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**Rural School District Superintendents' Perceptions of New Legislative
Reform: A Qualitative Study**

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Reform: A Qualitative Study**

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Dedication

I dedicate this to my family and friends that walked with me through this process. First and foremost to my loving, supportive husband, John Rentz. You have been a rock for me during this journey. Without your support and encouragement, this accomplishment would not have been possible. You helped me through the birth of our two beautiful children and put in overtime with our children so that I could continue my studies. John, you always knew I would finish this process, even when I believed it was impossible.

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Rural School District Superintendents' Perceptions of New Legislative Reform: A Qualitative Study

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The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the perceptions of rural school district superintendents on the implications of new federal regulations being implemented due to the failure of NCLB to meet its intended targets. This study was guided by the following three research questions: (a) What are rural superintendents' perceptions about current legislative reform as a consequence of ESSA and state education policy? (b) What are the challenges to implementing ESSA and state education policy in rural school districts? (c) What recommendations do rural superintendents have for ESSA and state education policymakers? The objective of this study was to investigate how superintendents from rural school districts of similar sizes and demographics received information concerning reforms such as ESSA and how they developed plans to implement organizational change. Ten superintendents from a representative sample of rural school districts were interviewed about their lived experiences in the current era of educational transition following the federal passage of ESSA. Data analysis yielded the following six themes: Inconsistent Message Delivery by Regulators, a Compliance Mentality, Financial Constraints, a Need for Differentiation by School District Size and Geography, a Lack of Human Capital, and the Importance of Service Centers. This study found that rural school superintendents were not adequately equipped with all the information and resources needed to implement organizational change effectively at the initiation of new

legislative reform. Legislative action is either compliance driven or reform driven. Therefore, if legislation is truly designed to reform education, policymakers need to develop policies that are differentiated and realistic for all school districts and to arm superintendents with needed information to form effective implementation plans.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Historically, the primary role of a superintendent was manager (Urban & Wagoner, 2014), but the growing complexity of education reform in the United States of America over the past two decades has increased the complex nature of the superintendent's role (Bjork, Browne-Ferrigno, & Kowalski, 2014; Rice, 2010; Starr & White, 2008). Today, superintendents are charged with leading legislative reform, creating strategic plans, budget development and management, instructional leadership, public and political engagement, making data-driven decisions, developing professional development plans, along with many other responsibilities (Forner, Bierlein-Palmer, & Reeves, 2012; Hentschke, Nayfack, & Wohlstetter, 2009). The role of a superintendent now serves multiple roles within a school district and community requiring multiple leadership styles. A superintendent is an instructional leader, applied social scientist, manager, effective communicator, and political leader (Bjork et al., 2014; James, Cambron-McCabe, Cunningham, & Koff, 2013; Olivarez, 2010). Superintendents must acquire and utilize adaptive leadership skills to effectively lead districts through frequent societal, political, and legislative changes (Yukl, 2013).

There is much literature concerning the challenges and complexity of leadership within large urban school districts. However, by comparison, there is a small amount of literature concerning the challenges and complexity of leadership within rural school districts. The roles and responsibilities of a superintendent, though fundamentally the same for rural and urban districts differ greatly in operation. Urban superintendents must navigate through complex political systems both internally and externally, are responsible for a significant number of students and employees, and are actively covered by the media (Hill, 2015). Rural superintendents must navigate through smaller political systems; however, many times the

superintendent in a rural district is the most prominent public figure in the town, leading to a different set of challenges. Although rural superintendents are responsible for much smaller numbers of students and employees, they are bound to the same federal and state required programming and outcomes. Rural superintendents are not subject to the same active media coverage as urban superintendents, but they are subject to “a fishbowl environment in which virtually every action or inaction, whether in professional or personal life, is on display” (Hill, 2015, p. 9).

The day to day operations of rural superintendents are quite different from that of superintendents in urban districts; rural districts have fewer resources both financially and human capital. For this reason, legislatively mandated education reforms place hardships on rural school districts by requiring the districts to meet the same compliance requirements as all other schools. Urban districts tend to have large numbers of central staff comprised of education specialists, managers and lawyers that can interpret, consult, develop and implement action plans to ensure the district is compliance with current legislation. The superintendent can delegate tasks to the most appropriate and qualified person. However, superintendents of rural districts are responsible for interpreting laws and developing action plans, overseeing implementation and with minimal, if any central staff, he or she is charged with completing tasks first-hand (Lamkin, 2006; Wylie & Clark, 1991).

In 2001, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) charged districts with educating all students and getting them to 100% proficiency by 2014; however, minimal resources were provided to realize this goal (Duncombe, Lukemeryer, & Yinger, 2008). Although NCLB placed hardships on all districts nationwide, rural school districts, in particular, struggled to meet this goal. While rural schools possessed many positive attributes that promoted student achievement,

NCLB's compliance measures were not differentiated to accommodate the needs of rural districts (Barley & Beesley, 2007; Jamerson, 2005).

Rural superintendents faced challenges due to the continual increase in student population diversity but an overall decline in student enrollment (Johnson et al., 2014). Schwartzbeck (2003) noted the following five challenges for rural school districts with declining enrollment: “(1) threat of consolidation, (2) loss of per-pupil funding, (3) fewer instructional resources, (4) teacher and administrator quality issues, and (5) declining school facilities or difficulty securing funds for repair or construction” (p. 3). Federal mandates only added fuel to the challenges faced by these districts. Rural superintendents had the added pressure of ensuring the success of their community, Lamkin (2006) ascertained, “These superintendents manage what is often the largest employer in the community and thus also bear sole responsibility for both success and failure in the school district and often in the community” (p. 17).

Fifteen years after the signing of NCLB, President Barak Obama signed a new legislative reform on December 10, 2015, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). ESSA and NCLB have many similarities, but there are also many differences. Once again rural superintendents are charged with learning, interpreting, sense-making, and interpreting this new legislation with minimal financial and human capital. If the goal of any education reform is to ensure that all students achieve, making specific provisions for rural schools is critical. Rural schools educate a large number of students nationwide, Johnson et al. (2014) reported the following information concerning rural school districts in the United States during the 2010-2011 school year:

Over 9.7 million students are enrolled in rural school districts, more than 20 percent of all public-school students in the United States. More than two in five of those rural students

live in poverty, more than one in four is a child of color, and one in eight has changed residence in the previous 12 months. (p. 27)

The student population in rural schools continues to become more demographically complex. Johnson et al. (2014) presented the need to take rural schools into consideration when developing policy at the state and federal level because, “rural schools [are] becoming increasingly diverse and serving larger populations of students that schools have historically not served effectively (i.e., the students for whom performance is described in terms of achievement gaps)” (p. 27). Therefore, it is necessary for policy-makers to make provisions for rural schools to ensure initiatives and mandates are reasonable and will lead to student achievement for all.

The need for specific research on the implications for rural school district superintendents of implementing a new legislative reform on the tail end of an unsuccessful reform that produced many unintended consequences especially for rural schools exists at the dawn of ESSA. Superintendents throughout the nation will need to implement organizational change to implement ESSA; however, rural superintendents have unique needs in leading organizational change and implementing a new legislative reform. McCloud (2005) argued against a “one-size-fits-all approach to either rural education or to the preparation of leaders for rural schools” (p. 1). Significant lessons can be learned from the experiences of rural superintendents involved in executing NCLB effectively in rural districts. Their first-hand experiences can provide context for policy-makers that can help shape the provisions needed to ensure all students are successful.

Policy-makers have recognized some of the pitfalls NCLB had for rural school districts, and ESSA has provided a small lens for rural school districts. This evidenced by the following changes from NCLB to ESSA: (a) to properly classifying schools as rural, (b) to allocate federal funding specifically for rural schools, (c) to allow flexible spending of federal funding, and (d) to

allow the submission of consolidated plans for multiple programs to reduce the burden of paperwork. Policymakers have not specifically ascertained if the above provisions are adequate, in fact, the Alliance for Excellent Education (AEE, 2016) reported on requirements of ESSA regarding rural schools that the U.S. Department of Education (DOE) must address as follows:

ESSA directs the DOE to review how it is serving the nation’s rural schools within eighteen months of the enactment of ESSA, . . . Assess the methods and means in which DOE addresses the needs of rural schools and rural local education agencies (LEAs), . . . [and] develop an action plan detailing ways to increase participation by rural schools and LEAs. (p. 1)

The DOE must make this report available to the Senate and House education committees.

Additionally, because funding was an issue with NCLB, ESSA requires a study of the use and effectiveness of Title I funds. AEE (2016) noted the following:

ESSA requires the director of the Institute of Education Sciences at DOE to complete a study examining the effectiveness of the four Title I Part A funding formulas, including the impact of the current formula structure on Title I funding allocations and whether the Title I formula adequately delivers Title I funds to the most economically disadvantaged communities. (p. 1)

Clearly, national policymakers see the need for further study of rural education needs; however, the studies outlined above do not look at the first-hand knowledge and experiences of current superintendents in rural districts.

ESSA provides more flexibility to states to develop intrastate accountability systems, interventions, and sanctions for struggling schools. States must include an indicator of “school quality or student success,” such as student engagement, post-secondary readiness, or school

climate and safety to their accountability measures (ESSA, 2015). States are currently developing their plans and have the opportunity to evaluate the hardships placed on rural schools and make provisions in their plans. Therefore, researching the experiences of rural superintendents during NCLB and their perceptions of the implications of ESSA during this period of regulatory transition may provide important context for developing an accountability system able to support rural school success. Provisions for rural school districts are required to meet the goal of every students succeeding. Additionally, rural superintendents must be equipped with the necessary skills to lead organizational change within complex rural districts.

Statement of the Problem

The 2017-2018 school year is the first, full implementation year for ESSA. While ESSA has similarities to NCLB, several differences will impact states, school districts, and students. Superintendents implement many new educational reforms at the local level. ESSA has been passed to ensure all students are successful, on the tail end of NCLB education reform era that never realized its intended goal of 100% student achievement. Implementing ESSA will require an organizational change at the state and district level. The depth of change superintendents implement will depend on the changes made at the state level.

In Texas, TEA will adopt and announce any changes it expects for districts to implement at the district or local level. Superintendents will need to plan for organizational change and put those plans in motion. The new ESSA climate is likely to require adjustments to these leaders' skill sets, depending on TEA guidelines. Rural superintendents, in particular, are challenged with implementing the changes with minimal human capital at the central office level.

Statement of the Purpose

As the role of the superintendent becomes more complex with each new educational reform, the need for organizational change related research addressing new educational reform is needed. The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the perceptions of rural school district superintendents on the implications of new federal regulations being implemented due to the failure of NCLB to meet its intended targets. This study investigated how superintendents from rural school districts of similar sizes and demographics received information concerning ESSA and how they developed plans to implement organizational change. Superintendents from a representative sample of rural school districts were interviewed about their lived experiences in the current era of educational transition following the federal passage of ESSA.

Research Questions

This qualitative study answered the following questions:

1. What are rural superintendents' perceptions about current legislative reform as a consequence of ESSA and state education policy?
2. What are the challenges to implementing ESSA and state education policy in rural school districts?
3. What recommendations do rural superintendents have for ESSA and state education policymakers?

Significance and Rationale for Study

ESSA's new accountability system does not go into effect until the 2017-2018 school year; therefore, the timing of this qualitative study allowed a real-time look at the perceptions of superintendents while they are experiencing the new legislative change. The selected superintendents were current superintendents of rural school districts in Texas. In the state of

Texas, 453 of the 1,024 school districts were classified as rural during the 2014-2015 school year. The Texas Education Agency (TEA, 2016) defined a rural district as follows:

A district is classified as rural if it does not meet the criteria for classification in any of the previous subcategories. A rural district has either: (a) an enrollment of between 300 and the median district enrollment for the state and an enrollment growth rate over the past five years of less than 20 percent; or (b) an enrollment of fewer than 300 students. (para. 15)

The results of this qualitative study may be used to further investigate organizational change and leadership under a time of transition between one legislative, educational reform expiring and another activating. Policymakers may better understand, from the perspective of the practitioner, the implications of legislative reform and potentially start the conversation to ensure the development of safeguards for districts of varying sizes. States are in the planning process for developing their accountability systems; therefore, the results of this study may be used to guide the planning and implementation process of the new system. Because this study was conducted at the forefront of this legislative change, practitioners may use the result this study to further their understanding of change organization in the midst of legislative change.

Assumption

An assumption made was that superintendents were aware of the new legislative reform, ESSA, and had started planning their district's implementation. There was an assumption that superintendents would answer interview questions openly and honestly. Another assumption was that rural school district superintendents had specific concerns with legislative reform and organizational change.

Limitations

The limitation of this study is that the researcher interviewed 10 participants, which limits the study findings to be generalized across all superintendents. Since the superintendents in the study were from rural school districts in one state, Texas, the data may not generalize to other school district superintendents in the state or nation. Because the researcher recorded the interviews, the candidates may have become nervous and not answered as openly as they would without an audio recorder in the room. Unknown personal biases by the researcher, a central office employee in a large urban district, may have affected the interpretation of information. Therefore, the researcher utilized a reflection log to recognize and overcome personal biases.

Definition of Terms

Key terms related legislative educational reform are defined in this section of the study.

Chapter 41. “Chapter 41 of the Texas Education Code requires school districts that are property wealthy to share their wealth with school districts that are property poor” (TEA, 2016).

Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). The Reauthorization of the ESEA signed in 2015, which replaced NCLB. School districts are required to be at full implementation for the 2017-2018 school year. States are in the process of developing the state specific policies required by this legislation.

External stakeholders. A key audience not directly linked to schools but essential to school reform. External stakeholders include but are not limited to, taxpayers, seniors, nonparent residents, new residents, local business owners, political officials, religious leaders, social service agencies, law enforcement agencies (Moore, 2009).

Finances. The aggregate of all revenues a district receives from local, state, and federal funding sources paralleled with the district’s current fiscal state:

Human capital. The people working for an organization at all levels. Human capital also refers to the knowledge, skills, experience, and effectiveness an individual brings to an organization (Pil & Leana, 2009).

Leadership capacity. The capacity a leader must lead the implementation of a major organizational change. A person's leadership capacity is the extent to which he/she exhibits leadership behaviors; some of these behaviors exhibit political and administrative aspects along with the ability to motivate, support, and guide people (Yukl, 2013).

Organizational structure. The *Encyclopedia of Small Business* (2011) noted and organization, "Shows the pattern or arrangement of jobs and groups of jobs within an organization, yet it is more than an organizational chart. The organizational structure pertains to both reporting and operational relationships, provided they have some degree of permanence" (p. 945).

Students with Disabilities (SWD). Students that are protected by IDEA (2004) and are eligible to receive services through Special Education in the public-school system. IDEA (2004) Section 300.8(a)(1) states,

Child with a disability means a child evaluated in accordance with Sec. Sec. 300.304 through 300.311 as having mental retardation, a hearing impairment (including deafness), a speech or language impairment, a visual impairment (including blindness), a serious emotional disturbance (referred to in this part as "emotional disturbance"), an orthopedic impairment, autism, traumatic brain injury, another health impairment, a specific learning disability, deaf-blindness, or multiple disabilities, and who, by reason thereof, needs special education and related services.

Rural district. A school district that has either: (a) an enrollment of between 300 and the median district enrollment for the state and an enrollment growth rate over the past five years of less than 20%; or (b) an enrollment of fewer than 300 students (TEA Website).

Summary

There is a need to examine how superintendents from rural school districts receive information concerning new educational reform and how they develop plans to implement organizational change. This chapter included the statement of the problem, statement of purpose, research questions, the significance of the study, assumptions, and the limitations. This chapter concludes with a definition of terms. Chapter 2 provides the review of the literature on the history of educational, legislative reform, the roles and responsibilities of superintendents, and provides guidelines for implementing organizational change. Chapter 3 provides the methods used to conduct a qualitative study of rural school district superintendents leading organizational change in light of the new legislative, educational reform, ESSA.

Chapter 2: Review of Literature

“The fifth freedom is freedom from ignorance. It means that every man, everywhere, should be free to develop his talents to their full potential—unhampered by arbitrary barriers of race or birth or income” (“Lyndon B. Johnson,” 1968). President Johnson (1968) spoke ahead of his time, a time of contentiousness and desegregation. However, his words prophesied the movement toward leaving no child behind that began in the early 1970s.

The reality was that minority students were not offered an equal opportunity for education in the public-school system even in 1970 which led to the Supreme Court enabling desegregation through busing in its 1971 decision. Additionally, “in the early 1970s, U.S. schools educated only 20% of children with disabilities” (Katsiyannis, Yell, & Bradley, 2001, p. 325). However, just because students of color and with disabilities (SWD) acquired the right to physically attend classes within the nation’s public education system that promoted education for White children before 1954, did not mean any of these marginalized populations indeed attained equal opportunity to participate, learn, and grow to the same extent as their White and nondisabled peers. Mandates and regulations are in place, and safeguards exist, but each state, district, and school have its practices based on its interpretation of federal and state mandates, regulations and safeguards (Louis & Robinson, 2012).

Though great strides were made towards Lyndon B. Johnson’s (1968) idea of a fifth freedom, there is still much work to do to fulfill the entirety of its intentions. All students throughout the United States of America do not have opportunities to attain and show their full potential (Pazey, Heilig, Cole, & Sumbera, 2015). Reform efforts have, unfortunately, been unable to ensure equal opportunity to all students (Rush & Scherff, 2012). With this information in mind, this chapter addresses reform movements and legislation from a historical perspective

and offers implications for the current climate of reform, given the new reform era brought about by Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015.

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)

President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) on April 11, 1965. Although this was not the first federal attempt to improve schools, Johnson knew the (ESEA) did not compare to previous attempts. During the signing of the ESEA, he commented, “It represents a major new commitment of the federal government to quality and equality in the schooling that we offer our young people” (*Johnson’s remarks at signing ESEA*, April 11, 1965). Nelson (2016) contended the ESEA was the catalyst for the topic of equity in educational policy, “the ESEA helped to place equity at the forefront of education policy” (p. 359).

This new policy established federal mandates but tied those mandates to federal funding. The ESEA provided funding at a federal level to aid schools in educating all students utilizing Title I funding. Title I funding, “doubled federal revenues for K-12 education authorizing \$1 billion (\$7 billion in 2009 dollars) in new federal funding for supplemental academic programs for ‘educationally deprived’ children from low-income families” (Cascio & Reber, 2013, p. 423). The charge to reform the educational system in America began at the federal level, first with Supreme Court rulings then with legislation. In 1965, the ESEA initiated school reform, which focused on providing an equitable education to all students, which eventually led to a standards-based model of reform. No longer was it acceptable to educate some students at one level and others at a lesser level by the early 1970s.

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act

On November 29, 1975, Congress enacted the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA, Public Law 94-142), which later became the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004). Before the EAHCA and IDEA, many children with disabilities (SWD) were not afforded the opportunity to receive access to a free, appropriate public education (FAPE; Zirkel, 2013). In 1970, U.S. schools only educated 20% of the SWD, because many states had laws to exclude students with disabilities from public schools (Department of Education [DOE], 2010).

In many instances, administrators began adhering to the legal mandates of IDEA (2004) when they faced litigation threats. “Since the 1970s, court cases have remained relatively stable at approximately 7,000 reported cases every ten years. From 2000 to 2010, however, “more than 8,000 reported cases (as cited in Samuels, 2011) have been reported” (Pazey & Cole, 2012, p. 246). Only parents could be responsible for forcing schools to adhere to federal guidelines as their children’s advocates, but they likely had little awareness of the laws. School administrators could easily disregard the original mandates of IDEA undetected (Wagner & Katsiyannis, 2010).

The 1997 amendments to IDEA required schools to provide SWD access to the general education curriculum and participate in state assessments; however, many principals did not adhere to these requirements (Stockhall & Dennis, 2015). According to Lashley (2007), the language contained in the 1997 IDEA amendments lacked the “leadership incentives and sanctions” necessary “to ensure that principals would accept responsibility for the education of students who have disabilities” (p. 178). Without penalties or consequences due to legislation, accountability for schools’ actions shifted to the parents having knowledge of the rights and

privileges outlined for them in IDEA. Any enforcement of IDEA was dependent on parents choosing to pursue legal solutions.

For example, parents must pursue their children's rights to Individualized Education Programs (IEPs). IEPs are developed with the intent of ensuring SWDs receive unique, individualized interventions per minimal requirement standards posed by IDEA (2004). Christensen and Dorn (1997) argued that many schools used an identical IEP for several students, regardless of the differences in students' disability classifications with no way for parents to know their children's IEPs were, in fact, not individualized. IEPs tend to be less individualized to students and to follow along with the strengths and programs unique to the school's program offerings (Frick, Faircloth, & Little, 2012).

The institution of IDEA did not change the historical trend of marginalizing special education students and students of color within public schools as they continued to receive less equitable access to quality education. More than 40 years ago, ESEA and IDEA were put in place to ensure all students received an appropriate and comparable education. Since initially put into the legislation, ESEA and IDEA went through multiple legislative updates to reinforce each legislation's intent of providing educational equality for all students; however, the 1980s proved a time when these efforts were scrutinized.

