, it expands the autonomy of education, and finally, it enables residents to choose a superintendent directly.

5. What are the disadvantages of Korean superintendents being elected by the general public?

The current progressive superintendent of the Seoul Metropolitan Office of Education may come into conflict with conservative council members due to their differing political affiliations. A clear disadvantage is a conflict between the central government and a local superintendent belonging to a different political party, as indicated by two interviewees:

For example, after the 2022 superintendent election, the superintendent of the Seoul Metropolitan Office of Education was a so-called progressive, and many members of the Seoul Metropolitan Council were conservative party members (interviewee No. 1).

In the past, during the Park Geun Hye administration and the Lee Myung Bak administration, there was conflict between a progressive superintendent and the central government (interviewee No. 2).

However, another participant expressed concern about the direct election system’s limitations:

It is also a way to increase the democracy of education administration (e.g., resident participation), but the system is also problematic (interviewee No. 3).

Another participant explained this concern further:

Most fundamentally, there is a limit to selecting professional personnel, contrary to the existing education system that values expertise in education (interviewee No. 3).

From the above, the direct election system for superintendents in Korea has its disadvantages, such as potential conflicts between elected superintendents and council members of different political affiliations. Another concern is the system’s limit in selecting professional personnel, which contradicts the existing education system that values expertise.
6. What can other countries learn from Korea’s experience in directly electing superintendents?

The direct election of the superintendent promotes professionalism, independence and political neutrality in education. As one interviewee stated:

Korea’s superintendent system is based on the professionalism, independence, and political neutrality of education guaranteed by the Constitution (interviewee No. 3).

Another interviewee stated that the separation of general and educational administration in Korea through the direct election of superintendents protects educational activities from political interference. As one participant said:

The education administration is directly influenced by general administration or politics. However, in Korea the general and educational administration are separated, and residents directly elect the superintendent, resulting in less political interference in educational activities (interviewee No.1).

From the above, the direct election of superintendents provides an example of professionalism, independence and political neutrality in education that other countries can learn from. The separation of general and educational administration in Korea through direct elections protects educational activities from political influence.

Concluding remarks and further discussion

Conclusion
Firstly, the results of the interviews indicate the following: 1) Korean stakeholders are getting more familiar with the direct election of superintendents, as the interviews indicate a more mature direct election system due to previous experience and public officials taking direct election into account; 2) The direct election of superintendents has advantages and disadvantages. The advantages include increasing the participation of the general public in education, and the disadvantages include conflict between the central government and local superintendents belonging to different political parties. However, the current system is likely to be retained; 3) The superintendent systems in various countries differ due to their respective traditions and social contexts. However, we can always learn lessons and implications from foreign countries if we compare our education systems with their foreign counterparts. The Korean system for electing superintendents provides a good model for other countries reflecting on the educational autonomy and accountabilities of their own systems.

Controversy over the direct election system
Since 2007 the Korean superintendent of education has been directly elected. In 2022, eight conservative candidates and nine centrist/progressive superintendents were elected. Public opinion is in favor of the electoral system, but there are calls to abolish the direct system, yet abandoning it would lessen local autonomy in education. Issues with the current system include concerns about political neutrality, lack of information about candidates and the excessive cost of the election.

1. Political neutrality

The political neutrality of the superintendent election is crucial, as Article 31(3) of the Constitution guarantees political neutrality in education. However, this neutrality needs more clarity in interpretation and institutionalization. Despite the emphasis on political neutrality, the superintendent election is a political process, leading to candidates presenting their political positions and media labeling them as conservative or progressive. The unequal
election system causes side effects and goes against the political neutrality of education specified in the Constitution. To ensure political neutrality, the superintendent should be nominated by a political party, but participation in a specific party’s election campaign should be prohibited.

2. Indifference to the election of superintendents of education

Much attention has been paid to the number of invalid votes, which have been 2.6 times higher than the number of invalid votes for mayors and provincial governors. More than 900,000 invalid votes were cast in the last superintendent election. Some media criticized this as evidence of a blind election, but there is room to view it as desirable.

3. Professionalism

The superintendent of education has blocked incumbent teachers from running for office, creating an institutional inconsistency. The superintendent’s qualifications require at least 3 years of experience in education or educational administration, but this may not be sufficient.

4. The conflict between general administration and educational administration

The scope of the powers and responsibilities of the superintendent of education and city/provincial councils needs clarification, as stipulated by the law and a relationship with the Ministry of Education needs to be established. The office of superintendent of education is not a decision-making agency, but an executive agency for administrative affairs related to education, with the city/provincial council holding the voting right.

The superintendent of education may request a reconsideration of a decision when it violates laws and jeopardizes public interest.

Strategies for improving future elections

1) Lowering the voting age

Lowering the minimum age for voting in the superintendent elections to 14 could have positive effects on civic awareness and political development, as students and the educational community will scrutinize candidates. This could also alleviate indifference to the election of superintendents of education.

2) Running mate system:

A running mate system is being proposed as an alternative. Part of the concern is that the political philosophy of a party directly affects education and that candidates for superintendent are loyal to a particular party.

3) Establishing a regional education committee

The election of superintendents with different viewpoints is expected to cause fluctuations in local education. The establishment of a regional education committee can improve the stability and reliability of education and serve to limit the authority of the superintendent of education. The National Assembly will need to revise the Local Education Autonomy Act to specify the basis for the establishment, composition and procedures of the committee.

4) The evaluation of local offices of education

Local education autonomy should not be limited to selecting the superintendent of education. The accountability of the local education administration needs to be questioned, and the education committee’s performance needs to be evaluated. The system needs to expand participation in local education development.
5) Limited direct election

The Constitution guarantees independence, professionalism and political neutrality in education. The running mate, party nomination and appointment systems lead to politicization, so a limited direct election system should be considered.

6) Nominating candidates for the superintendent of education by political parties.

To enhance transparency and reduce election costs, political parties should nominate candidates for superintendent of education, focusing on qualifications and presenting results to the electorate. Direct elections can lead to politicization, but abolishing elections would undermine political neutrality. Accepting blind elections and maintaining political neutrality can improve the system.

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Further reading


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