A Nation at Risk

In 1983, the National Commission of Excellence in Education (NCEE) reported, "the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people" (p. 13). The self-proclaimed purpose of this report was "to define the problems afflicting American education and to provide solutions" (NCEE, 1983, p. 9). The NCEE spent 18 months researching and identifying the problems with

the educational system in America which focused on, “four important aspects of the educational process: content, expectations, time, and teaching” (NCEE, 1983, p. 26). They presented their findings and recommendations for each of the four aspects of the educational processes.

In content, the commission found that high school curriculum was reduced to a “cafeteria style curriculum” in which students were completing a disproportionate number of “appetizer and dessert classes” and not enough “main course” classes. The percentage of students completing general track courses increased while the percentage taking vocational or college prep courses decreased. The commission recommended a graduation plan for all students that required a heavier dose of the following core subjects: English, mathematics, science, social studies, computer science and for the college-bound student, a foreign language. Recommendations were also made for the specific standards taught in each of the core subject areas (NCEE, 1983).

The commission identified expectations “in terms of the level of knowledge, abilities, and skills school and college graduates should possess” (NCEE, 1983, p. 19). They noted several deficiencies in the nation’s high schools that exemplified low expectations. They found that while the homework decreased and grades increased, student achievement declined. The minimum requirements of competency exam, required by most states at the time, exhibited low expectations for students. The commission also noted deficiencies in the college entrance requirements, the rigor in textbook, and in the lack of funds spent on instructional materials. The commission recommended universities to raise admissions requirements. They proposed that states administer standardized tests at each school level transition period; these tests should “certify the student’s credentials,” and identify needs of intervention or acceleration. Textbook companies needed to be held to a higher standard to provide more rigor, regularly updated

material to meet the needs of all learners and to provide districts with evidence of textbook quality and effectiveness. Furthermore, funds should be allocated to, “support text development in ‘thin-market’ areas, such as those for disadvantaged students, the learning disabled, and the gifted and talented” (NCEE, 1983, p. 36).

The commission criticized the amount of time American schools spent on schoolwork compared to other countries. The utilization of the time American schools did devote to schoolwork was deemed inefficient, and schools were not providing students with necessary study skills. Recommendations were made that school districts and state legislation should lengthen the school day to a minimum of 7 hours a day for 220 days a year. Schools should provide instruction in practical study skills and find more time for students that may need differentiated instruction. A student code of conduct should be developed and consistently followed with alternative settings for habitually disruptive students, and truancy policies should include both incentives and sanctions (NCEE, 1983).

The final area of concern was teaching; with a strong focus on the issues with teacher recruitment and retention. They found that an alarming number of recruited teachers were academically in the bottom 25% of graduating college students. Teacher preparation programs focused too heavily on pedagogy courses, which gave minimal time for subject matter courses. Teacher salaries were insufficient for living standards; therefore, teachers had to work part-time and summer jobs to supplement their income. There were persistent teacher shortages in the following areas: mathematics, science, foreign languages, special education, gifted and talented, and English Language Learners. Several recommendations were made concerning this issue. Raise the requirements for those entering the teaching field requiring them to demonstrate an “aptitude for teaching” and competence in the subject area in which the person wanted to teach.

Raise teachers' salaries and make salaries performance-based. Develop an alternative method for certification to get recently graduated math and science majors to join the teaching field.

Provide incentives, such as grants and loans, to attract students to the teaching field.

The NCEE argued its recommendations could be acted on immediately and “implemented over the next several years” with the “promise [of] lasting reform” (p. 31). Much like the ESEA, the NCEE report was focused on all students and noted the realities that students have varying abilities and needs for differentiated support. The NCEE did not postulate federal mandates but noted since the end of WWII the “ever-growing federal role in public education” served to promote “an interest in providing and achieving equality of educational opportunity” (NCEE, 1983, p. 27). Many states followed some of the NCEE’s recommendations in the 1980s and 1990s. Texas served as a model for the reform movements when former Governor George W. Bush became the 43rd President of the United States in 2001. As a result of Bush’s experiences in Texas, reform became federally regulated by 2002.

No Child Left Behind

If the objective of government policy is to obtain the highest level of student learning for a given level of expenditure, cost-effectiveness analysis should be used to determine which instructional expenditures (such as reductions in class sizes versus increases in teacher salaries) are able to achieve a given increase in student test scores at the lowest possible cost. (Ludwig & Bassi, 1999, p. 399)

Therefore, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB, 2002) put student achievement at the state, district, and campus levels under the federal microscope. NCLB required schools receiving any federal funding to follow its mandates. States had to provide reports indicating

adequate yearly progress for all students and all schools, but NCLB did not include sufficient funding to fulfill its mandates (Duncombe, Lukemeyer, & Yinger, 2008).

The premise of NCLB was to ensure that all students made academic gains, but the assumption that pre-NCLB funding levels were adequate was not efficiently or equitably considered when the law passed (Duncombe et al., 2008). “A set of assumptions underlying the NCLB school improvement policy logic is that the consequences, sanctions, resources, and supports can be characterized as improvement efforts and are appropriately assigned to and effectively implemented within identified schools” (Forte, 2010, p. 80). The law used federally instituted sanctions to motivate school leaders to allocate adequate funds for its goals as part of ensuring the academic achievement of all students. “The failure of NCLB and earlier accountability reforms to close achievement gaps reflects a flawed, implicit assumption that schools alone can overcome the achievement consequences of dramatic socioeconomic disparities” (Dee & Jacob, 2010, p. 60).

Even though some student groups met expected achievement gains, the achievement gap between White students and many historically marginalized groups of students did not fade over the course of NCLB from January of 2002 through the end of the 2015-2016 academic year (Lauen & Gaddis, 2015; Levine & Levine, 2013). Students of color, students with disabilities, students learning English, and students from low-income families continued to face inequitable opportunities in schools (Frattura & Capper, 2007; Jennings & Sohn, 2014; Mintrop & Sunderman, 2009). Over the course of NCLB, funding was increased at the federal, state, and local levels for struggling schools; however, the desired increases in student achievement did not emerge among historically marginalized student groups such as, minority, and students with disabilities (Husband & Hunt, 2015).

NCLB appeared to lean toward social justice by legislating that historically marginalized students have an equal opportunity to achieve academically; however, the schools serving minority majority students received a greater number of labels because the administration of NCLB regulations. These students and their schools became even more marginalized by the use of labels (Darling-Hammond, 2007). Schools not achieving academically by NCLB standards, which tended to be minority-majority student campuses, became unable to recruit or to retain quality teachers and administrators due to the amount of state and federal oversight and scrutiny imposed upon those schools (Husband & Hunt, 2015).

As an example of added scrutiny, the implementation of NCLB (2002) caused administrators to reconsider their special education programs. Due to the “increased alignments of NCLB with IDEA 2004, principals are responsible for the educational performance of students who have disabilities and for providing the procedural safeguards” (Lashley, 2007, p. 182). Administrators felt the urgency and importance of developing effective special education practices on their campuses; however, they lacked a clear understanding of what an effective program contained and how to develop this type of program. The NCLB regulations complicated principals’ ability to realize the intended mandates of IDEA (Pazey et al., 2015).

The pre-NCLB mentality for principals involved overseeing the regular operations of the special education classroom without being “expected to contribute to the quality of teaching or learning that occurred within them” (Lashley, 2007, p. 170). The NCLB requirement for highly qualified teachers forced principals to provide instructional leadership for all students and led principals away from the roles of operations management and student discipline. Administrators had the responsibility to ensure the high quality of instruction for all students on their campuses. The expectation of success with this task was unrealistic because principals did not receive

adequate training for managing curriculum and other needs of special education during the pre-NCLB years and had no access to funds for receiving such training during the NCLB years (Administrator Standards, 2014; Pazey et al., 2015).

Even though school principals were not prepared to lead special education programs on their campuses, they were held accountable for the academic performance of all students. Complicating the principal role, SWDs could not just be pulled out and grouped together for interventions by special educators, for example, to prepare for mandated tests. SWDs were required to be included in the general education classroom to meet the expectations for their equal access to curriculum (Lashley, 2007). Therefore, principals were concerned about SWDs displaying satisfactory achievement results, because the inadequate performance of any subpopulation resulted in regulatory sanctions (Lashley, 2007).

Lack of resources was the number one excuse given by educators as to why the achievement gap grew for historically marginalized students (Lashley, 2007). However, poor resource allocation caused the already limited resources to become unstable and unequal. NCLB was intended to be a solution to inequitable resource distribution, but the intention was not met (Jennings & Sohn, 2014). In fact, unintended consequences of NCLB impeded many districts from promoting equitable resource allocation.

Though often referred to as an unfunded mandate, NCLB's (2002) Title I program offered a great deal of extra funding to schools with poor students and districts with less funding. The DOE granted districts that applied for Title I monies to improve technology and support programs. The intent of Title I funding was to provide the needed additional funding to ensure all students met standards. The U.S. Department of Education (DOE, 2015) defined the Title I Program as the following:

Title I, Part A (Title I) of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, as amended ESEA provides financial assistance to local educational agencies (LEAs) and schools with high numbers or high percentages of children from low-income families to help ensure that all children meet challenging state academic standards. (para. 1)

Many urban schools received large amounts of Title I funding. The scope of the funding regulations enabled districts and campuses to allocate and utilize Title I funds differently. However, even with the increased per pupil spending, the actual Title I resources allocated on behalf of targeted students groups only marginally increased (Dee, Jacob, & Nathaniel, 2013).

The lack of benefit from Title I funding could be attributed to the NCLB requirement for annual accountability testing of all students. Accountability testing was a federally unfunded mandate, and districts had to find ways to pay for the accountability measures. In some states, annual testing was not the norm before NCLB, so those states were challenged to find the means for meeting the requirements of NCLB without receiving Title I funds (Levine & Levine, 2013). A significant portion of the funds intended for promoting student achievement and reducing achievement gaps went to fund the NCLB requirement for annual assessment. School districts had to hire personnel to be responsible for specific regulations that emerged from NCLB, causing the largest portion of local and federal funding to be spent on personnel. In Texas, school districts hired extra administrators, and by 2013, approximately 62.5% of a Texas school district's budget went to personnel (Combs, 2013).

Moreover, in urban school districts, more personnel did not guarantee better educational programs. The districts that served a larger population of minority students, poor students, and students with disabilities required quality educators, not just quantity of administrators. Recruiting quality teachers was a struggle for many districts, "this is especially true for urban

schools with high concentrations of poor non-white, and low-performing students” (Boyd, Lankford, Loeb, & Wycoff, 2005, p. 113). Thus, school districts spent lots of money on recruiting, retaining, and training teachers. Although these efforts may increase the quality of classroom instruction, under NCLB, even Title I students were not directly receiving a dollar for dollar return. NCLB set up an economy of testing, rather than students profiting through achievement, “educational publishing companies, whose subdivisions develop standardized tests” became the profiteers in the accountability era of NCLB (Arce, Luna, Borjian, & Conrad, 2005, p. 58).

NCLB’s Bermuda Triangle: The Highly Qualified Teacher Metric, RTI, and Title I

Matsurdaira, Hosek, and Walsh (2012) examined the effects of Title I funding in one large urban school district. Matsurdaira et al. (2012) compared schools “with poverty levels, just around an eligibility threshold for Title I funding” (p. 2). This study allowed them to analyze data from schools with similar variables outside of the Title I funds. They found that although campuses that were receiving Title I funds might have initially increased per pupil expenditures by \$460, the decreased funding from other sources brought the total increased per pupil expenditure to \$360. Matsurdaira et al. (2012) concluded, “Title I funds appear to have no impact on achievement scores in any part of the distribution of test schools” (p. 3). If Title I funds did nothing to improve student achievement, the consequences of NCLB on teachers caused new concerns.

Because of the regulatory environment of education under NCLB, hiring the required highly qualified teacher became a serious problem through the nation (Ludlow, 2011). Teachers’ salaries were raised to recruit new teachers, and the number of teachers with higher levels of education increased (Dee & Jacob, 2010). Unfortunately, the numbers of available teachers did

not change; the attrition rates of teachers in some districts became untenable (Thibodeaux, Labat, Lee, & Labat, 2015). Instead of increasing the number of teachers hired to lower class sizes, teachers received raises.

Many veteran teachers held steadfast to working at campuses that did not have the highest need for highly qualified teachers (Rodgers & Skelton, 2014). Instead, novice teachers ended up working at campuses with the larger numbers of historically marginalized students. Of additional concern, teachers tended to be White and female, but on these disadvantaged campuses, the students tended to be minorities, English as a second language, low socioeconomic status, migrant, and SWD (Eslinger, 2014; Feistritzer, 2011).

“The pedagogical issues in teaching low-income students, as well as large numbers of immigrant and special education students are especially difficult, while teachers are more likely to lack experience and credentials” (Grubb, 2009, p. 36). Novice teachers struggled to close the achievement gap of their students because they lacked proper training and cultural understanding, let alone professional experience. Thus, the students who needed highly trained teachers the most entered classrooms led by novice teachers. This dilemma led to the widening of the achievement gap (Rodgers & Skelton, 2014).

Not only were teachers less qualified in underperforming and Title I schools, but they worked in a state of fear. Teachers in high need areas were under pressure to produce results or risk losing their jobs. These teachers placed a considerable amount of their focus on teaching the annual test to their students rather than teaching fundamental academic skills and grade-level curricula. “Teachers report greater concern over how student test performance will affect their job security;” therefore, they tended to resign from the profession rather quickly, within five

years (Reback, Rockoff, & Schwartz, 2014, p. 232). New teachers left the field at a greater rate post-NCLB than pre-NCLB (Eslinger, 2014; Thibodeaux et al., 2015).

Although sanctions were intended to ensure the equitable allocation of resources, many unintended consequences materialized. Schools utilized educational triage strategies to ensure data showed an improvement in student achievement, which caused an inflation of resources for too few students (Booher-Jennings, 2005; Jennings & Sohn, 2014). Many marginalized students, considered to have the least probability of passing standardized tests, did not receive resources, such as funding for Title I, intended for them. The triage used for reducing gaps in achievement became a national practice known as response to intervention (RTI).

RTI met requirements for both NCLB (2002) and IDEA (2004) federal funding. Title I funds were allocated specifically for resources to close the achievement gap for SWD and minority students (DOE, 2012). IDEA (2004) provided an additional authority to local education agencies (LEA), “In determining whether a child has a specific learning disability, a local educational agency may use a process that determines if the child responds to scientific, research-based intervention as a part of the evaluation procedures” (IDEA, 2004). IDEA (2004) did not mandate RTI in the context of the evaluation process; however, RTI was encouraged to provide early interventions for students in hopes of decreasing inappropriate, disproportionate referrals to special education (Finch, 2012; Thomas & Dykes, 2011).

NCLB (2002) emphasized data-based decision making and scientifically research-based instruction for all students which brought RTI in the classroom for general education students. RTI was no longer just for special education screening. Burns and VandDerHeyden (2006) defined RTI as “the systematic use of data-based decision making to most efficiently allocate resources to enhance learning outcomes for all children” (p. 3). Thus, RTI was conceived to

allow schools to achieve NCLB's (2002) intentions. However, no specific model of effective RTI was developed.

Zirkel and Thomas (2010) ascertained that without state laws or guidelines on the implementation of RTI, the use of RTI was left "entirely to district discretion based on professional research and norms" (p. 72). Without any clear understanding of how RTI could be effectively implemented throughout Grades K to 12, educational leaders and teachers became frustrated. Castro-Villarreal, Rodriguez, and Moore (2014) studied the teachers' perceptions of RTI in a large urban school district. Castro-Villarreal et al. (2014) found five common themes among the teachers' perceptions of barriers to an effective RTI program: (a) lack of training, (b) lack of time to plan, (c) lack of both human and material resources, (d) process complexity, and (e) overwhelming documentation requirements. With the pressures of accountability and detrimental sanctions, teachers implemented RTI in classrooms even though they also faced many barriers.

NCLB (2002) provided Title I funds for initiatives such as RTI; however, without operational flexibility schools struggled to produce the required achievement promptly. Districts fretted over Title I audits because these federal programs were focused more on compliance rather than on "within-school coordination between Title I and regular instruction" (Miron & St. John, 2003, p. 73). RTI received attention and resources throughout school districts even when the programs were ineffective due to political and contextual factors.

In 2011, the U.S. Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, allowed states to apply for waivers from many NCLB mandates. However, these waivers were contingent upon the states adopting the U.S. Department of Education's policies (Bell & Meinelt, 2011). Some questioned the U.S. Secretary of Education's authority to grant NCLB waivers (Black, 2015). Other

educational leaders viewed the NCLB waivers as an escape from the NCLB's accountability procedures. "Waivers under the No Child Left Behind Act have provided an escape hatch for many schools that were facing some of the toughest penalties under the 12-year-old federal school accountability law" (McNeil, 2014, p. 4).

Two of the historically marginalized groups of students were most affected by waivers. These students were English language learners (ELL) and special education students. Education critics worried "that students in special education and ELLs are being neglected by the waiver process" and wanted "the department to release data on how those students and others are faring academically under the waivers" (Klein, 2014, p. 22). Allowing waivers, these critics argued, impeded the intended equitable resource allocation (Klein, 2014).

The NCLB (2002) magnified student achievement at the state, district, and campus levels. Schools struggled to meet the requirements of NCLB. Educational leaders proclaimed failure to attain NCLB's goals was due to NCLB itself because it required unfunded mandates. NCLB attempted to ensure that all students made academic gains with the assumption that added accountability would lead to equity. NCLB policymakers thought that the threat of punitive sanctions would motivate schools to allocate funds to programs equitably and efficiently to close the achievement gap for all students to achieve academic success. However, even under the threat of sanctions or in the face of operating under sanctions, the idea of equitable and efficient resource allocation in schools was never fully realized across the nation during the NCLB era.

NCLB highlighted the inequities in schools but did not offer adequate funding to produce equity. Effective educational reform in schools can only be realized when educational leaders and policymakers gain an understanding of how to best allocate limited resources to ensure academic gains for all students. NCLB failed to follow Levin's (1989) admonition that

“economics addresses a central social dilemma, how to allocate a scarcity of resources to a multiplicity of competing ends” (p. 13). Grubb (2009) held firm that debating funding is inadequate because “it is necessary to develop an improved approach to school resources” (p. 25). Nonetheless, NCLB’s mandate that all students must show academic achievement success was unfulfillable because NCLB did not illustrate how schools could effectively allocate resources to ensure student success.

At the outset of the earliest evaluations under NCLB, a formative policy evaluation did not enable schools “to make necessary changes throughout the life of [NCLB] to improve it” (Fowler, 2013, p. 206). While evaluation is an ongoing process that should drive revisions when needed, necessary revisions to NCLB did not occur. NCLB underwent some change since its inception; however, the changes tended to be cosmetic and did not fix the larger problems.

Forte (2010) identified three major problems left unrepaired under NCLB revisions. First, the measures used to categorize schools, as either meeting accountability standards or needing improvement, were not reliable and accurate. Second, sanctions were not properly used to facilitate the improvement process (Forte, 2010). Third, the improvement process did not increase student achievement (Forte, 2010). Eight years past the intended reauthorization date, the NCLB era ended in December of 2015 as a new era started with President Obama signing into law the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). ESSA “represents a significant return of educational authority from the federal government to the state and local level” (Franquiz & Ortiz, 2016, p. 1).

ESSA: A new era of reform?

Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) was signed by President Barak Obama on December 10, 2015. This new education legislation was designed to reduce federal involvement in local

schools by returning the regulatory and educational leadership roles and power to the states. The new law did not do away with standardized testing. Under ESSA, annual testing in Grades 3 through 8 continues to be required. For Grades 9 through 12, one year of testing is required, but states may choose what high school grade to implement any testing.

Reporting of student performance will continue, but states have more latitude in the selection of the assessments they use and the standards they choose to measure. Because of the forced adoption of the Common Core standards under NCLB, the ESSA prohibits the “Secretary of Education from forcing or encouraging states to adopt any particular set of standards” (McGuinn, 2016, p. 405). While state testing and reporting must continue, Average Yearly Progress (AYP) reporting and the corresponding sanctions were removed from educational practice. States must, however, set goals for schools and monitor and rate schools on the progress made towards the established goals, suggesting ESSA promotes strategic planning. Schools will no longer be evaluated on standardized test scores alone. “Instead, ESSA requires the use of multiple measures of student success for monitoring learning and improvement” (Franquiz & Ortiz, 2016, p. 1).

ESSA does not require states to reconstitute schools that fail to meet state goals. States are “required to identify and intervene in underperforming schools (though fewer than under NCLB), and they have been given more flexibility in deciding how they want to intervene” (McGuinn, 2016, p. 406). Under ESSA, states must continue to identify schools needing support for improvement under a regulation known as Comprehensive Support and Improvement Schools (CSIS) but based on goals, states will have latitude for establishing what those supports will be. ESSA requires states to identify and provide interventions to their lowest-performing 5% of schools and high schools with graduation rates equal to or lower than 67%. These schools

must be identified at least once every three years, but each state develops its CSIS exit criteria.

ESSA identified a second group of schools requiring interventions for the Targeted Support and Improvement Schools (TSIS). TSIS schools have one or more subpopulations that continually underperform. ESSA's third and final group for intervention is identified as Additional Targeted Support and Improvement Schools (ATSIS). ATSIS schools serve one or more subpopulation that performs academically at a rate that would place them in the lowest 5% of Title I schools (Charnov, 2015). "While this is the most prescriptive section of ESSA on accountability (and the most NCLB-like), states and districts nonetheless retain considerable discretion about how they will intervene and support these schools" (McGuinn, 2016, p. 406).

ESSA has been targeted for full implementation as of the 2017-2018 school year. Although states have been given back a great deal of power concerning the accountability of their schools, many have been slow to move toward implementing ESSA. Wood-Garnett (2016) ascertained that "states and districts spent 10 years reforming their schools under the prior education law, No Child Left Behind (NCLB). Under NCLB, nearly every state either adopted or adapted new or existing academic standards and systems of assessment and accountability" (p. 2). Furthermore, ESSA was signed during a presidential election cycle. Since the timing of full implementation falls after the presidential election, it is possible the new U.S. President and Secretary of Education may choose not to activate the law, or Congress may decide to stop the law from activating.

Nonetheless, many states have begun making decisions, based on ESSA, with caution, in the hope of minimizing the unintended consequences of NCLB. Burnette (2016) noted states' education officials had begun building consensus, collecting data, and planning how to intervene appropriately assuming ESSA becomes fully implemented to avoid the same pitfalls caused by

NCLB.

Superintendents operating a district at the forefront of new legislation will be on a learning curve and possibly need a paradigm shift. NCLB was in place since January of 2002, when ESSA is fully implemented for the 2017-2018 school year, it will represent the first major educational reform affecting the operation of schools in 15 years. Many current, up and coming administrators have never known a different way of operating schools and may have spent their entire careers working under NCLB, which differs from current the current legislation, ESSA.

Because NCLB (2002) sparked several unintended consequences that were harmful to the very students the law was meant to help (Darling-Hammond, 2007), superintendents have an opportunity to play a vital role in the introduction and implementation of ESSA in their districts. To take any steps to minimize future unintended consequences under ESSA legislation, superintendents must understand the nuances of the law and began sense making for all stakeholders. Superintendents effectively communicate the changes to stakeholders as school districts begin contemplating plans for operating under ESSA (Kowalski, 2001). Superintendents need to start communicating with stakeholders and developing organizational change plans.

Bird, Dunaway, Hancock, and Wang (2013) explained: “the school superintendent’s pivotal organizational perch has direct and proximate access to board members, building principals, and community residents, as well as direct and proximate influence on vision inception, resource distribution, and operational procedures” (p. 77). This is a huge responsibility and requires the ability to mediate both internal and external demands while making decisions in the best interest of all students (Feuerstein, 2013). Each action the

superintendent takes will have multiple outcomes, including unintended side effects (Yukl, 2013).

Although an exact framework from the Texas Education Agency (TEA) about what to expect regarding accountability for the 2017-2018 academic year has not been entirely developed, superintendents must guide their districts by making sense of ESSA's legislative reform. Superintendents in smaller, rural districts bear greater responsibility for guiding their schools since these smaller districts tend to lack the central staffing levels that are found in large urban districts which employ specialists in all the areas covered in the 391-page ESSA document. The smaller districts' superintendents will lean on TEA's interpretation of ESSA and interpret the state's regulations about how to carry out reform. The role of the superintendent bears consideration due to the current climate of regulatory change.

Conceptual Framework

The implementation of the study will include a conceptual framework guided by five roles of a school district superintendent the 10 functions of a school district. The roles and the functions are interwoven when applied during organizational change. With these aspects of the conceptual framework in mind, the final component of the conceptual framework will be Yukl's 14 guidelines for implementing major organizational change.

The Superintendent's Roles

The role of the superintendent has changed and became more complex with each educational reform movement. The role of a superintendent can no longer be surmised as manager. Today, superintendents perform the following five roles within a school district: instructional leader, applied social scientist, manager, effective communicator and political leader (Bjork et al., 2014; Callahan, 1966). Bjork et al. (2014) emphasized the need for

superintendents to conceive “their work as consisting of five roles not only is grounded in both historical and empirical evidence that reflect its evolution but also emerging responsibilities” (p. 451).

Instructional leader. Another term used for an instructional leader is teacher-scholar. The superintendent’s top priority is student achievement; therefore, all decisions made for the district must facilitate student achievement. In this role, the superintendent ensures all students receive quality instruction. Teaching and learning should be a priority for all superintendents (Bjork et al., 2014; Smith, 2015). Instructional Leadership is one of three domains within the Texas Examinations of Educator Standards (TExES) framework that outlines what an entry-level superintendent should know and be able to do in the state of Texas (TEA, 2015). Competency within the Instructional Leadership domain requires a superintendent, “to facilitate the planning and implementation of strategic plans that enhance teaching and learning; ensure alignment among curriculum, curriculum resources and assessment; use the current accountability system; and promote the use of varied assessments to measure student performance” (TEA, 2015, p. 10).

Applied social scientist. Superintendents must make decisions based on sound research. This requires the ability to recognize sound research from educational fads. Bjork and Kolawski (2005) determined “the demands on superintendents to become outcomes-based, data-driven decision makers require superintendents to assume [this] role” (p. 188). Superintendents apply scientific inquiry to problems within the district for decision-making within all 10 functions of a district. Superintendents develop action plans to incorporate current research-based strategies and best practices in the field of education and business. These action plans include measurable outcomes to evaluate if the strategies and practices produce the desired outcomes. The TExES framework required an entry level superintendent in the state of Texas should know and be able

to “facilitate the ongoing study of current best practice and relevant research and encourage the application of this knowledge to district/school improvement initiatives” (TEA, 2015, p. 11).

Manager. This was the original role of superintendents, and although superintendent roles have expanded, manager is still an important role played by the superintendent. As Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of a school district, a superintendent oversees all functions of a school district and is ultimately responsible for poor decisions or compliance violations. Therefore, superintendents must continually exert the role of manager to ensure district affairs are in order at all times. In the TExES framework, an entry-level superintendent in the state of Texas should know and “apply principles of effective leadership and management in relation to district budgeting, personnel, resource utilization, financial management and technology applications” (TEA, 2015, p. 12).

Effective communicator. The role of effective communicator has become increasingly prevalent with each new reform initiative. Bjork and Kowalski (2005) explained: “virtually every major school improvement concept and strategy encourages superintendents to work collaboratively with principals, teachers, parents and other tax-payers to build and pursue collective visions” (p. 11). Superintendents should listen and gather information from all stakeholders when developing action plans, implementing new initiatives, and making decisions that affect stakeholders. At the same time, superintendents must continually share information and be transparent with all stakeholders, not just when providing good news or when it is convenient to share information. In the TExES framework, an entry-level superintendent in the state of Texas should know and be able to “communicate and work effectively with diverse groups in the district and community, i.e., social, cultural, political, ethnic and racial groups, so

that all students receive appropriate resources and instructional support to ensure educational success” (TEA, 2015, p. 8).

Political leader. Within a district and community, several personal and group agendas exist. The superintendent has one main agenda/vision to ensure academic achievement for all students within the district. The superintendent must continually remind the board of trustees, teachers, parents, and other community members/group of this vision. At the same time, superintends must advocate locally, at the state level, and even at the federal level for the rights of the students within the district to ensure student achievement for all students. The TExES framework tasked the entry-level superintendent in the state of Texas to know and “respond to and influence the larger political, social, economic, legal and cultural context, including working with the board of trustees, to achieve the district’s educational vision” (TEA, 2015, p. 9). These five roles are constantly used by superintendents.

Figure 1 shows the continuum of the five roles of a school district superintendent. However, the importance of each role changes with social, economic, and political conditions addressed by Bjork et al. (2014). To adapt roles to appropriate situations, superintendents must have the operational knowledge of the 10 functions outlined above to navigate his or her role in any given situation.

Ten Functions of a School District

Olivarez (2013) ascertained a superintendent is responsible for 10 operational functions of a school district. All districts exhibit the 10 functions regardless of size. District size does have implications as to how hands on the superintendent is within each function. For example, in a large urban district, there might be a chief of operations that directly reports to the superintendent; however, in a rural district, the superintendent might wear the chief of operations

hat. Therefore, the degree of knowledge needed among superintendents is variable depending on size and central staff capacity.

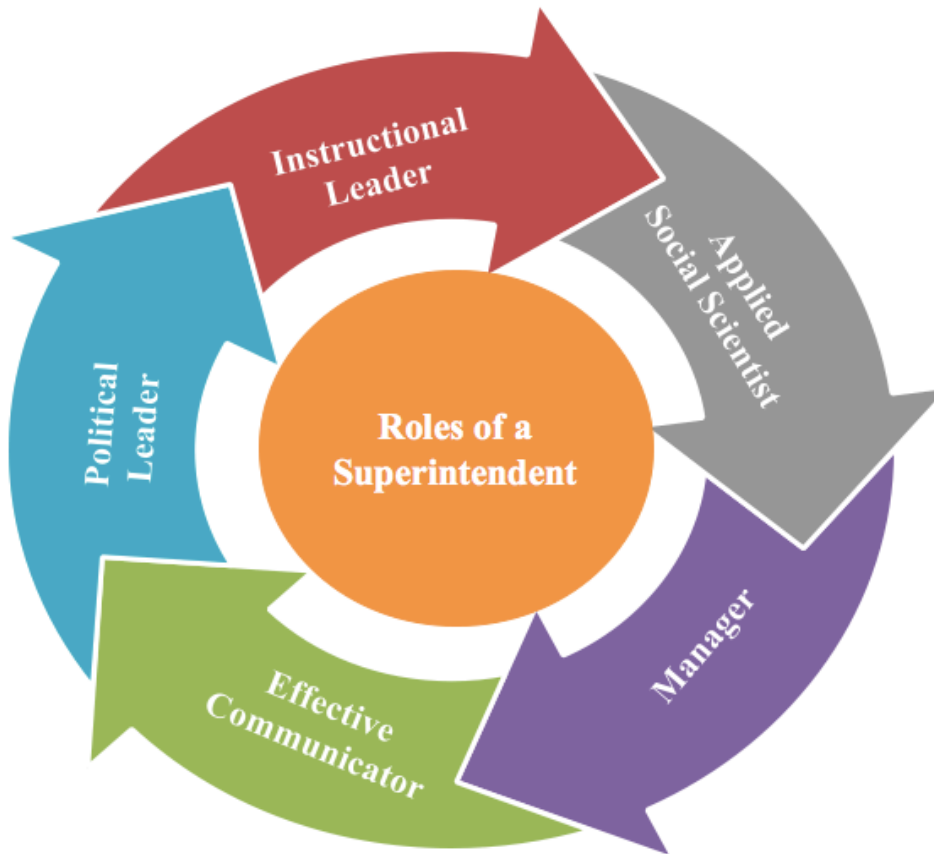


Figure 1. A continuum of the five roles of a superintendent.

Governance Operations. The Governance Operations function includes the roles and responsibilities of a school board and the superintendent as required by Texas Education Code (TEC). The structure and organization of the school boards and the processes for developing and managing policy is within the governance operation. It is the responsibility of the superintendent to keep student achievement at the forefront of all district decision-making (James et al., 2013). Therefore, the superintendent is charged with communicating the district vision with all stakeholders, especially the school board. The school board, superintendent, and the district

leadership team (defined by the superintendent) lead the governance operation function which guides and supports the district's operational plan and budget (Olivarez, 2013).

Curriculum & instruction. The Curriculum and Instruction function makes sure campuses receive state adopted curriculum, support materials, and needed equipment to provide instruction to students both efficiently and equitably. To make proper curriculum and instruction choices for students, districts must utilize data to conduct a curriculum needs assessment that will outline the district's curriculum strengths and weaknesses. The superintendent should use the needs assessment to lead the development of district goals designed to increase student achievement.

This function also ensures appropriate professional development is provided to campus-based instructional personnel. Using the curriculum needs assessment, the superintendent oversees district-wide staff development initiatives. This includes training, guidance, dissemination of materials needed to implement local instructional initiatives that promote differentiated instruction for special populations of students within the district (Olivarez, 2013). Along with leading the district in developing curriculum, instruction, and professional development initiatives. The superintendent is the voice of the community he or she should share the district's strengths and weaknesses in curriculum instruction along with celebrations of what is working in the district in curriculum and instruction.

Elementary & secondary campus operations. The Elementary and Secondary Campus Operations function involves both short and long-term action planning to ensure student achievement on all campuses. This function involves monitoring campuses to ensure action plans are being realized and providing feedback to all instructional units. "Planning and monitoring of effective and appropriate services include consideration of special populations,

including but not limited to programs for students with limited English proficiency, special education needs, behavioral and/or conduct disorders, and learning differences such as dyslexia” (Olivarez, 2013, p. 21).

This function includes the operations of specialized campuses such as magnet, choice, alternative, charter, etc. (Olivarez, 2013). The function is responsible for developing and monitoring systems and procedures that ensure all students are delivered effective programming and services; this includes students in the following programs: special education, English language learners, gifted & talented, migrant, etc. The superintendent ensures equitable resource allocation for all campuses for all students to have proper access to high-quality instruction. Operational structures are put in place to guide and reinforce district-wide goals district goals.

Instructional support services. The Instructional Support Services function ensures systems are in place to provide students with required instructional related services within the framework of the district’s instructional plan. This function covers a variety of services (Olivarez, 2013). One services that falls within this function is counseling services. This function is responsible for ensuring all campuses have access to sufficient counseling services based on campus need, state guidelines, and district policy. This function is responsible for ensuring library services, and extra-curricular activities on campuses are monitored to ensure equitable access and participation for all students. Other service within this function are health-related services, community and parent outreach services, and other specialized family support services. This function is crucial in the area of whole-child wellness. The complexity of this function has grown with the importance placed on social, emotional learning.

Human resources. The Human Resources function manages the district’s human capital. The areas managed by this function are recruitment, hiring, firing, compensation,

benefits, evaluations, employee relations. This function ensures federal compliance guidelines are met including the Wages and Fair Labor Act (FSLA), the Family Medical Leave Act (FMLA), and during the NCLB era, the Highly Qualified (HQ) requirements.

This function requires collaboration among all departments both campus level and central level to address the complex processes needed to maintain and evaluate all staff (Olivarez, 2013). The superintendent is hired by and reports to the school board; however, all other personnel is hired by and report to the superintendent. Although in most districts, the superintendent does not directly hire all of the employees, the superintendent is ultimately responsible for all district employment.

Administration, finance & business operations. The Administration, Finance and Business Operations function provides oversight to the District's finances. This function deals with all aspects of the district's finances including budget planning and monitoring, purchasing, accounts payable, payroll, and budget evaluations. Superintendents must be more involved in this function than they have been in the past due to increasing accountability with decreasing funds (Olivarez, 2013). Many districts have a CFO that manages this function; however, some rural superintendents are also the CFO of the district. Ultimately, superintendents are responsible for the district finances and will take the blame for any negative issues with the district's budget. This function ensures district spending is within federal, state and local compliance maintaining proper documentation for all expenditures.

This function must develop systems and procedures for handling expenditures, money, and procurement throughout the district. Frequent audits throughout the organization and yearly inventory accounting provide a district with safeguards for unethical practices. Funds come from a variety of sources, and many of them have particular regulations on how monies can be spent,

what can be purchased, and documentation required. This function is responsible for training applicable staff with regulation and compliance requirements and monitoring compliance.

Facilities planning & plant services. The Facilities, Planning and Plant Management function is responsible for all district facilities, the building, maintenance, and upgrades. This function is vital in the planning process of closing and opening buildings to ensure each facility is equipped with the necessary infrastructure to meet the needs of the program to be housed in the facility. This function plans for potential enrollment increases and decreases, modifies current buildings to meet existing policies and ensures the sustainability of all facilities.

When facilities are renovated or newly constructed, this function is responsible for ensuring all federal, state and local policy are followed during the procurement process. Long-term facility planning is pivotal to ensure the district is prepared to meet the needs of future students and programs. Part of the planning required by this function beyond the district's projected facility needs is the funding needs for projects. When facility emergencies arise that threaten the safety of students and employees, this function is charged with ensuring a timely response and plan are executed to ensure a safe environment for students and employees is restored.

Accountability, information management & technology Services. The Accountability, Information Management, and Technology Services function “addresses the entire network of data gathering and information exchange that is the unifying network across all aspects of the school district organization” (Olivarez, 2013, p. 32). This function ensures the multiple data sources are integrated to address accountability in the area of meeting academic standards and federal and state compliance requirements. Due to the complexity of federal and

state requirements, school districts must maintain structured and monitored electronic files of all data.

Technology has become a part of every facet of a school district; therefore, this function is visible through all 10 functions. This function is responsible for ensuring districts have the proper infrastructure to facilitate district databases for multiple sources of data, student information, purchasing, payroll, budgeting, etc. At the same time, the infrastructure must be able to support the campuses and instructional programs utilized by the district. Since technology is changing rapidly, a system for monitoring and assessing district databases and district technology devices regularly to ensure equitable accessibility and desired outcomes be realized.

External & Internal Communications. The External and Internal Communications function is a critical function in any school district. Internally, this function is responsible for establishing lines of communication and communication protocols among employees at campuses, central office, and the superintendent. Externally, this function ensures parents and community members are aware of all events, district accountability results, board meeting schedules, and all other important information concerning the district. Beyond ensuring all stakeholders are receiving important information, this function is responsible for building systems in which internal and external stakeholders can voice district concerns, suggestions, and praises.

This function is responsible for gathering information and perceptions on current and anticipated district happenings through multiple sources such as task forces, surveys, and social media. When negative internal issues cause potential disruption to the organization, this function utilizes effective communication to resolve the issues. This function deals with district

marketing, strategically communicating district successes to all stakeholders. When potential situations arise that might cause negative press, this function is proactive in responding to the community, taking responsibility when needed and communicating the district's actions to ensure the situation does not happen in the future.

Operational support systems, safety & security, food services & transportation. The Operational Support Systems – Safety and Security, Food Services, and Transportation function are essential to the daily operational needs of students and staff. Safety and Security encompass planning for all activities, events, and potential events and ensuring staff can enforce needed safety and security measures. Food services whether locally managed or outsourced ensures students receive meal services in a timely, efficient, safe, and effective manner. The free and reduced lunch federal funding program requires food services to be within compliance and submit documentation of compliance to receive funding. Transportation encompasses more than transporting students to and from their zone school; it includes specialized transportation for SPED students, transportation to choose magnet schools outside of students' school zones, transporting student for field trips, and transportation for extracurricular programs.

Each function of the district is important and necessary to the success of the school district and ultimately the students. Superintendents play five overarching roles and are responsible for the 10 major functions of a district. Figure 2 illustrates the variability of the roles and responsibilities a superintendent must adapt at any given moment.



Figure 2. The variability and continuum of the roles and responsibilities a superintendent.

While these roles and responsibilities are constant, there is also a variability. This complexity is this magnified when superintendents are charged with organizational change through legislative reform. This complexity is this magnified when superintendents are charged with organizational change through legislative reform.

Guidelines for Implementing a Major Change

Superintendents must lead their school systems through change. The responsibility of leading change is extremely important and quite difficult (Yukl, 2013). To change an organization, the leader must understand his/her role and responsibilities as it relates to the functions of the organization and know how to effectively implement change within an organization. Yukl (2013) ascertained “successful implementation of change in organizations requires a wide range of leadership behaviors. Some of the behaviors involve political and

administrative aspects, and others involve motivating, supporting, and guiding people” (p. 315). Yukl (2013) suggested 14 guidelines for best practices to implement major organizational change. These guidelines provide a framework that may be applied to the roles outlined by the TEA (2015) and within the needs of meeting the 10 functions of a school district (Olivarez, 2013) as superintendents seek to implement legislative change in their rural school districts.

First, when facing a major change, superintendents need to “create a sense of urgency about the need for change” (Yukl, 2013, p. 84) in the school district. Although changes may be mandated by legislation, such as ESSA, or due to non-legislated outside forces, such as economic recession, the superintendent must explain the necessity for addressing the change to meet the district’s needs. If district stakeholders do not see the need for change, the superintendent should provide specific information and examples to share a vision of why the change is needed and why it is needed now (Yukl, 2013).

Second, superintendents need to “communicate a clear vision of the benefits to be gained from change” (Yukl, 2013, p. 85). The clear vision needs to include shared goals, objectives, and expected outcomes of the change and to provide an organizational framework for understanding the desired outcomes of the change. Stakeholders are more likely to be committed to the change if they understand the superintendent’s vision (Yukl, 2013).

Third, by identifying “likely supporters, opponents, and reasons for resistance” (Yukl, 2013, p. 85), superintendents can better plan for the communication and implementation of the change. This effort allows superintendents to engage proactively in effective communication with key stakeholders who may need assistance with making sense of change. Superintendents need to be strategic about implementing a major change and to know which stakeholders are critical to successfully making change possible (Yukl, 2013).

Fourth, superintendents must “build a broad coalition to support the change” (Yukl, 2013, p. 85). This coalition should be comprised of both influential internal and external district stakeholders. Supporters should be varied in their backgrounds and current roles because support is needed at all levels (Yukl, 2013).

Fifth, superintendents who use “task forces to guide implementation of changes” (Yukl, 2013, p. 86) based on data and useful information can more effectively guide action plans. The task force should be comprised of members suitable for its responsibilities. Each task force should have a leader who demonstrates alignment with the change vision and has an appropriate skill set to lead meetings (Yukl, 2013).

Sixth, superintendents must “fill key positions with competent change agents” (Yukl, 2013, p. 86) to ensure the change is implemented with fidelity. People who hold key positions but are not dedicated to the vision should be replaced, when possible. Change agents must support the change to be instrumental in making change happen (Yukl, 2013).

Seventh, to facilitate change throughout the district at all levels, superintendents need to “empower competent people to help plan and implement the change” (Yukl, 2013, p. 86). These competent people should be allowed to make the decisions regarding the best plans for implementing their roles and parts of organizational change. Empowerment requires removing the “bureaucratic constraints that will impede their efforts and providing the resources they need to implement change successfully” (Yukl, 2013, p. 86).

Eighth, Yukl (2013) said, when feasible, “make dramatic, symbolic changes that affect the work” (p.86). If stakeholders are immediately affected, they gain higher levels of buy-in that the change will happen. Yukl (2013) described symbolic change as “changes that affect the everyday lives of organization members in significant way” (p. 86). Such change can be offering

flexibility in how or where the work occurs.

Ninth, because change is difficult for most people, superintendents need to “prepare people for change by explaining how it will affect them” (Yukl, 2013, p. 87). This effort can minimize the stress, and possible trauma stakeholders may feel due to the change.

Superintendents can provide realistic views about potential hurdles to change and discuss solutions to the hurdles. Superintendents must also remain optimistic and helpful during all phases of the change (Yukl, 2013).

Tenth, superintendents need to provide mechanisms to “help people deal with the stress and difficulties of major change” (Yukl, 2013, p. 87). Before the change implementation, it is important to put systems of supports for stakeholders that will experience stress and anxiety due to the change. Training events may be helpful in helping stakeholders deal with stress and building capacity (Yukl, 2013).

Eleventh, Yukl (2013) expressed the importance of providing opportunities early to ensure stakeholders’ “successes build confidence” (p. 88). Stakeholders are more likely to take on new tasks or new ways of doing tasks if they believe their efforts will be recognized through positive reinforcement. When stakeholders experience successes early in the implementation phase, they are motivated to continue the work (Yukl, 2013).

Twelfth, on a daily basis, superintendents need to “monitor the progress of change and make any necessary adjustments” (Yukl, 2013, p. 88). Progress monitoring is key to any organizational change. It should be data-driven, accurate, and timely to make effective adjustments. “Many things must be learned by doing, and monitoring is essential for this learning” (Yukl, 2013, p. 88).

Thirteenth, superintendents who “keep people informed about the progress of change”

(Yukl, 2013, p. 88) let stakeholders know that progress is being made, especially during the early phase when visible changes are harder to see. Success should be celebrated, and contributions recognized to keep stakeholders positive about the change. If revisions to the change implementation are needed, superintendents need to be transparent with stakeholders as to what the issues are, why the revisions are needed, and how revisions will facilitate success (Yukl, 2013).

Finally, superintendents who “demonstrate optimism and continued commitment to the change” (Yukl, 2013, p.88) with both words and actions enable buy-in by stakeholders. Continued commitment is shown by investing, “time, effort, and resources in resolving problems and overcoming obstacles” (Yukl, 2013, p. 88).

Synergy of the Conceptual Model

School district superintendents perform five roles as part of achieving the 10 major functions of the school district within a community. The complexity of the superintendent job is evident in the fluidity of the roles and functions. Superintendents exhibit multiple roles within multiple functions at any given moment. When implementing organizational change within a district, superintendents must plan and execute programs and changes from the lens of all five roles (TEA, 2015) and 10 functions (Olivarez, 2013). Yukl’s (2013) 14 guidelines for implementing organizational change adds another layer of complexity in promoting and managing change. The synergy of these three conceptual elements leads to a cyclical process that requires constant movement between each step and continual evaluation of each step of the process. Figure 3 illustrates the synergy of combining these three concepts into establishing and promoting organizational change within a school district.



Figure 3. The synergistic organizational change framework for superintendents.

The roles and functions of a superintendent are woven together throughout the change process. The expansive breadth of knowledge and leadership abilities are required by superintendents seeking to implement organizational change effectively. Each role, function, and guideline are interdependent for the effective implementation of organizational change in a school district.

Summary of the Literature Review

The education system in the United States has undergone many futile attempts at education reform with the intention of realizing President Johnson’s notion of the *fifth freedom*. Historically, the education system has failed to provide equitable education opportunities for SWD, minority students, and poor students. In 1965 the federal government attempted to

improve schools through the implementation of the ESEA. Federal funding was available to aid schools in implementing the new legislation; however, Title I funding was tied to mandates. This started the movement towards the idea of equity in educational policy (Nelson, 2016). In 1975 EAHCA, later known as IDEA was enacted to ensure SWD were provided free and appropriate public education. ESEA and IDEA provided historically marginalized students a better chance at obtaining an equitable educational opportunity to their white peers, but neither legislation provided a guarantee.

In 1983, *A Nation at Risk* noted the inferiorities of education in the United States compared to other countries. The report listed concerns and solutions for the public education system in the United States. The NCEE noted several concerns; a few mentioned were low student expectations, lack of rigor in high school requirements, and lack of teacher content mastery. The NCEE provided several solutions with the promise that if the recommendations outlined were followed, the education system would essentially be fixed. The recommendations were just that, recommendations, they were not enforced mandates.

In 2002, NCLB magnified emphasis on student achievement at the campus, district, and state level. States, districts, and campuses were held accountable for the achievement of the aggregate student population, but for the first time, states, districts, and campuses were also held accountable for the achievement of historically marginalized students. States, districts, and campuses failing to meet achievement standards as set by the federal government for all student populations received sanctions and penalties. NCLB yielded many unintended consequences that ultimately impeded its goal of ensuring all students success in academic achievement. NCLB ended in December of 2015 when ESSA was signed into law.

The shortcomings of each legislative education reform, provide helpful information to educators and policy-makers about implementing reform. Information about what reforms work and what reforms do not work should teach policymakers about future education reform. ESSA brings new policies and may require organizational change. Organizational change is complex in school districts, especially in rural school districts. Superintendents must understand their roles, the functions of their districts, and possess capacity for providing organizational leadership to effectively implement any new education reform.

This chapter provided a historical review of legislative education reform in the United States noting pitfalls and shortcomings. A conceptual framework guided by the 10 functions of a school district and the roles of the superintendent paired with 14 guidelines for implementing major organizational change was introduced. Chapter 3 provides an explanation of the research design and methodology of this qualitative study that examined the perceptions of superintendents on the implications of new federal regulations being implemented due to the failure of NCLB to meet its intended targets.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter explains the research design and methods utilized in this study to examine the perceptions of rural school district superintendents of new legislative reform. Additionally, the appropriateness of the selected research design and methodology to this study are reviewed. Sections included within this chapter are the purpose of the study, research design, data collection and procedures, instrumentation, participant selection, creditability, and data analysis.

Purpose of the Study

As the role of the superintendent becomes more complex with each new educational reform, the need for organizational change related research addressing emergent educational reform is needed. This purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the perceptions of rural school district superintendents on the implications of new federal regulations being implemented due to the failure of NCLB to meet its intended targets. This study investigated how superintendents from rural school districts of similar sizes and demographics received information concerning ESSA and how they develop plans to implement organizational change. Superintendents from a representative sample of rural school districts were interviewed about their lived experiences in the current era of educational transition following the federal passage of ESSA. This qualitative study attempted to answer the following questions:

1. What are rural superintendents' perceptions about current legislative reform as a consequence of ESSA and state education policy?
2. What are the challenges to implementing ESSA and state education policy in rural school districts?
3. What recommendations do rural superintendents have for ESSA and state education policymakers?

Research Design

This study was founded on superintendent perceptions; therefore, meaning was interpreted through an interpretive research approach. Utilizing an interpretivist epistemology allowed the researcher to understand the implications of the research findings better.

Interpretivism is one framework utilized to interpret data and research (Crotty, 1998). The ultimate goal of interpretivism is to understand individual experiences, with the belief that reality is subjective and constructed by the individual (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Therefore, interpretivism offered a theoretical perspective in which the researcher could develop meaning surrounding rural school district superintendents' perceptions of the implications of new federal regulations being implemented due to the failure of NCLB to meet its intended targets.

This interpretivist paradigm warranted a qualitative research design. Creswell (2007) defined qualitative research:

Qualitative research begins with assumptions, a worldview, the possible use of a theoretical lens, and the study of research problems inquiring into the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. To study this problem, qualitative researchers use an emerging qualitative approach to inquiry, the collection of data in a natural setting sensitive to the people and places under study, and data analysis that is inductive and establishes patterns or themes. The final written report or presentation includes the voices of participants, the reflexivity of the researcher, and a complex description and interpretation of the problem, and it extends the literature or signals a call for action. (p. 37)

Qualitative research was the most appropriate design for this study, Creswell (2007) ascertained, "We use qualitative research to develop theories when partial or inadequate theories exist for

certain populations and samples or existing theories do not adequately capture the complexity of the problem we are examining” (p. 40). Current literature did not address the specific complexities of the rural school district superintendent’s role in addressing organizational change through legislative reform; therefore, a qualitative design was merited.

The qualitative approach utilized in this study was a basic qualitative study. Merriam (2009) explained that the purpose of a basic qualitative study is to understand, “(1) how people interpret their experiences, (2) how they construct their worlds, and (3) what meaning they attribute to their experiences. The overall purpose is to understand how people make sense of their lives and experiences” (p. 23). The basic qualitative approach provided a voice to participants who personally experienced the complexities surrounding the implementation of legislative reform in rural school districts. All participants in this study were acting superintendents in rural school districts in the state of Texas at the time of this study. All the participants were superintendents in their respective rural district during the previous legislative reform, NCLB, and were superintendents at the forefront of ESSA.

A qualitative lens offered the most promise to gain insight to the implications new legislative reform placed on rural districts. This methodology provided the best opportunity to develop a rich description of the in-depth perceptions of rural school district superintendents (Creswell, 2013; Saldana, 2013). Furthermore, the qualitative methodology allowed the researcher to gain an understanding of how each subject, personally, perceived the implications of ESSA in his or her district.

Data Collection and Procedures

After approval had been received by the dissertation committee, a request for approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the University of Texas at Austin was submitted.

Once approval was received by the IRB, potential participants were contacted by email with an invitation to participate in the study. Once the participants agreed to participate in the study, an email was sent to each participant containing a consent form and an explanation of the study. The consent form outlined the study, the interviews as being recorded, and any risks or benefits to the participant involved in the study. Before each interview, the researcher obtained verbal consent to participate in the study from each participant.

Each participant participated in one 45 to 90 minute, face-to-face, semi-structured interview. Each interview was scheduled at a time and location convenient for the participant. Face-to-face, semi-structured interviews were conducted both in person, via Skype or FaceTime; all interviews were audio recorded. A semi-structured interview strategy was utilized, this structure allowed, “the researcher and the participant to engage in a dialogue in real time. [Semi-structured interviews] also give enough space and flexibility for original and unexpected issues to arise, which the researcher may investigate with more detail with further questions” (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014, p. 10).

Each participant was interviewed one time; therefore, an interview guide was developed to ensure data was collected for each of the three research questions from each participant. The interview guide comprised of open-ended questions to guide the interviews, and the researcher inserted probing and or clarifying questions when needed. The semi-structure strategy permitted the participants to include information not covered within the interview guide, thus allowing, “the researcher to respond to the situation at hand, the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic” (Merriam, 2009, p. 90).

During each interview, the researcher watched for non-verbal cues and recorded them along with initial reactions to the interview in a reflection journal immediately following each

interview. This journaling technique provided a moment of analysis and reflection of the process and outcomes of the interview (Rapley, 2004). The reflective journaling technique was also used to record the researcher's thoughts and feelings as part of keeping biases in check. Sustain and Chiseri-Strater (2007) suggested researchers ask themselves the following questions throughout the study:

1. What surprised me? (to track assumptions)
 2. What intrigued me? (to track your positionality)
 3. What disturbed me? (to track the tensions within your value, attitude, and belief systems)
- (p. 106).

After all interviews were conducted the interviews were transcribed verbatim utilizing an electronic and secure transcription service. Transcripts were coded using open-coding after each interview to create initial codes, after the tenth interview, data saturation was met. Rubin and Rubin (2012) stated, "When no new information is forthcoming, you have reached what Glaser and Strauss (1967) term the 'saturation point'" (p. 63). As part of the data analysis, emerging themes were sent to participants for review and validation. Participants were asked to note any needed clarifications, additions, or corrections to the emergent themes before completing the presentation of the findings. All data collected was stored in a locked office and on a password protected computer to ensure participant confidentiality.

Instrumentation

The primary instrument in qualitative research is the researcher, which Merriam (2002) ascertained, "Since understanding is the goal of this research, the human instrument, which is able to be immediately responsive and adaptive, would seem to be the ideal means of collecting and analyzing data" (p. 15). The primary source of data for this qualitative study was semi-

structured interviews. The researcher utilized an open-ended interview question guide for each participant. Padilla-Diaz (2015) noted that open-ended interviews allow “the researcher to address the phenomenon profoundly, providing a space of aperture for the informants to express their experiences in detail, approaching reality as faithfully as possible” (p. 104). Each participant was interviewed one time, interviews lasted 45 to 90 minutes and were audio recorded. The question guide included background questions, probing questions related to each research question (RQ), and closing questions. The interview questions used to guide the interview are below:

Background Questions

1. What is your background in education and how did you become superintendent of schools?
2. How many years have you been the superintendent of this rural district?
3. Why do you believe you were selected for this position?
4. What are your roles and responsibilities as a rural district superintendent?
5. How would your stakeholders, both internal and external, describe your roles and responsibilities?
6. How are your roles similar and/or different to those of an urban district’s superintendent?

RQ 1 Probing Questions

What are rural superintendents’ perceptions about current legislative reform as a consequence of ESSA and state education policy?

7. What do you know about ESSA, which was signed by President Obama in December of 2015?

8. What differences and similarities do you see between ESSA and previous legislative reforms?
9. How do you think ESSA will affect rural schools as a reform that follows a legislative reform that did not meet its intended target?
10. What implications for state accountability do you anticipate under ESSA?
11. What implications for teacher recruitment and retention do you anticipate under ESSA?
12. What implications do you anticipate ESSA having on rural district's finances, given that rural districts tend not to have access to the financial and other resources available to urban districts?

RQ 2 Probing Questions

What are the challenges to implementing ESSA and state education policy in rural school districts?

13. What advantages and disadvantages do rural districts have in implementing new legislative reform such as ESSA?
14. What planning process have you undergone for the implementation of ESSA?
15. What is your primary source of information concerning ESSA?
16. What challenges have you had in the past in implementing legislative reform/requirements?
17. What do you believe will be the greatest challenge to implementing any new ESSA-related guideline or regulation in your district?

18. In what ways do you feel you are prepared to handle legislative changes such as ESSA? In what ways do you feel you not prepared? (May need to offer a hint for discussion of both academic and professional preparation.)

RQ 3 Probing Questions

What recommendations do rural superintendents have for ESSA and state education policymakers?

19. What supports do you need from TEA and or your Education Service Center to plan and implement ESSA in your district?
20. Based on what you anticipate for ESSA; what do you recommend the state does to help rural school districts?
21. What recommendations do you have for helping school boards understand ESSA?
22. What recommendations do you have for first-year rural superintendents in implementing ESSA 2017-2018?
23. If you were the Texas Commissioner of Education and you were responsible for implementing ESSA what would you do to ensure rural students benefited from the changes equally to students from all other types of districts?

Participants

Participants were selected through purposive sampling. Maxwell (2005) referred to purposive sampling as a “strategy in which particular settings, persons, or activities are selected deliberately to provide information that can't be gotten as well from other choices” (p. 88). For the purpose of this study, 10 practicing rural public school district superintendents in Texas were sought for participation. The governance in Texas is common among districts; however, the financing differs between rural and large urban districts. Large urban districts tend to be more studied; therefore, information obtained about the smaller rural districts might be beneficial to educators and other stakeholders seeking to implement ESSA-related regulations effectively. Purposive sampling was utilized to ensure quality participants (Creswell, 2007). Participants selected met the following criteria:

1. The participants were currently serving as a superintendent in a Texas rural school district.
2. The participants were currently in their fourth or more year as the superintendent in the same district at the time of the interview.
3. The participants' rural districts earned met standard status for at least one year of the participating superintendent's tenure.

Rural districts from which participants were recruited met the TEA definition of a rural district. The purpose of participants having 4 or more years as a superintendent in the rural district was because the average tenure of a rural superintendent was three years. By exceeding the average tenure, an assumption was made that the superintendent was effective in the area of organizational change. Additionally, participants with the extended tenure in the same district had experienced previous legislative reform such as NCLB and HB5 and likely understood the

implications of implementing new legislative reform in a rural school district. Therefore, the aforementioned purposive sampling provided participants that could draw from actual experiences and provide a rich context to the phenomenon.

Creditability

One strength of this study was the specific criteria the researcher set for the participant selection. The selection process ensured that each candidate has experienced legislative change in the role as a rural superintendent prior to ESSA. Also, by having participants with 4+ years as the superintendent of their current rural district provided participants rich context in their specific rural district setting, they worked in. While all participants were working in rural districts, each rural district had varying characteristics. What is applicable in one district may not be applicable to another district.

To protect the participants, the researcher used pseudonyms superintendents. The researcher ensured that all identifying information in the interviews was not used in the findings without properly disguising the information. Superintendents were likely to discuss the current district structure and the school board; therefore, it is important to keep anonymity. In Texas, school boards have the authority to hire and fire superintendents.

The researcher is a practitioner in a complex district and has worked in seven Texas school districts. Although the broad experience and exposure to several districts are helpful in understanding the inner workings of Texas school districts, unknown personal bias may exist. Unknown biases, left unchecked could lead to the researcher constructing meaning based on the researcher's past experiences and not on the participants' perceptions. The researcher utilized reflective journaling to record thoughts and feelings to uncover any personal biases. The researcher used a process of validation called corroboration with the participants, "Corroboration

with participants consists of presenting and discussing the data analysis between the researcher and the research participants to verify that the essences and meanings are in fact those expressed directly or indirectly by the participants” (Padilla-Diaz, 2015, p. 107).

Being a practitioner in Texas, the researcher brought background knowledge of the framework of the Texas education system. Many practitioners in education use a unique vocabulary embedded with a plethora of acronyms, by understanding this language, the researcher was better able to make meaning of the interviews. The researcher’s professional background led to commonality with the candidates and enabled the candidates to speak fluidly without having to explain background knowledge on the education system, board governance, or Texas education law.

Data Analysis

After interviews had been conducted, the researcher listened to each interview again to take additional notes with initial thoughts on categories to be developed during the coding stage (Maxwell, 2013). Saladana (2013) explained, “A code is a research generated construct that symbolizes and thus attributes interpreted meaning to each individual datum for later purposes of pattern detection, categorization, theory building, and other analytic processes” (p. 4). The interview recordings were then sent to Rev.com, a transcription service, to be transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were then uploaded to NVivo, a computer software program utilized by the researcher to collect, organize, and analyze interview data. Each transcript was read carefully, multiple times, to gain a better understanding of each participant’s experiences.

The researcher retrieved codes from each interview transcript and corresponding journal notes of non-verbal cues utilizing open-coding. Lin (2013) explained, “The purpose of open coding is to promote the generation of concepts from the data rather than from the researcher’s

preconceptions” (p. 473). The open-coding process was initiated after each interview so that data analysis was simultaneous with data collection. Merriam (2002) asserted, “Simultaneous data collection and analysis allows the researcher to make adjustments along the way, even to the point of redirecting data collection, and to ‘test’ emergent concepts, themes, and categories against subsequent data” (p. 14). Additionally, simultaneous data collection and analysis allowed the researcher to identify the point of data saturation.

After all transcripts were coded via opening-coding, the researcher utilized pattern-coding to identify emerging themes within coded transcript text. Miles and Huberman (1994) defined pattern codes as: “exploratory or inferential codes, ones that identify an emergent theme, configuration, or explanation. They pull together a lot of material into a more meaningful and parsimonious unit of analysis (p. 69). Throughout coding process, the researcher wrote memos as part of the analytic process, Maxwell (2013) purported, “You should regularly write memos while you are doing data analysis; memos not only capture your analytic thinking about your data, but also facilitate such thinking, stimulating analytic insights” (p. 105).

The researcher used pattern-coding and memo writing to identify six overarching themes that served to answer three research questions. At the completion of the coding process, the researcher validated the data analysis by sharing the identified emergent themes with the participants. After all of the participants validated the initial themes, the researcher returned to the transcripts to finalize emerging themes related to the superintendents’ perceptions the implications of ESSA to their role and district and their plans in relation to organizational change.

Summary

This chapter provided the methods used for this qualitative study. This chapter included the methodology and procedures, purpose of the study, research questions, research design, data collection and procedures, instrumentation, participants, credibility, and data analysis. Chapter 4 provides the findings of the study.

Chapter 4: Findings

Chapter 3 provided the methods used by the researcher to examine the perceptions of rural district superintendents on the implications of new federal regulation implementation such as ESSA. This chapter gives an overview of participant selection criterion, participant attributes, and the interview process. Next, the six emerging themes are identified. Finally, the findings related to each research question are presented.

Participants were current superintendents from rural school districts in Texas. Rural school districts were defined for this study according to TEA's definition and criteria for the rural school district type. There are 453 rural school districts in Texas making up 53% of the total number of public school districts in the state. The TEA (2016) rural school district classification is represented by "(a) an enrollment of between 300 and the median district enrollment for the state and an enrollment growth rate over the past five years of less than 20 percent; or (b) an enrollment of less than 300 students" (para. 8).

To be included in the study sample, participants had to be serving as the superintendent of their current rural district for a minimum of 4 years. The rural school district must have attained TEA's "met standard" rating for at least one year during the participant's tenure as the rural school district superintendent. Ten rural school district superintendents were included in this study as participants. The participants were interviewed face to face in person or by FaceTime or Skype, and the interviews were audio recorded. The researcher utilized an open-ended interview guide with each participant. The interviews occurred at a location convenient for the participants. Each interview lasted between 45 to 90 minutes. All interviews were conducted between November 28, 2016, and December 19, 2016.

Based on 2015-2016 superintendent and district data retrieved from the TEA website and

through a Public Information Request, 68.52% of the rural school districts in Texas had a student population of less than 500 students while 31.48% had 500 to 999 students. As shown in Figure 4, 60% of the participants in this study were superintendents of rural school districts with fewer than 500 students. In the state of Texas, 19.42% of rural school district superintendents were female. As shown in Table 1 below, 20% of the participants in this study were female.

The ethnicity of participants was not used as an attribute of this study since 92.58% of the 256 rural school district superintendents that met the participant criteria, were White. While 4.69% of the rural school superintendents that met the participant criteria were Hispanic/Latino, one of the participants in the study was Hispanic/Latino attributing to 10% of the study participants. However, all other ethnicities had less than 1% representation among the 256 rural school district superintendents that met participant criteria. Pseudonyms for the ten rural school district superintendents were developed to protect the anonymity the participants. Participants were referenced by the following pseudonyms: S1, S2, S3, S4, S5, S6, S7, S8, S9, S10.

Table 1

Participant Attributes

| Participant | Gender | Tenure | Enrollment | Interview Mode |
|-------------|--------|---------------|------------|----------------|
| S1 | Male | 5 - 9 Years | 500 - 900 | In - Person |
| S2 | Male | 16 - 21 Years | Under 500 | In - Person |
| S3 | Male | 5 - 9 Years | 500 - 900 | In - Person |
| S4 | Female | 5 - 9 Years | Under 500 | FaceTime |
| S5 | Female | 10 - 15 Years | Under 500 | FaceTime |
| S6 | Male | 10 - 15 Years | Under 500 | In - Person |
| S7 | Male | 10 - 15 Years | Under 500 | FaceTime |
| S8 | Male | 16 - 21 Years | 500 - 900 | In - Person |
| S9 | Male | 5 - 9 Years | 500 - 900 | Skype |
| S10 | Male | 16 - 21 Years | Under 500 | FaceTime |

Note. Tenure is the total number of years the participant was the superintendent of his or her current rural district at the time of the study.

The Texas Education Agency divided the state into twenty geographic regions that encompassed all school districts and charter schools in the state of Texas. Participants in this study represented 8 of the 20 geographic regions. The geographic regions were not included in the attributes in Table 1 to protect the anonymity of the participants. The geographic regions represented in this study are circled in Figure 4.

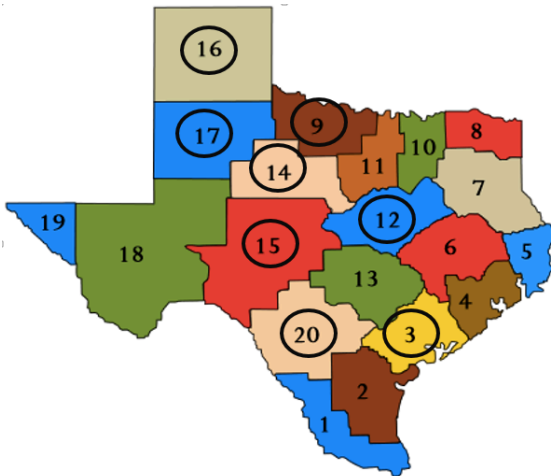


Figure 4. The 20-geographic regions for the education service centers of Texas.

Research Findings

The researcher started with five participants; however, data saturation was not met, so the researcher interviewed five more participants making the total participant count 10. Data saturation was met after ten participant interviews. Each interview transcript was carefully read utilizing open-coding to start categorizing data. The researcher then analyzed data through pattern-coding, and memo-writing identify emergent themes. Six over-arching themes emerged that answered the three research questions this qualitative study sought to answer. The six overarching themes noted in Figure 5 were found throughout all three research questions at varying levels.

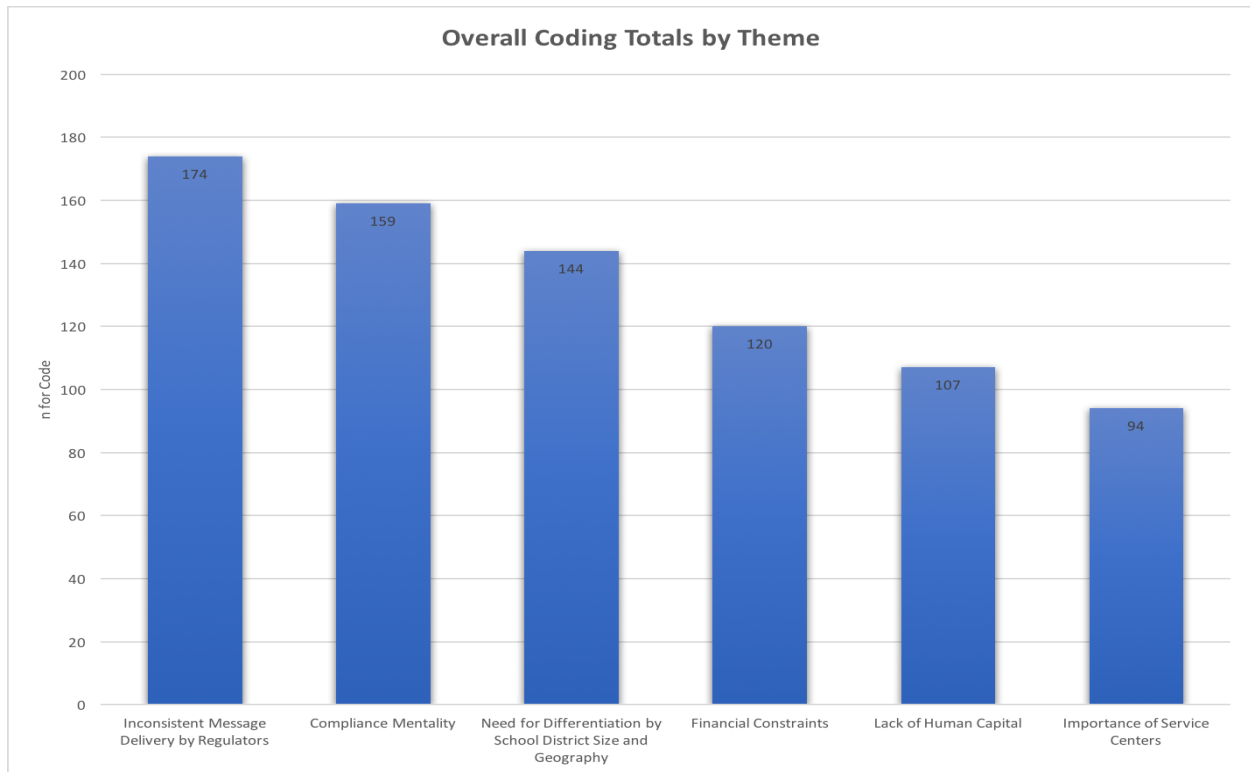


Figure 5. Total count of codes by theme from all 10 interview transcripts.

Research Question 1

Research Question 1 asked: “What are rural school district superintendents’ perceptions about current legislative reform as a consequence of ESSA and state education policy?”

Participants were asked six probing, open-ended questions (questions in Chapter 3) to guide Research Question 1. The probing questions referenced the participants’ current knowledge of ESSA, the perceived differences and alignment of previous legislative reform, and their perceived/anticipated implications of ESSA for rural school districts. The response to each probing question was coded utilizing the following two coding methods: open-coding and pattern coding. Table 2 charts the themes referenced in the responses to the six probing questions. Themes are listed in order of most prominent, those with the most referenced codes first.

Table 2

Theme Coding Totals for Research Question 1

| Emerging Themes | S1 | S2 | S3 | S4 | S5 | S6 | S7 | S8 | S9 | S10 | Totals |
|--|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|-----|--------|
| Financial Constraints | 8 | 5 | 15 | 9 | 7 | 6 | 4 | 9 | 4 | 7 | 74 |
| Need for Differentiation by School District Size and Geography | 5 | 9 | 4 | 10 | 5 | 3 | 7 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 67 |
| Compliance Mentality | 6 | 9 | 0 | 6 | 2 | 7 | 12 | 4 | 6 | 9 | 61 |
| Lack of Human Capital | 4 | 2 | 0 | 9 | 9 | 6 | 9 | 4 | 1 | 5 | 49 |
| Inconsistent Message Delivery by Regulators | 6 | 6 | 3 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 8 | 2 | 4 | 8 | 43 |
| Importance of Service Centers | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 5 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 13 |
| Totals | 29 | 32 | 22 | 36 | 27 | 26 | 45 | 27 | 24 | 39 | 307 |

Note. Totals above reflect the coding totals for participant responses to RQ 1 guiding questions.

Financial Constraints

When asked about the previous and current legislative reform and the implications for recruitment and retention, participants expressed challenges with retention in rural school districts due to Financial Constraints with teacher salaries. Legislative reforms pose mandates to all districts, and the perception of the participants of this study was that these mandates do not take into consideration the financial implications for rural school districts. The participants indicated that although ESSA has lifted the Highly Qualified regulation, they were not sure what exactly that meant or to what degree that would help them with teacher retention in their rural school districts. S1 expressed, “The only way they can help in retention is if they can do something with school finance here in Texas and get us some more money.” S3 explained the following concerning teacher retention in his rural school district:

We give them the experience. They stay with us for 2 to 3 years. We provide them with quality staff development. We grow them, and then they may leave to [a larger neighboring district], who can pay \$10,000 more. We still have those challenges. I don’t think ESSA necessarily helps us with that, but we’re able to employ teachers and not have so many restrictions on certifications now.

Rural school districts are unable to provide competitive teacher salaries compared to surrounding larger school districts, due to Financial Constraints, so teacher retention was a concern expressed by all participants.

In discussing ESSA and the new legislation's implications for recruitment and retention, S7 did not think ESSA and the removal of Highly Qualified would help rural school districts with retention:

I think our small districts are pretty much based on ability to pay. The job is going to be what it is. It's going to be an increased amount of duties without an increased amount of pay. That's just how we're going to have to deal with it.

S9 stated, "I've lost practically every great teacher I have because they can just drive 15 miles down the road and make another \$20,000 a year." S4 had a different view on the retention situation in her rural school district, they are currently able to retain teachers, but she fears finances may hinder that in the future:

Right now, I think for teacher recruitment for us, we are about to retain most of our teachers... We haven't had huge recruitment issues so far because we offer a 547 match. We match up to 3%. I think that savings account and then just trying to keep our pay as close to theirs [larger neighboring districts] as we can, we pay \$354 toward insurance and other districts just pay \$297. Once you add the 457 match and insurance supplement that we do, and we do an insurance supplement overall in December of each year of \$1,000. If we can maintain that, we're going to be in great shape.

S4 later stated, "So our teachers have stayed with us, but I don't know that we are going to be able to continue that because again, the other districts are getting additional funding and we're not. We send 60 cents [recapture] of every dollar we bring in."

Most participants indicated an inability to retain teachers due to funding, while S4 expressed the belief that her district has found a way to compete financially with larger school districts' teacher salaries. However, S4 articulated uncertainty about her rural school district's ability to retain teachers in the future, due to Financial Constraints.

While teacher retention was the most prevalent issue that surface within the theme of Financial Constraints, another issue that surfaced was the Texas funding classification of being a Chapter 41 versus Chapter 42 school. Six of the 10 rural districts represented in this study were Chapter 41 districts with five of them in recapture with the state at the time of this study; therefore, due to property value, they were required to give funds to the state to be used in districts with less property wealth, to equalize wealth among the school districts in the state. Participants from Chapter 41 rural school districts indicated recapture posed a burden on their districts. S4 purported:

That's another expense for us. I think there are a lot of financial resources that for a small district, especially one that's already subject to recapture, they're making it where there's not really a way for us to meet all of the requirements and meet the programmatic needs that we have, because we can't fund it.

The participants indicated a discrepancy with the dates funding model that identified certain rural school districts has property wealthy. S9 explained that although his rural school district was property wealthy, the students his rural school district served, were not. "The wealth is not in the families; the wealth is not in the kids, it's in these businesses and corporations who have these pipelines that flow through my school district. That's where the money is, not my kids." Legislative reform placed requirements on all school districts; participants indicated those requirements were not funded and therefore caused Financial Constraints in rural school districts.

Financial Constraints was referenced 74 times across all 10 participants when asked probing questions to guide Research Question 1. It was the most prominent theme found within the participants' perceptions of current legislative reform. The next prominent theme concerning current legislative reform that emerged from the participants' perceptions was the need for legislation to be differentiated for the unique needs of rural school districts. The varying size and geography of all school districts, especially rural school districts, merited differentiated legislative reform and accountability measures.

Need for Differentiation by School District Size and Geography

All participants referenced the Need for Differentiation by School District Size and Geography in legislative reform implementation, measures, and mandates. The participants conveyed a perception that current legislative reform was written for the larger districts. Although many stated they felt that ESSA will offer more control back to the state, they thought the state made decisions with the larger districts in Texas in mind and not the rural districts. S5 noted:

I feel like there are some good things in there but only to the extent that they're not choking down local control. I don't think that those decisions in ESSA and things like that at the federal level, and even at the state level, are made, and not even fully to their fault, but they don't have a perspective of what we deal with in small school districts. If they take local control with it, then it kind of hamstring us. We're limited on how successful we can be with it again, that's where the perspective of the lawmakers is not in line with the realistic view of small rural districts.

Since rural school districts are different on multiple levels, participants noted legislation should be written with all types and sizes of schools in mind.

At the time of this study, rural school districts made up 53% of the total number of school districts in the state of Texas, participants expressed their frustration that the rural school district perspective is not taken into consideration when legislative reform were both written and implemented. Instead, legislation is written through the lens of larger school districts, S5 asserted, “I think their [legislators] perspective is that they live in the big city, their kids go to either a big city private or a big city public school. Regardless, all of their perspective is from a big urban district.” Participants expressed frustration with previous and current legislative reform that required all districts to reach the same goals regardless of student needs or community perception.

S2 gave an example of how the measure of college readiness could be perceived as a negative measure within the rural school district community:

If you talk about small schools and you start talking about we want all of our kids to be college ready, we want all of our kids to go to college. You’re telling a community we want all your kids to move off.

Although the legislators’ intentions might be to ensure all students have an equal opportunity to be successful in college, rural communities could see that in a different light. S8 explained that each rural school district is unique and that not all of the students in his rural school district were going to college:

They’re all unique; they all kind of have their own twist. We’re a big agriculture type district with farms and ranches, and not all of our students are going to go to college. Some are going to go to tech school; some are going to go right into the workforce. We try to get our vocational programs geared to where they can function and be productive

citizens when they graduate, even if they go into the workforce, we try to give them some of those skills.

Participants expressed many differences in their rural school districts compared to larger districts and even compared to other rural school districts.

Participants noted that the rural school districts' small student enrollment counts skew the accountability data. S5 noted that accountability measures do not give a true narrative of what was happening in her rural school district because the district had "suffered enrollment-wise" and new accountability ratings "won't necessarily be fair because the demographics of what we have to work with are so different." When demographics changed in small rural districts, it only took a small number of students to drastically change a school's or district's accountability rating. S4 gave the following example:

We had a whole group of LEP students who just came from other countries: Costa Rica, Mexico, and Spain. When you're a district of less than [a substantial number less than 500 students], and you get all those kids within one grade level, it really skews everything about your scores. Just the ability to manipulate in some aspect your numbers to understand really what's going on. Three of our students came identified as intellectually disabled and LEP. They are intellectually disabled. It's not a language issue; you can test English, Spanish, and you know, whatever.

S6 explained, "The impact of one family moving in is irrelevant in a big district. I could have one foster care family that focuses on serving special needs kids who could have made me not meet No Child Left Behind." Since the student enrollment numbers are smaller, any demographic change in student population drastically changed the data for rural school districts.

Participants suggested that districts be given more local control so that districts could make decisions that would be in the best interest of the students. For rural school districts to benefit from any legislative reform, S5 proposed:

If they allow local districts to kind of create [local legislation] under the umbrella of ESSA or whatever we're talking about, whatever it may be, you know, NCLB before that, then the likelihood of us being able to benefit from it and be successful with it is a lot higher.

The need for increased local control was noted several times; however, it was not an overarching theme because it was most often noted in reference to the need for differentiation for rural school districts.

The participants noted that with every legislative reform change they have a concern with how immediate changes will affect their districts and students. All participants noted the increased work workload for central staff. When asked about their perceptions of current and past legislative reform, participants expressed concern about amount of work required to implement and comply with legislative requirements. S7 explained the burden placed on rural school districts was a result of legislators not seeking a rural school district perspective before writing the legislative reform and its compliance measures and requirements:

I think a lot of times when these rules are in place, they're put together with larger districts in mind. They don't understand the amount of work they put on smaller districts. The amount of work per district, no matter what size it is, is the same. It's just that the people who have to do it is different. The more reports they put out, the more reporting requirements they put out just puts more on the plate of whoever's having to report it, which is going to be the three people in my office.

The Need for Differentiation by School District Size and Geography was referenced 67 times across all 10 participants when asked probing questions to guide Research Question 1. The next prominent theme concerning current legislative reform that emerged from the participants' perceptions was the mentality of compliance when implementing legislative reform. The varying size and geography of all school districts, especially rural school districts, merited differentiated legislative reform and accountability measures.

Compliance Mentality

When asked probing questions about participants' knowledge of ESSA and their perceived implications, responses focused on compliance as opposed to reform (transformational/organizational change). S1 gave an anecdotal story about learning of a rural regulation, from a meeting at the service center, that he had not heard before and how he needed to quickly get in compliance:

I'm sitting there and I hear about this rural regulation. I look around and the superintendent over here, "Hey are you guys doing that?" Guy goes, "I'm like you I've never heard of it." "You guys doing it?" "Yeah, we heard about it, we're not doing it. We'll take a slap on the wrist." "Y'all doing it?" "Yeah, we're doing it, but we're doing it this way, we didn't like it that way." I'm sitting there going, "Oh my gosh, what am I supposed to do?" I've learned what some of those meant by the end, after hearing the conversation. We try to find out about stuff in meetings, but it never fails when they pass something a year and a half, 2 years later. "Oh, what they meant by this was you're supposed to be doing this right now." "Oh really?" "I've never heard of that, what do we do?" We try to put it together really quick and who puts it together? It's my principals and me, and we make it work.

Participants noted several mandates they were made aware of after-the-fact, and when made away, they worked to get in compliance for the sake of being in compliance.

S10 noted his thoughts on NCLB, a previous legislative reform, “It was compliance to the extent that you felt like you were getting away from some of the good things you were doing for your students just to meet the compliance requirements, so it was compliance to a fault, in my opinion.” Concerning ESSA, S10 stated that he would do, “What makes sense for us and leave some of the other stuff off on the sidelines.” S6 described his view of new legislation as a means of funding; therefore, compliance is needed to ensure funding not reform. When asked about ESSA, S6 stated:

Quite frankly, I think it’s just different hoops, and the hoops are a little broader. There’s not enough federal money if there were less federal money. I wouldn’t participate in it at all. If you want the federal money, you have to meet ESSA. If I weren’t taking their money, they actually don’t have any say.

Due to Financial Constraints, rural school superintendents rely on all funding both local and federal; therefore, funding became a motivator for compliance.

Participants gave varied examples of compliance for compliance sake. S7 used the example of district improvement plans to ascertain the notion of legislation being more compliance-driven than reform driven, doing what’s best for students:

We have a district improvement plan, and here’s what we’re going to do to be in compliance, but now here is actually what we are going to work on and our three goals for the year. What’s happening is any time you get federal and state governments getting that in-depth with what’s happening at a local district, then that’s what you’re going to get. Every district is the same. What do we have to do to meet your audit requirements?

If you're going to do an audit, what do we have to do to score good on the audit? That's what we're going to do, versus what's necessarily best for kids in the district.

S9 stated, "ESSA is the next generation of No Child Left Behind. They're gonna mandate all of these things, and we're gonna fulfill them...When I look at ESSA, we're gonna comply and do whatever they ask us to do."

While participants noted they do what they need to do to comply, some of the participants noted that at times, they chose not to follow mandates. The decision not to comply was included within the theme of Compliance Mentality because the participants specifically noted, they chose not to comply, which signified an attitude of decision making as compliance versus noncompliance. Rural superintendents are left with making decisions about what is best for their students and sometimes that means "flying under the radar" and not complying in areas.

Participants noted that the federal and state government were more concerned about ensuring larger districts complied with mandates, S2 ascertained:

In a smaller district, I think you can get away with a few things...We ain't doing that and nobody pays attention cause if Texas wanted to come and audit me, really for [less than 500 students] ...They want to go get the big schools cause that's where all their money's going. If they're coming after me they're chasing pennies.

Participants with more tenure expressed noncompliance at a higher rate than participants with less tenure as rural school district superintendents. S5 expressed that at the beginning of her tenure as a rural school district superintendent, she would have been worried about meeting all the compliance standards; however, now she does not stress as much and does what she can to meet the requirements. However, she stated if she missed a requirement:

I'm not going to get in the frenzy. We have to do this and knowing that there's not a superintendent jail, they're going to come and put me in if we don't get something, if we don't provide something or we miss something. As long as we think we're doing the best job we can with the resources that we have, then that's what we do.

Each time the participants used the descriptor of compliant or noncompliant, the researcher coded within the Compliance Mentality theme.

A Compliance Mentality was referenced 61 times across all 10 participants when asked probing questions for Research Question 1. The Compliance Mentality theme included both compliance and non-compliance references in participants' responses. The next theme that emerged from the participants' perceptions of current and past legislative reform was a Lack of Human Capital in rural school districts.

Lack of Human Capital

When asked probing questions concerning their perceptions of legislative reform, 8 of the 10 participants noted that a disadvantage that rural districts had in implementing new legislative policies is the strain placed on human capital. With limited central staff members, rural districts must add duties concerning legislative compliance and program implementation to their current roles. For smaller rural districts, these duties are added to the superintendent's and principal's responsibilities. For larger rural districts, there is usually one to two more central staff administrators that take on some of the responsibilities along with the superintendent and principals. These added duties pulled these administrators away from other job duties. All superintendents had a least one other full-time employee on staff at the central level that played several roles in the district. S5, from a small rural district, had one full-time employee at the central level. "Business manager, yes. She's payroll; she's human resources; she's finance.

She's one that wears probably more hats than I wear." Participants noted that all staff at the central level played multiple roles.

Due to a Lack of Human Capital, current staff were already overextended in their responsibilities; participants relied on other information sources to make sense of the legislation. S2 pleaded, "A small school with something like that, we have to wait on some people to figure out and tell us. Because when I'm mowing the lawn or driving the bus, I don't have time to read that bill." Participants noted that although they have minimal human capital compared to larger districts, the legislative reform requirements were the same for all districts. S5 noted, "We still have all the same requirements as [a large urban district], just on a much smaller scale." S7 explained:

Larger districts have the ability to just change the titles of what their staff member was that did that. Whoever was doing NCLB is going to be doing ESSA at a 6A district.

That's the same thing at small schools; except for they don't have necessarily the time to do that.

Participants stated that both the urban and rural districts must do the same amount of paperwork and preparation for new requirements; however, rural school districts lacked the finances and human capital to implement smoothly.

New requirements meant more work for current central staff, and in the smaller rural districts usually consisted of a superintendent, a business manager, and a couple of principals. All time spent on new requirements, took time away from other things that needed to get accomplished. Participants felt larger districts were at an advantage when implementing new legislative reform due to the availability of a robust central staff comprised of specialists in multiple areas.

One participant acknowledged the state's attempt to provide districts an opportunity for flexibility for the district of innovation application. However, due to a Lack of Human Capital, S4 did not see the opportunity as a viable option for her small rural school district:

I think there are some awesome opportunities they're going back to the size of the district. If you have someone who can spend a lot of time filling out all the paperwork and reworking and doing that, obviously, you're going to have more flexibility there as well with some of the state guidelines. I don't have the personnel to sit and research that and go through and do some of that.

Participants felt that if provisions were not made for rural school districts within implementation of ESSA, then the perceived flexibility the new legislation could bring, would not be realized by rural school districts.

A Lack of Human Capital was referenced 49 times across all 9 of the 10 participants when asked probing questions for Research Question 1. All participants from the small rural school districts, districts with less than 500 students, perceived a Lack of Human Capital as a barrier to understanding past and current legislative reform. This barrier caused participants to find needed information from multiple sources, some information being second hand information. Participants used phrases such as, "I've heard" and "People are saying," when responding to the question of what they knew about ESSA. This second-hand information led to participants receiving inconsistent messages about ESSA.

Inconsistent Message Delivery by Regulators

When asked about their knowledge of ESSA, although many stated that it would be better or more flexible than NCLB, most of the participants admitted they had little to no specific

knowledge of ESSA. The Inconsistent Message Delivery by Regulators theme emerged from participants' responses noting the lack of information gathered by policymakers, the lack of information received by the participants, the source and distribution of information, and the varied interpretations of information concerning new and past legislative reform. S1 noted the lack of information he had concerning ESSA. He noted that the information he had received to date was from two 15-minute meetings he attended at his service center:

From what I understand, what I've heard at those meetings, it is better for rural schools, it's lessening some of the restrictions so it should be better. I'd be hard-pressed to tell you exactly why yet, because I don't know. But we keep hearing that, it's going to be less restriction, it's going to be better, it's a better piece of legislation than NCLB was.

S2 answered, "At this point, I personally don't know a lot. It's such a massive bill. S3 admitted, "I know just the major highlights." S5 responded, "I know it replaced NCLB. It was supposed to give us a little bit more local control...or not local control, state control as far as the testing. We're able to reduce some testing. That's about the extent of my knowledge." S6 stated, "For the most part, it got rid of NCLB." The varied level of information, correct and incorrect information concerning ESSA, noted the Inconsistent Message Delivery by Regulators.

While some participants expressed an idea that ESSA would be better, S1 was not sure there would be much difference from the previous legislative reform. He noted the following:

I know people are saying it's better legislative, different, but I will see a lot of similarities to NCLB and ESSA; there's got to be. You can't totally reinvent the wheel on that stuff.

From what I hear, there's a lot of similarities, and I'm sure when it comes out.

Participants indicated minimal, if any, changes would positively affect rural school districts as a result of the implementation of ESSA.

When asked about perceived differences with ESSA compared to previous legislation, S7 proposed the major difference would be in the paperwork, “They’re actually going to, there’s going to be new forms, there’s new applications. Everything like that is changing. It seems like about the time everybody gets used to a system that’s being used; they change that.” S7 cautioned that when the systems change, consultants exploit rural school districts, “They’ll send an email and then say, ‘Hey, we know you don’t have the time to mess with all the reporting requirements. Hire us for X amount of dollars, and we’ll take care of it for you’.” Participants anticipated the implementation of the new legislation, ESSA, would result in more work for rural school districts.

None of the participants, aside from saying ESSA replaced NCLB, noted any part of the purpose given by President Barak Obama when signing ESSA, “With this bill, we reaffirm that fundamentally American ideal—that every child, regardless of race, income, background, the zip code where they live, deserves the chance to make of their lives what they will” (“Barack Obama”, 2015). Participants did not have a unified understanding of ESSA; therefore, the need for consistent messaging concerning legislative reform surfaced.

Inconsistent Message Delivery by Regulators was referenced 43 times across all 10 participants when asked probing questions for Research Question 1. Participants noted that the service centers were their primary source of information for legislation. Participants claimed the service centers were the answer to receiving consistent messaging.

Importance of Service Centers

Service centers played an important role in the rural school districts. All participants noted the service centers as their primary source of information. When asked about his knowledge of ESSA, S7 proclaimed, “How I find out about it a lot of the times is rolled down

from the region service center.” S7 expressed concern with any new legislative reform stating, “I think that it’s going to require rural schools to really lean even harder on the education service centers to meet the needs.” The rural school districts rely on the service centers for information and training. New accountability measures and ratings in Texas required, S7’s rural school districts to “lean on the service center for the training of our staff to meet the changes and the demands of ESSA.”

Service centers were a source of information and training, but they also filled the human capital gap rural school districts had in their central staff. All participants noted that their rural school districts contracted with the service centers each year in a variety of areas; grant management, business management, professional development, legal advisement, etc. Due to the Lack of Human Capital, rural school districts must contract with service centers to complete and submit required paperwork. Participants perceived much of the required paperwork for grants and TEA accountability have been in excess and redundant. S6 elucidated:

Well, basically, what it is we contract with [the service center] for them to be able to do the paperwork and things like that for us. I lose a portion of the money right off the top versus like a block grant that went directly to the schools where the application process was simple. They already have all this information. Everything that they’re requiring in these title grants, they have all the information, but you’ve got to redo it and submit it in this form to make these people happy.

The contracted services are at the expense of the rural school districts. Although contracts were optional, the participants felt they did not have a choice. S8 affirmed S6’s explanation:

We farm that out to the service center, which cost us, of course, to do the applications.

They do most of the applications for us. We have to have service centers; rural schools have to, because we don't have the manpower.

The need rural school districts had to contract services with service centers to meet legislative requirements. Participants expressed the Importance of Service Centers with the contracted services because they are at minimal cost.

The Importance of Service Centers was referenced 13 times across 8 of the 10 participants when asked probing questions for Research Question 1. If rural school districts did not have service centers they would be forced to contract with other service providers at a much higher cost to the district. Therefore, all participants noted concerns about the recent debate to close service centers.

Research Question 2

Research Question 2 asked: "What are the challenges to implementing ESSA and state policy in rural school districts?" Participants were asked six probing, open-ended questions to guide Research Question 2. The probing questions referenced the participants perceived advantages and disadvantages rural district had in implementing ESSA, their current planning process and resources, and their perceived past and future challenges to implementing legislative reform. The response to each probing question was coded utilizing the following two coding methods: open-coding and pattern-coding. Table 3 charts the themes referenced in the responses to the six probing questions. Themes are listed in order of most prominent, those with the most referenced codes first.

Table 3

Theme Coding Totals for Research Question 2

| Emerging Themes | S1 | S2 | S3 | S4 | S5 | S6 | S7 | S8 | S9 | S10 | Totals |
|--|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|-----|--------|
| Inconsistent Message Delivery by Regulators | 14 | 4 | 9 | 6 | 5 | 6 | 4 | 3 | 8 | 5 | 64 |
| Compliance Mentality | 11 | 4 | 2 | 2 | 5 | 3 | 2 | 11 | 5 | 8 | 53 |
| Importance of Service Centers | 4 | 3 | 5 | 3 | 4 | 7 | 0 | 4 | 3 | 7 | 40 |
| Lack of Human Capital | 4 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 5 | 2 | 4 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 29 |
| Need for Differentiation by School District Size and Geography | 3 | 4 | 1 | 6 | 3 | 0 | 2 | 2 | 3 | 1 | 25 |
| Financial Constraints | 0 | 5 | 3 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 17 |
| Totals | 36 | 24 | 23 | 22 | 24 | 19 | 13 | 23 | 22 | 22 | 228 |

Note. Totals above reflect the coding totals for participant responses to RQ 2 guiding questions.

Inconsistent Message Delivery by Regulators

When asked questions about the perceived and anticipated challenges rural school districts faced when implementing new legislative reform such as ESSA, Inconsistent Message Delivery by Regulators was coded 64 times, more than any other theme for Research Question 2. Inconsistent Message Delivery by Regulators included a lack of information of the legislative requirements, misinterpretations of the legislation, and a need for reliable and comprehensive resources that outline the requirements and expectations for rural school districts. S1 noted having a lack of information when asked about the challenges of implementing ESSA: “That’s the biggest thing right now. It’s such an unknown factor for me.” S1 noted that this is not the first time he has had to implement new legislative reform in his rural school district. So, even though S1 had a lack of information, he professed:

It’s one of those deals, now that I’ve been in education as an administrator, as a superintendent, here for a long time, I know not to just start worrying off the top because

of all this. Half the time you're worried about something that never happens. It's a rumor.

I don't know how many times a superintendent would call, "Man I heard..."

Six of the 10 participants have been in their current rural school district as the superintendent for 10 or more years. All six of these participants noted similar experiences. When they started in their role as the superintendent they worried and tried to find information wherever they could; however, they had learned that much of what they had 'heard' was usually incorrect. Instead they chose to sit back and wait for their service centers to give them information.

As noted in previous sections of this chapter, the participants did not have a large working knowledge of ESSA. S3 noted that he did not have much information concerning ESSA: "We haven't, aside from just some of the education that our regional service center has provided. Just some talking points, and just some highlights of what all was included in that."

Time was a challenge for the participants in getting and receiving information. S6 explained:

On any federal program when there's a change, I've been at this for ten years, so I've seen a lot of them. What happens is then if they've been in existence for a while, I know them. ESSA comes out, when do I sit down and learn all of it? Your other option is well; you could go to a workshop for it. Well, when do I leave? When is it okay for me to not be in the district?

Even when participants made time to go to training to better understand new legislative reform and its requirements, the volume of information was overwhelming. S5 said, "It'd just be myself and the principal just trying to learn what all this required, what we were able to do, what we couldn't feasibly do, and just getting the grasp of what they did, what they changed."

Participants noted frustration with the volume and complexity of legislative past and current legislative mandates.

Participants expressed a key challenge to implementing the past and current legislative reform requirements were finding reliable and comprehensive resources. S4 admitted the challenge was finding reliable resources that outlined the requirements, but also in how to make sense of it in the context of what was best for her rural school district's students:

I think the biggest problem, though, in implementation is again just the different interpretations and the time to stay current in all of the changes, to make sure that you're compliant and you're helping kids, and you're making the right decisions for students because you're responsible for every single program.

Participants noted several times the desire to do what was best for students, but were forced to spend a majority of their time on compliance and making sure they knew, understood, and met all compliance measures.

Participants perceived rural school districts to be at a disadvantage to learn and implement the requirements in legislative reform implementation because of their lack of central personnel. Larger school districts have central personnel that become experts in specific sections and requirements of any new legislative reform or mandate. However, rural school district superintendents along with one to two other central staff must become experts on all sections and requirements of any new legislative reform or mandate. S1 had two people that comprised his central staff, he and his business manager. He explained the working plan he had with her when she was at the service center for training:

I've known her for a long time and her and I work well together I told her, "Look, you're going to hear this stuff fast and furious." If it's a national emergency, she'll leave the meeting and call me. Which has been done before, she'd call and say. "Did you know we're supposed to be doing this?"

If it wasn't an emergency, she would take note of it and the two of them would meet that week to discuss any noted compliance issues.

Participants noted keeping abreast of all legislative requirements was a challenge for rural school district superintendents. They tried to stay in compliance; however, they expressed frustration with the number of mandates they did not know about and were forced to quickly develop a plan to meet compliance. S5 gave the following example:

There was something the other day. We're supposed to be offering to junior high students, either three or four fine arts [class choices]. Pretty much, all of us had missed it somewhere along the boat, and one superintendent had caught it. None of us were offering three and four fine arts. We're doing good if we're able to offer two.

Several examples similar to the one above were given during the interview. Participants noted learning of time-sensitive requirements, after the fact. This required them to stop what they were currently working on and ensure the correct documentation was sent immediately. S8 expressed frustration of not meeting compliance measure at times because of the lack of information, "We don't know. I had to do two things before I left today, and one of them I didn't even know I had to do, and it was due December 1. Very aggravating. If I don't do it, it doesn't get done." Participants conveyed the need to receive reliable information in a consistent, timely, and comprehensible format.

Inconsistent Message Delivery by Regulators was referenced 64 times across all 10 participants when asked probing questions for Research Question 2. Participants stated they just wanted to know what was required of them to be in compliance. The participants did not seek to understand the premise of legislative reform; they just needed the rules, thus exhibiting a Compliance Mentality.

Compliance Mentality

When answering probing questions about the perceived challenges with implementing new legislative reform, participants expressed the need for someone to simply tell them what they must do to be in compliance. S1 proclaimed:

Bottom line is, nobody in any profession didn't want to do what's expected of them by law. Certainly, don't want to get in trouble for it. I've had this conversation with a lot of different people. Let us know what we're supposed to do and the way we're supposed to do it and God dang, we'll get it done the best of our ability.

As noted in the previous section, the lack of information was a perceived challenge perceived by all participants. S3 concurred, "We adapt to change really well. Just tell us what we need to do, and we'll do it."

S6 described previous legislative reform compliance to landmines: "It's a field full of landmines that you're trying to wander through to try and figure out what you actually have to do? What do you have to meet? Is it even important to meet No Child Left Behind?" With more than 10 years of experience implementing different legislative reforms and mandates, S6 learned not get overly anxious:

I let the dust settle and then typically there's four or five things I need to know. I wait until we actually know what those four or five things are, and then I learn in 15 minutes what people spend three months trying to figure out what they're supposed to do with. I just make it as simple as possible.

Participants indicated they were waiting until information was given to them by a reliable source, usually the service center before they started planning ESSA implementation.

Participants discussed the need to be told what they need to do; S7 noted his biggest challenge in implementing ESSA would be to document his district's compliance with required reporting documents properly. "I just think the biggest challenge is going to be making sure that everything is in the format that they're looking for. That goes from campus improvement plans to reporting requirements to required improve plans." Participants wanted the information on ESSA in a simple format of what they had to do and what they could not do to meet compliance.

All participants expressed a pressing need for ESSA implementation was how to be in compliance. While two participants also briefly alluded to more than just compliance, ultimately, the perceived challenges with ESSA were related to knowing what had to be done, by when, to be in compliance. Participants articulated the challenge they faced with new and increasing mandates over the past 10 years was their loss of time to focus on instructional leadership. S8 frustratingly expressed the need to "cover your tail. You got to play that game." S8 continued by saying "that is my problem with the whole thing. I've found out over the years my job has evolved into being a compliance officer rather than an instructional leader. I'm a compliance officer now, and I don't like it."

A Compliance Mentality was referenced 53 times across all 10 participants when asked probing questions for Research Question 2. Participants demonstrated annoyance and frustration when they discussed requirements, mandates, and compliance. Much of the Compliance Mentality stemmed from the lack of knowledge, time, and money to implement legislative reform; however, service centers were perceived to be a solution to some of the aforementioned barriers.

Importance of Service Centers

When asked probing questions about their perceived challenges to implementing legislative reform in their rural school districts, 9 of the 10 participants referenced the Importance of Service Centers. As noted in the previous section, knowing and meeting all compliance measures of new legislative reform was perceived to be a major challenge for rural school district superintendents. Participants noted that the service centers played an important role in supporting rural school district superintendents with compliance. S8 explained the following way the service center supported him:

The service center is really good. If something's due, they'll send out warnings, and sometimes they'll even call you, say, "Hey, this is due, you know, we just want to remind you." I say, "Well, thank you because I forgot about it."

The support service centers provide noted with appreciation by all participants.

Participants named service centers as their primary source of information for implementing new legislative reforms, such as ESSA. S9 explained, "We get alerts from our region service center and updates and timelines from the region service center. We rely upon them, tremendously. I get more alerts from our region service center than I do TEA." Service centers provided the participants with information and updates and followed-up with them to ensure they met deadlines.

Participants noted that the service centers also provided support in the area of training. S1 stated, "We couldn't do a lot of training we have to do if it wasn't for the service center. Whether it's coming out, we pay them or we send our people there." S3 expressed the Importance of Service Centers stating, "We rely on our service center immensely. We utilize their content specialist in all of our core content areas. We couldn't function if it weren't for

them.” Although services provided by the service center are at a cost to the rural school districts, participants noted the costs were considerably less than other available contracted service provider.

Participants noted serious concern with the desire that some politicians have to consolidate or close the regional education service centers in Texas. S10 ascertained:

You got to do what’s required of you, but we’ve got to utilize our education service center and implement what helps us. I know some of why they got under fire, but for small districts it would be a really bad thing if they either consolidated or did away with service centers.

S1 poignantly stated, “There’s no doubt that the Region Service Center is first and foremost [resource] and all this discussion [to close them], over the past several years, I think it’s died down. Trimming down or getting rid of the service center is plain stupid.”

Participants perceived the service centers as a pivotal resource and support to all rural school districts. S9 professed:

Without it we would be absolutely blind. We would have no support structure. As an administrator, I don’t think I appreciated this until I became a superintendent. The TEA is the enforcement aspect of the state legislature. The service centers have nothing to do with enforcement. The service centers are strictly support service structures, and they help us fulfill the legislative requirements of the Texas legislature. Which is why some politicians don’t like them and want to do away with them. You’ll hear this from time to time.

Participants perceived the service centers to be part of the solution to many challenges they anticipated with the implementation ESSA, especially for rural school districts.

The Importance of Service Centers was referenced 42 times across 9 of 10 participants when asked probing questions for Research Question 2. Participants noted the support provided by the service centers was pivotal to their success as rural school district superintendents. One of the main supports the service center provides to rural school districts is central staff support. Rural school districts have minimal central staff, which causes hardship during a legislative transition.

Lack of Human Capital

When asked probing questions about perceived challenges in implementing new legislative reform such as ESSA, all participants expressed the challenge of adding work to already over-worked employees. S2 reported, “I don’t have facilities or faculty or people to do what they are asking so another hat gets put on a current staff member.” As noted in previous sections, the participants noted minimal central staff in their rural school districts. S3 explained the extra work placed on current staff is not a one-time event and it pulls staff away from their other responsibilities. S3 noted:

Staffing is always going to be a challenge. What extra work is going to be required of us? If it deals with title funds, all of the legwork associated with that sometimes can be overwhelming. The application itself, but then if you have to perform evaluations at the end of the year, all of that. I do think staffing is a big thing... All of that falls on the shoulders of our curriculum director. If our curriculum director’s having to devote x-amount of time to this, she’s not able to provide support and be a resource for our teachers where it matters most.

When discussing the implementation of new legislative reform, participants explained that legislation, laws, and regulations are always changing and it was a challenge to keep abreast

of the changes. S4 discussed the many roles she already played as the district's lone central office administrator, "I don't have a GT coordinator, I don't have an ELL person, and so I'm responsible for that." Participants noted the unnecessary challenges they face, such as when the state changes an application process or form. It may seem like a menial change; however, it was one more thing the rural school district superintendent and his or her other limited central staff had to spend time learning.

Participants gave examples of challenges they faced while implementing previous legislative reform, which participants expressed challenges due to the rural school districts' Lack of Human Capital. S2 shared an example of a challenge he faced due to the lack of teachers needed to implement a new graduation plan:

We're going back to NCLB, it's great to say we want four years of math, we want four years of science, we want four years of English, we want this and that. Now you just doubled my math classes, and I didn't have enough math teachers to begin with.

Participants referenced NCLB and the challenge of getting all their teachers High Qualified. Some districts had to let teachers go and struggled to find the needed Highly Qualified teachers for Spanish, math and science. S4 shared the following example:

I think my biggest challenge as it relates to personnel is just really offering things for my higher kids. When I started here we had a Spanish teacher that actually was not Spanish certified, was ESL certified. I had to cut two programs right when I started, theater arts and Spanish, because neither one of those teachers met the highly-qualified requirements. I think those have been challenges for me just in a smaller district, trying to offer things to allow kids who may not excel in a certain area but still deserve to come to school and learn new things and have their gifts and talents used and met.

Another challenge was knowing and understanding everything they were required to do. Implementing the requirement even if they did not feel it was in the best interest of their students. Participants noted several times that they wore several hats and that if something new was mandated, they must add that to their current list of responsibilities. S4 admitted:

There's a point where you push yourself as an administrator so much to try to read, read, read, and keep up with every single thing you're doing. Over time, I think that can cause exhaustion and burnout in other areas. I see why people start with a larger district and then continue to move up, not because the job's easier but because you have more support systems and more layers to really work with.

Participants noted the increasing difficulty of both recruiting and retaining district personnel due to the added responsibilities placed on all personnel.

The Lack of Human Capital was referenced 29 times across all 10 participants when asked probing questions for Research Question 2. The Lack of Human Capital in rural school districts was perceived as both a challenge and disadvantage for implementing new legislative reform such as ESSA. Participants expressed the need for smaller districts to have a reprieve from some of the mandates that did not make sense for their districts; the need for differentiation for the unique needs of rural school districts in current and future legislative reforms is a necessity.

Need for Differentiation by School District Size and Geography

When asked about perceived challenges to implementing new legislative reform such as ESSA, participants once again noted the decision makers for ESSA did not have a rural school district perspective. Therefore, the challenge would be implementing legislation in rural school districts that was written with larger school districts in mind. "There's no question," S1 said,

“most decisions made are what’s better for urban or bigger school district that the rural take is usually not taken into consideration. We don’t have the political clout.” S1 explained the challenges he anticipated with the implementation ESSA; “They just need to understand our unique challenges.” Participants noted concerns with current accountability measures that did not give an accurate picture of their school districts due to small numbers and unique challenges.

S1 gave an example of how the small numbers of a tested group of students in a school caused the school not meet state standards and became improvement required. S1 explained the drastic measure his district had to take to ensure they met future accountability:

The elementary was [Grades] K, 1, 2, 3. We moved the third grade to the intermediate, moved the sixth grade to the junior high. Now that elementary won’t have any test scores. The elementary was based on just those third-grade scores. That’s been tradition so now that we moved the third grade over to the intermediate, and they’re with the fourth and fifth, the building’s rankings will be an average of Grade 3 to 5. Before, K, 1, and 2 weren’t taking standardized tests so the only scores used for the building’s rankings were Grade 3. And guess what? When you got a class coming through that’s low, all the sudden you got the whole elementary having to go through all these things.

The difference of moving the third-grade class to another campus caused the now Grade K through 2 elementary school to no longer be in improvement required, and with the fourth and fifth grade scores added to the third-grade scores, both schools met standard.

Size is not the only differentiation noted by the participants. The location, economy, and culture of each rural school district community were different. Therefore, participants noted the Need for Differentiation by School District Size and Geography in legislation. S9 ascertained, “Everybody’s doing it differently because you have different assets and different cultural

expectations in the community where you are.” S5 noted a required course she was to offer in her district; however, she stated, “Since we’ve found out we just kind of pushed it under the rug because one, we don’t have the people and two, you can’t put it in our schedule. It doesn’t work in the schedules.” The participants were hopeful that the anticipated increase in local control with ESSA would alleviate some of those challenges. However, none of the participants knew how that local control could or would take shape to help the rural school districts.

Several participants noted the demographic changes they had experienced in recent years, which compounded the challenges faced by an accountability system that looked at all school districts through the same lens. S9 discussed the challenge of trying to make schools better by mandating progress without considering the Need for Differentiation by School District Size and Geography among districts. “That’s the challenge. How far can you mandate progress? When you’ve got urban students, who are surrounded with urban aspects, and it depends on where you are. It just depends.” Each district is unique; therefore, a one-size-fits-all mentality caused a disadvantage to rural school districts.

The Need for Differentiation by School District Size and Geography was referenced 25 times across 9 of 10 participants when asked probing questions for Research Question 2. No two districts are the same; however, all districts are mandated to produce similar outcomes with different student populations and communities. Participants noted that legislative reform typically equates to unfunded mandates, this only adds fuel to the current financial issues that burden rural school districts.

Financial Constraints

Eight out of 10 participants noted Financial Constraints as a challenge in implementing any new legislative reform such as ESSA. S6 expressed concern with current unfunded mandates and the stacking on of more unfunded mandates with ESSA as follows:

I think the hardest part is trying to figure out what you have to do and you're doing it, basically, with no new funding whatsoever. Everything that the federal government does is always an add-on. At some point, there's so much added on that, you start wondering whether or not it's worth it.

S2 explained that the ability for his rural school district to implement ESSA “is gonna boil down to finances. If they're requiring some things that I need to add some personnel or add some programs or anything like that, I don't know where I'm pulling that money from.”

Participants did not know what financial implications ESSA would bring. However, by the time the state gave them the final state ESSA plan; their districts would have already completed the budget planning process for the first year of implementation. Participants anticipated they would need to make budget amendments during the summer months. The changes would require moving funds from one program to another, participants noted that this was not always done with the best interest of the students in mind.

The demographic changes faced in the rural school districts of many of the participants caused financial challenges. Therefore, any new requirements that have financial implications would add to the financial hardship already faced by many rural school districts. S4 elaborated on the financial challenges her districts faced due to student demographic changes:

I'd love to say there was a time that the economically disadvantaged and the LEP were the only two issues that we face, but I've got a lot of kids who are coming from random

situations and as I mentioned before the homeless situation, [and students} that are coming with very limited English skills. Not because they're limited English proficient, but because they don't have a vocabulary to even do colors and things like that. I'm not getting paid for them, so it's costing me almost \$60,000 for a staff position, and then I'm having to have an aid in there for my two LEP kids who just came who have no English skills.

Adding one teacher and one teacher aid to the district is a substantial cost to her rural school district's budget. Many participants noted that providing needed services to incoming LEP students had become a financial constraint in recent years. All of the participants that noted Financial Constraints understood the need to provide the services; however, due to the small number of students, districts did not receive additional funding to support these students.

Financial Constraints was referenced 17 times across 8 of 10 participants when asked probing questions for Research Question 2. Participants noted that the current state education funding formula continues to tighten the Financial Constraints in many rural school districts. These Financial Constraints are exacerbated with each new unfunded mandate, and rural school districts struggle to provide all required and needed programming to students due to the constraints.

Research Question 3

Research Question 3 asked: "What recommendations do rural school district superintendents have for ESSA and state education policymakers?" Participants were asked five probing, open-ended questions to guide Research Question 2. Probing questions referenced the superintendents' perceived supports needed and recommendations. The response to each probing question was coded utilizing the following two coding methods: open-coding and

pattern-coding. Table 4 charts the themes referenced in the responses to the six probing questions. Themes are listed in order of most prominent, those with the most referenced codes first.

Table 4

Theme Coding Totals for Research Question 3

| Emerging Themes | S1 | S2 | S3 | S4 | S5 | S6 | S7 | S8 | S9 | S10 | Totals |
|--|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|-----|--------|
| Inconsistent Message Delivery by Regulators | 8 | 7 | 13 | 6 | 5 | 10 | 4 | 5 | 4 | 5 | 67 |
| Need for Differentiation by School District Size and Geography | 3 | 3 | 9 | 7 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 4 | 7 | 7 | 52 |
| Compliance Mentality | 2 | 3 | 5 | 3 | 7 | 5 | 8 | 5 | 4 | 3 | 45 |
| Importance of Service Centers | 8 | 4 | 5 | 1 | 3 | 5 | 8 | 2 | 2 | 3 | 41 |
| Financial Constraints | 4 | 0 | 1 | 4 | 0 | 4 | 9 | 1 | 6 | 0 | 29 |
| Lack of Human Capital | 2 | 4 | 3 | 1 | 2 | 4 | 5 | 4 | 3 | 1 | 29 |
| Totals | 27 | 21 | 36 | 22 | 20 | 32 | 39 | 21 | 26 | 19 | 263 |

Note. Totals above reflect the coding totals for participant responses to RQ 3 guiding questions.

Inconsistent Message Delivery by Regulators

When asked probing questions about their recommendations for ESSA and state education policymakers, participants recommended legislators and regulators better communicate a consistent message of the new legislative reform and policy to all stakeholders. Participants expressed the need for TEA and the service centers to, as S5 put it, “translate that [ESSA] for me and give me the nuts and bolts.” All of the participants stated, in one way or another, that they did not have the time or the personnel to dive deep into the legislative documents to gain an understanding. They needed TEA and the service centers to prepare resources that breakdown all of the important components of ESSA. Participants expressed urgency in developing these resources before districts start making their own sense of the legislative documents. S2 stated, “I know I need that, and I may need a little more than

guidance. I may need some templates and examples of what they are talking about. It's all confusing." S2 further explained the consequence of how only giving people the legislative document itself would lead to multiple interpretations and more confusion.

Another recommendation suggest by the participants was for TEA to provide a comprehensive list of requirements, some participants requested a checklist, while others wanted a timeline with important due dates for all required documents and actions for the year. S1 suggested that TEA needed to:

Come up with a list of the requirements. If there's a foster care transportation requirement, then put it on that list. That sounds easy, but I know it's tougher than it sounds. Once it's [ESSA state policy] all hammered out. I don't think there's any superintendent period, much less the rural guys, more adapt to just tell me what we got to do.

Participants recommended TEA provide comprehensive resources that are reliable, comprehensive, current, and readily available. Participants noted difficulties in reaching TEA personnel via phone; therefore, they recommended better customer service from TEA and to ensure all staff have a thorough understanding of ESSA and be willing to assist with answers. S1 explained as follows:

When they [TEA] cut down on personnel, one, you weren't going to get anyone to answer the phone, it's hard to get a return call. Number 2, they wouldn't venture out and give you a lot of opinions. They got in trouble, somewhere down the line. They really tell you a whole lot of nothing on some issues. That kind of gets frustrating.

Participants recommended TEA work closely with the service centers to provide comprehensive training. Develop a common training that TEA does as a trainer of trainer model

to train the service centers. The service centers would then train their region superintendents and other school personnel. This would ensure a consistent message and interpretation of the policy. Since TEA is charged with developing the ESSA plan for Texas, they are the most qualified to develop the training.

Participants expressed the need for training to happen during the summer months and to be comprehensive. S8 explained:

We just need the time to be trained on what it's all about. The best time is during the summer. We just need the time for them to train us and get us up to snuff on what we need to be doing. For example, the state just came out with a new principal and teacher evaluation system. The principals spent one full week this summer getting certified. I spent 2 days in September being certified to appraise the principals.

Rural superintendents play an active role in implementing new legislative reform such as ESSA; therefore, they must receive intense, purposeful training to aide them in effective implementation.

Another recommendation made concerning messaging was for the Commissioner of Education and other TEA influencers to visit rural school districts and allow the educators in the rural school districts to hear information straight from the source, S5, when asked for recommendations, stated:

I guess just get out more and spread the message. Come up to the rural areas, have meetings, explaining. Let us hear it directly from the commissioner instead of three or four people later. The Commissioner of Education, he came up I guess about a month ago. It was really nice to hear what he had to say. You heard it directly out of his mouth.

It wasn't through a few people, so just to communicate the changes and don't forget us up here.

Inconsistent Message Delivery by Regulators was the most prominent theme extrapolated when coding all ten-interview scripts. When asked probing questions for Research Question 3 Inconsistent Message Delivery by Regulators was referenced 67 times across all 10 participants responses. Participants noted previous and current experiences dealing with Inconsistent Message Delivery by Regulators with legislative reform implementation during their tenure as rural school district superintendents.

Need for Differentiation by School District Size and Geography

Rural school districts face unique challenges that need to be considered when developing legislative reform and mandates. This was a common belief among all ten participants throughout the interview transcripts. One recommendation made to address the Need for Differentiation by School District Size and Geography was for policymakers to visit rural school districts and see first-hand the unique challenges. S3 stated:

The greatest advice and I've said this to some of our local legislators, before you make policy, come out and visit our school districts. Come to [S3's district] and see what the job that our teachers are doing. Ask us about the challenges. Ask for input from us that are in it on a daily basis.

Participants expressed the need for policymakers to gain perspective past what they saw in the districts where they live and work. S10 expressed the need for perspective in the following statement:

But if they could get out and just have some perspective. If they could come, see our districts. If they could vision the difference in what they're used to and what's all around

them versus [rural school districts], I think that it would give them a lot better perspective to make laws. It would also give them the reasoning behind why they hear from us all the time, “You’ve got to give us some more local control.” That’s not so that we can sit back and hide. It’s so that we can do what we know is best for our district. ... I mean comparing schools across the State is not apples to apples. There’s apples, oranges, peaches, pears. There’s everything.

Another recommendation made was for state education policymakers to listen, listen to the practitioners, the people doing the work. S2 declared:

It would help if they listen. It’s like I walk in my board meeting and if I have a board member or two that’s going off the reservation and they shouldn’t be. I’ll just tell them, guys, I don’t know how to sell a tractor for Warren Caterpillar, I don’t know how to farm, I can’t go to the feed lot and do this, but I have some experience with the school. I know school business; I have some experience running school business and they let me do it. The state doesn’t tend to listen they just shove things down. Like the legislature shoves things down our throat, and they don’t realize the unintended consequences because they haven’t done enough listening.

Several participants acknowledged the recent attempts TEA has made to gain the perspective of rural school districts by assembling a rural school district task force to discuss ESAA specifically. However, many of them weren’t sure what would actually come of it, S4 admitted:

I think he’s [Texas Commissioner of Education] trying to do some of it with the small school initiatives and task forces... I think they’re doing a good job there, I think it’s just

going to be interesting to see how it continues, how it plays out, if they actually listen to those things.

Participants reiterated the need for policymakers to not just listen, but to act in the interest of all school districts.

When asked for his recommendations for TEA and state education policy maker, S3 exclaimed, “You can’t set one policy for all!” S9 concurred, “Here’s what I know. One size does not fit all. Even among rural schools.” Participants recognized the difficulty in developing a truly differentiated accountability system, but all participants agreed it was a necessity.

S6 suggested state policymakers gain perspective to develop differentiated accountability by working with the service centers:

You’ve got 20 regions. Now, you’re not talking to the 500 superintendents that have kids, with less than 500 kids, now you’re talking to 20 people and saying, “This is exactly what they need to take away from this. Here’s what your mid-sized districts need; here’s what your larger urban districts need; here’s what your rural schools need.”

This recommendation aligned with the belief many participants had that TEA should work closely with the service centers allowing the service centers to serve as a support and liaison for TEA and rural school districts.

Participants noted the Need for Differentiation by School District Size and Geography for all types of school districts, not just rural districts. Participants also noted that all rural school districts were not the same, and even among small and large rural school districts, many differences existed. S7 suggested:

When you make your rules and you look at your environments, make sure that you see how it’s going to affect rural as well as urban. Even to the fact that we don’t all have to

be on the same playing field. No one has to be exactly the same. They have started looking at rules that, if you have less than 500 students, then this.

The Need for Differentiation by School District Size and Geography was referenced 52 times across all 10 participants when asked probing questions for Research Question 3.

Participants did not make specific recommendations of what ESSA should mandate or the specific design of the accountability system. Participants noted that total enrollment counts and the enrollment counts of sub population groups should be taken into consideration when developing differentiated accountability measures.

Compliance Mentality

Many of the participants' recommendations for ESSA and state education policymakers expressed the need to simply know what was needed to be compliant and not face punishment or sanctions. S3 suggested that TEA, "Just let us know what the requirements are. And how do we meet those requirements? How do we fulfill our obligations? Just the main thing is just educating districts on what we need to do." This idea resonated throughout the interview scripts.

The following statement from S5 puts some context as to why she equates legislative reform as a means of compliance and not a means of reform:

I guess if they would just recognize that we don't have the personnel, we don't have the experts. We have to travel to go to any sort of training, any sort of meeting and it's cost and time prohibited for a lot of the stuff we have to do like the district improvement plan. To be honest, that is such a waste of my time and their time, because I sit down and I do the plan anyway. I bring in a few people. They look at it and they're like, "Yeah, I don't care. It looks good," and go on with it. I spend hours and hours trying to get it so I have it

for Title I then it sits in my folder until I have to get it out next year and update it. We're so small; everyone knows what's going on.

The district improvement plan process may make sense in a large urban district to facilitate needs assessment, goal setting, and strategic planning across all district departments; however, in a district with a superintendent and two principals, the improvement plan process and documentation process is cumbersome and it became an act of compliance and not improvement.

S7 recommended the following to any new rural superintendent starting his or her first year in 2017-2018, the first implementation year of ESSA:

The learning curve is going to be so steep on all the other things that's going on that, for the first 2 or three years, you just need someone from the service center to make sure you're in compliance so you don't get in trouble. Just stay out of trouble for your first 3 years, and then by that time, you'll start learning it.

Participants made recommendations to differentiate policy and requirements to meet their needs. If the policy were not to be differentiated, recommendations were made to simply provide a checklist and timeline of what rural school districts were required to do and they would ensure compliance. Therefore, participants expressed the desire to have a policy that would make sense for their districts, but if that were not to happen, they expressed the need for complete transparency on what they need to do to stay out of trouble.

A Compliance Mentality was reference 45 times across all 10 participants when asked probing questions for Research Question 3. None of the participants noted a mentality of organizational change or educational reform; all participants expressed the purpose of legislative reform was to develop mandates and to sanction districts that fail to meet compliance measures. Rural school district superintendents express concern with finding the time and ability to read

and interpret each new legislation. Rural school district superintendents rely heavily on the service centers to interpret new legislation.

Importance of Service Centers

Five of the 10 participants recommended that TEA fund the service centers, stating the role the service centers play in rural school districts is instrumental. S6 purported:

Stop and think about it from this point of view. If you fund the service centers, you already have a built-in communication mechanism from the state to the rural school district superintendent, the guy 25 miles from a Walmart. You have a built-in mechanism to get me that information.

S6 further claimed that by funding the service centers, TEA would ensure consistent messaging:

If you're going to try and go around that [service centers] and you're going to offer these things other places or make me pay to go get those other things, some districts will, some will not, whereas you could have not only a built-in communication flow, but you would have much more consistency, much more consistency depending upon how people interpret things. We get the emails from them and all.

Recommendations were also made to partially fund the service centers, to fund training required that came straight from TEA. Additional services required by the service centers incur costs to rural school district service center contracts. S7 elaborated:

[The previous Texas Commissioner of Education] pushed a lot of compliance stuff down to the service centers to make sure that districts are in compliance. What they never did do is fund that. Now for the service center to make sure we're in compliance, they have to send people out to us. That then, in turn, causes additional fees. The service centers then push it down to districts if they don't get funding for that. Anything they push down

to the service centers; they just need to fund it so it's not at an additional cost to the district.

Participants noted the added expenses to their service center contracts were another example of how legislative reforms, such as ESSA, cultivated unfunded mandates.

Participants voiced concern at previous attempts to close service centers; participants noted several times that without service centers, they did not know how their districts would function. S5 testified, "I can't imagine. I mean, I really can't because our training, our contracts, my budget would skyrocket, just because they're able to keep everything relatively low cost."

The support and services provided by the service center are critical to the success of rural school districts. S9 summed up the Importance of Service Centers with the following statement:

They are highly involved and service centers are designed to have programs in place or personnel in place to provide training and support that will enable every single school district in their region to meet all of the mandates. Service centers do a great job!

The Importance of Service Centers was referenced 41 times across all 10 participants when asked probing questions for Research Question 3. Without the service centers, participants felt they would be at a loss when it comes to meeting legislative requirements. Service centers provide reliable support at minimal cost to rural school districts, which all participants stated their districts would suffer greatly without these services.

Financial Constraints

Six participants made recommendations to provide funding to rural school districts to pay teachers comparable salaries to those in larger school districts. S9 went one step further stating:

If I could appeal to the United States Department of Education, I would ask for a federal law that would put rural schoolteachers on a pay scale equivalent to the average of the

larger schools. Give us more money. Give us more money to impact teacher pay scales and that will drive education...if the federal government would supplement rural school districts with teacher salaries, it would help tremendously.

Another financial constraint experienced by 6 of the 10 participants was being classified as a Chapter 41 school districts, and 5 of the 6 were in recapture at the time of this study, meaning they had to give money back to the state. Recommendations were made for the state to look at those districts and their current student population. Although they were property wealthy, their students were not wealthy and they were struggling financially to meet current mandates and current students' needs. S4 expressed the need for TEA to at least have a conversation about recapture and the hardships placed on small rural school districts in recapture:

One of the concerns I've always had is people tend to cater to the bigger districts. Nobody really cared about recapture until [a large urban school district] decided not to pay it. As we see [larger urban districts] start to be impacted in some way where they have a louder voice and more voters, TEA can't fix what they're mandated to implement. I think it's just understanding how the process works and trying to get legislators who work well with the agency. I guess that was a really long way to say I need them to continue working with small districts through input opportunities to talk about why is this difficult?

Participants expressed the need for the state and the federal government to understand the unique financial challenges faced by rural school districts.

Financial Constraints was referenced 29 times across 7 of 10 participants when asked probing questions for Research Questions 3. Participants expressed the hope that ESSA would not bring

any new unfunded mandates. Participants recommended that policymakers take a look at rural Chapter 41 districts and the hardships placed on those districts to meet unfunded mandates, especially districts in recapture.

Lack of Human Capital

The Lack of Human Capital theme that emerged from this study encompassed the lack of central staff found in rural school districts, as well as, the deficit of perceived qualified candidates. A recommendation to help the latter pertains to NCLB's Highly Qualified requirement for teachers. S1 suggested TEA could support rural school districts by providing, "Any relaxation on some of those certification requirements for teachers, especially in some of the high demand or very hard to find subjects." More recommendations made concerning teacher recruitment and retention can be found in the previous section concerning recommendations for Financial Constraints.

Participants did not have many recommendations for the lack of central staff noted throughout their interview transcripts. Instead, the recommendation was for policymakers to understand this Lack of Human Capital in rural school districts and to take that into consideration when developing mandates and reporting requirements. S3 expressed:

You have to take into consideration the size of the school district, just because as I've mentioned before, an urban district may have just people solely devoted to complying with that policy where we don't. It falls on the shoulders of the superintendent or principals or another administrator. That's the only advice that I would have, is that take into consideration the context and the size of the school districts.

Participants expressed frustration that policymakers did not take rural school districts' Lack of Human Capital into consideration, which S7 evidenced, "Just like I said earlier. Our

PEIMS coordinator has to submit the exact same thing that [a large urban district] has to submit. Our numbers are just different.” Participants noted that many of the reports that TEA required for submittal had redundant information to fill in that TEA already had on file. This was perceived as a waste of time, and participants recommended TEA streamline all reports and applications to not require multiple entries of the same information.

The Lack of Human Capital was referenced 29 times across all 10 participants when asked probing questions for Research Question 3. Rural school districts serve small numbers of students; however, rural school districts must provide all of the require courses. To provide all services, many rural school district employees serve multiple roles within the district. At the central level, rural school districts are at a disadvantage, they are tasked with doing the same amount of work as a large urban school district, but with a fraction of the human capital.

Summary

Chapter 4 examined responses to three research questions. Data retrieved from the rural school district superintendent participants were analyzed and six themes emerged that provided answers to the three research questions. The six themes that emerged from the participants’ responses were Inconsistent Message Delivery by Regulators, a Compliance Mentality, a Need for Differentiation by School District Size and Geography, a Lack of Human Capital and the Importance of Service Centers. Chapter 5 will provide a discussion of the findings, implications, and recommendations for further study.

Chapter 5: Findings, Implications, and Recommendations

Chapter 4 presented the findings from interviews with 10 rural school district superintendents. Chapter 5 includes a summary of the study and a summary of the findings. Next, a discussion of the analysis and implications for rural school district superintendents and rural school districts is provided. Finally, recommendations for future study are presented.

Statement of the Problem

The 2017-2018 school year is the first, full implementation year for the new ESSA, which became federal law during President Obama's administration in 2015. While ESSA has similarities to NCLB, several differences will impact states, school districts, and students. Superintendents implement many new educational reforms at the local level. ESSA has been passed to ensure all students are successful, on the tail end of NCLB education reform era that never realized its intended goal of 100% student achievement. Implementing ESSA might require an organizational change at the state and district level. Superintendents must plan for any needed organizational change and put those plans in motion. Rural superintendents, in particular, are challenged with implementing the changes with minimal human capital at the central office level.

Statement of the Purpose

As the role of the superintendent becomes more complex with each new educational reform, the need for organizational change related research addressing new educational reform has been needed. The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the perceptions of rural school district superintendents on the implications of new federal regulations being implemented due to the failure of NCLB to meet its intended targets. This objective of this study was to investigate how superintendents from rural school districts of similar sizes and demographics

received information concerning ESSA and how they developed plans to implement organizational change. Superintendents from a representative sample of 10 rural school districts were interviewed about their lived experiences in the current era of educational transition following the federal passage of ESSA.

Research Design Overview

This basic qualitative study provided a voice to participants who personally experienced the complexities surrounding the implementation of legislative reform in rural school districts. Participants included 10 Texas rural school district superintendents that met criteria for participation outlined in Chapter 3. Data were gathered through semi-structured, open-ended face-to-face interviews with each participant. To gain insight to the implications new legislative reform placed on rural districts, a qualitative lens offered the most promise. This methodology provided the best opportunity to develop a rich description of the in-depth perceptions of rural school district superintendents (Creswell, 2013; Saldana, 2013). Furthermore, the qualitative methodology allowed the researcher to gain an understanding of how each subject, personally, perceived the implications of ESSA in his or her district.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed through the retrieval of codes from each interview transcript and journal notes of non-verbal cues utilizing open-coding. Initial themes emerged, and the participants validated the themes. After the initial themes were validated, the researcher returned to the transcripts to finalize emerging themes related to the 10 superintendents' perceptions the implications of ESSA to their roles, districts, and plans regarding organizational change. The researcher retrieved codes from each interview transcript and corresponding journal notes of non-verbal cues utilizing open-coding (Lin, 2013). The open-coding process was initiated after

each interview so that data analysis occurred simultaneously with data collection. This simultaneous data collection and analysis allowed the researcher to identify the point of data saturation.

After all transcripts were coded via opening-coding, the researcher utilized pattern-coding to identify emerging themes within coded transcript text (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Throughout coding process, the researcher wrote memos as part of the analytic process (Maxwell, 2013). The researcher used pattern-coding and memo writing to identify six overarching themes that served to answer the study's three research questions. At the completion of the coding process, the researcher validated the data analysis by sharing the identified emergent themes with the participants. After all participants validated the initial themes, the researcher returned to the transcripts to finalize emerging themes related to the superintendents' perceptions the implications of ESSA to their role and district and their plans in relation to organizational change.

Limitations

The limitation of this study occurred based on the sample size because the researcher interviewed 10 participants who were superintendents of rural school districts in Texas. The size of the sample might limit the findings from generalizing across all superintendents of rural school districts in Texas. Since the superintendents in the study were from rural school districts in one state, Texas, the data might not generalize to other school district superintendents in nation. Also, the researcher recorded the interviews and cannot be sure the candidates answered as openly as they would have without the interview being recorded for transcription. Unknown personal biases held by the researcher, who as a central office employee in a large urban district,

could have affected the interpretation of information. Therefore, the researcher utilized a reflection log to recognize and overcome personal biases.

Findings for the Research Questions

Data retrieved from the rural school district superintendent participants were analyzed, and six themes emerged that provided answers to the three research questions. The six themes that emerged from rural school district superintendents’ perceptions of the implications of new federal regulations being implemented due to the failure of NCLB to meet its intended targets were Inconsistent Message Delivery by Regulators, a Compliance Mentality, Financial Constraints, a Need for Differentiation by School District Size and Geography, a Lack of Human Capital and the Importance of Service Centers. The six themes appeared for all research questions. Table 5 lists the six emerging themes with excerpts of coded transcript data for each emerging theme. The themes are discussed individually in six subsections.

Table 3

Six Emerging Themes Across All Research Questions

| Emerging Themes | Excerpts from Transcript Data | Excerpts from Transcript Data |
|--|---|--|
| Inconsistent Message Delivery by Regulators | “It’s all confusing...” | “I think the biggest problem...is again just the interpretation.” |
| Compliance Mentality | “...so, it was compliance to a fault.” | “Now here’s what we’re going to do to be in compliance, but now here’s what we’re actually going to do.” |
| Need for Differentiation by School District Size and Geography | “They just need to understand our unique challenges.” | “One size does not fill all, even among rural schools.” |
| Financial Constraints | “...gonna boil down to finances.” | “...the other districts are getting additional funding, and we’re not.” |
| Lack of Human Capital | “Staffing is always going to be a challenge.” | “I don’t have a GT coordinator, I don’t have an ELL person, so I’m responsible for that.” |
| Importance of Service Centers | “We rely on our service centers immensely...” | “...lean on the service center...to meet the changes and the demands of ESSA.” |

Note. Excerpts above are taken from coded transcript data.

Inconsistent Message Delivery by Regulators

The first major theme, Inconsistent Message Delivery by Regulators, emerged from several initial codes concerning the communication of information. Participants, active rural school superintendents, lack information concerning ESSA which is to be fully implemented at the beginning of the 2017-2018 school year that begins 8 months after conducting the interviews. With previous legislative reform, participants struggled to keep up with all the policies and reporting requirements. Particularly for ESSA, the superintendents relied on word of mouth information many times, stating, “I hear,” or “they say,” without having a first-hand knowledge of what the legislation specifically required which led to receiving misinformation.

Rural superintendents perceived Inconsistent Message Delivery by Regulators to be the greatest challenge to implementing past and present legislative reform. Due to limited central staffing in rural school districts, rural school districts needed timely, consistent, clear, concise, and accessible information concerning legislative reform. This theme supported Lamkin’s (2006) findings that rural superintendents are tasked with interpreting and implementing legislation with minimal central staff, requiring them to complete tasks first-hand. Rural school district superintendents spent most of their time trying to find out what they needed to do and by what date. They presented with a Compliance Mentality instead of focusing on organizational change.

Compliance Mentality

The second major theme, Compliance Mentality, emerged through the transcripts as participants noted having the desire to simply know what needs for falling in compliance with policies and regulations. Participants wanted the state to provide a checklist of what they needed to implement and how to report it along with a corresponding list of deadlines. Instead of

referring to legislative reform as reform, or as transformative, the participants referred to legislative reform with terms such as mandates and requirements meant for compliance. The participants perceived the current ESSA changes as both changes to current requirements and the addition of new requirements and rules.

Another component of this emerged theme was the act of non-compliance. Participants noted they held strict to the rules their first few years as rural school superintendents for fear of being out of compliance. However, after a few years, they realized they could choose to be non-compliant in certain areas for “flying under the radar.” Participants noted, at times, even when they knew and understood a mandate or requirement, choosing to be noncompliant, due to either a lack of resources or out of motivation to do what they perceived to be best for students in the school district. To move away from this Compliance Mentality, legislative reform must be written to enable all districts to attain success with student achievement. Rural school districts have unique needs; therefore, legislation needs to differentiate policies to ensure all districts can do what is in best interests of their students.

Need for Differentiation by School District Size and Geography

The third major theme was Need for Differentiation by School District Size and Geography and emerged from the superintendent’s perceived challenges and disadvantages of rural school districts. The perception that educational, legislative reform was written to address issues that plagued large urban school districts was evident among all participants. Rural school districts held unique characteristics, and the unique needs of rural school districts need to be accommodated within legislative reform policies and accountability measurements. Components of this theme included the perception of unfunded mandates and unintended consequences for rural school districts.

Many of the unfunded mandates and accountability measures were not applicable to the student achievement needs of rural school districts; therefore, legislative reform has triggered negative unintended consequence and hardships for rural school districts. This finding supports Barley and Beesley's (2007) findings that unique factors in rural school districts lead to student achievement. This theme also accounts for the growing demographic complexity in rural school districts. This theme supports Johnson et al.'s (2014) conclusion that policymakers must take into consideration the changing demographic complexity within rural school districts.

Financial Constraints

The fourth major theme of Financial Constraints emerged through participants' perceptions of the challenges they faced as rural school district superintendents who were tasked with enacting both past and current legislative reforms. Although ESSA has currently overturned the highly-qualified teacher requirement for classroom teachers, participants did not perceive this change as a solution to the problem of teacher attrition faced in rural school districts. Rural school districts struggle with the recruitment and retention of teachers (Ludlow, 2011). When districts can recruit teachers, many times the teachers will spend 1 to 2 years in the rural school district, and at which time, they leave to teach in a larger school district with the ability to pay much higher salaries. When participants were asked for their recommendations for what the state policymakers should do, the participants recommended developing and funding a state teacher salary scale to ensure all teachers, regardless of district, make comparable salaries. The finding that raising teachers' salaries will help retention is not new, the NCEE (1983) made the recommendation to raise teachers' salaries in *A Nation at Risk*.

However, current finances were a challenge for many rural districts, especially districts in that are considered property wealthy and therefore must give portions, at times very large

portions, of their revenue to the state. New graduation requirements, accountability measures, and initiatives are required of rural school districts, all of which cost money. Since rural school districts are currently facing financial hardships, each added unfunded mandate chips away at an already impossible to manage budget. They noted that education finance policy lacks the accommodations needed to meet the needs of rural school districts. Therefore, if mandates are given to rural school districts, those mandates need to be funded by the state or federal government. Unfortunately, the funding for those mandates is tied to so many reporting requirements that more money is spent for rural districts to be able to meet reporting requirements.

Lack of Human Capital

Rural school districts have minimal central staff; therefore, rural school district superintendents perceive legislative reform as more work. Rural school districts do not have the central staff that large districts do; however, they are required to do the same paperwork and meet same requirements with no extra human capital. Each new responsibility or task given to the superintendent, business manager, or another central staff, equates to time unavailable for fulfilling another responsibility (Lamkin, 2006; Wylie & Clark, 1991). Rural school district superintendents also lack the human capital available to do extensive research and learn about new policies in depth. Therefore, they wait until the service center sends them information about new legislative reform, policies, and mandates. They attend superintendent meetings, training, and receive communication via email from the service centers concerning pertinent information about policy, mandates, and required reports.

Another area of human capital that plagues rural school districts is teachers. Rural school districts can recruit new teachers to come to the district, but after 1 or 2 years of teaching, they move to other nearby, larger districts that pay higher salaries. Also, due to low numbers of

students, rural school districts need teachers that have multiple certifications to cover several required course offerings. This is extremely difficult in the areas of science, math, and some elective courses.

Rural school district superintendents lack human capital available to do the research and learn what each new policy is about. Therefore, they wait until their service centers send them information about new legislative reforms, policies, and mandates. They attend superintendent-targeted meetings and training events and receive communication via email from the service centers to learn pertinent information about the state education agency's policies, mandates, and required reports.

Importance of Service Centers

Because there is a Lack of Human Capital to run the day-to-day functions of rural districts, service centers provide the needed training and support for compliance-oriented documents and reports. The participants perceived service centers to be vital to the success of their rural districts, and without the service centers, the participants did not know how rural districts could function. Service centers were viewed as the hub of information for rural school superintendents. In fact, when asked for recommendations, participants made recommendations for the service centers to be funded by the state instead of through individual districts' contracts for services.

In recent years, discussions to close the service centers in the state of Texas have occurred, but closing the service centers would cause undue hardship on rural school districts. The service centers play vital roles, according to the participants, for performing the 10 functions of the rural school district. Without contracted services with the service centers, many rural school districts would not be able to operate efficiently. Rural school district superintendents

considered the service centers to be a primary source of information. The participants recommended that the state needs to utilize the service centers as mechanisms for consistent messaging and effective communication across of the state's educational regions.

Significance of the Study

ESSA's new accountability system does not go into effect until the 2017-2018 school year; therefore, the timing of this qualitative study allowed a real-time look at the perceptions of superintendents as they experienced the repercussions of new legislative change. The selected superintendents were current superintendents of rural school districts in Texas. In the state of Texas, 453 of the state's 1,024 school districts were classified as rural during the 2014-2015 school year. Rural school districts operate very differently from large urban districts; however, policy tends to be written from the perspective of the large urban school district. The objective of this study was to investigate how rural school district superintendents received information concerning ESSA and how they developed plans to implement organizational change.

The findings revealed rural school districts lack the information and resources needed to implement legislative reform as organizational change; instead, rural school district superintendents viewed legislative reform through a lens of compliance. The rural school district superintendents perceived current legislative reform to mirror previous reforms and policies in its lack of differentiation between types of districts, such as rural and urban. The challenges to implementing legislative reform identified by the rural school district superintendents were the following: Inconsistent Message Delivery by Regulators, Financial Constraints, and a Lack of Human Capital.

The challenges mentioned above paired with the idea that current legislative reform is not differentiated, in contrast to the needs of urban school districts, to meet the unique needs of rural

school districts and this lack of differentiation leads to a Compliance Mentality for implementing legislative reform. The Importance of Service Centers surfaced as part of the solution. Even with service centers, rural school district superintendents need differentiated policy to implement true organizational change that leads to education reform. Figure 6 provides a graphic illustration of the imbalance of resources and support when implementing new legislative reform perceived by rural school district superintendents. The imbalance leads to the Compliance Mentality.

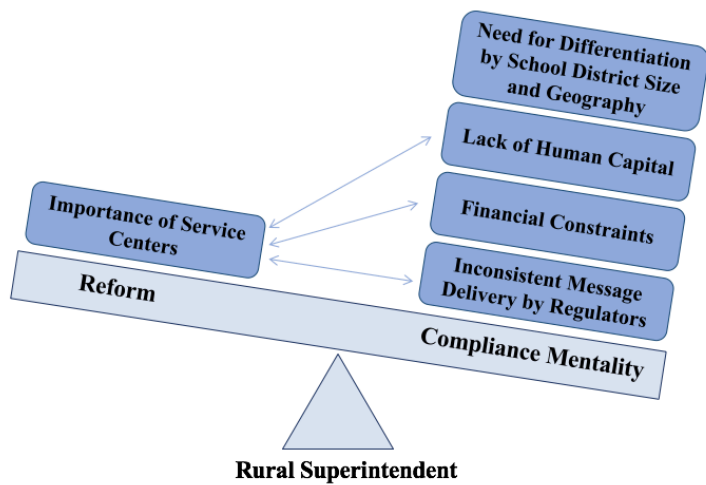


Figure 6. Rural school district superintendents’ perception of legislative reform.

The results of this qualitative study may be used to further investigate organizational change and leadership under a time of transition between one legislatively directed educational reform expiring and another legislatively directed educational reform activating. Policymakers might better understand, from the perspective of the practicing superintendent, the implications of legislative reform and might potentially start conversations to ensure the development of safeguards that support successful reform among districts of varying sizes. Now, states are in the planning process for developing their accountability systems to reflect the requirements of

ESSA; therefore, the results of this study may be used to guide the state's planning and implementation process of the new system as it affects rural school districts.

Discussion

Rural school district superintendents are charged with leading a school district through major organizational change each time a new legislative reform is developed and passed by policymakers. To do this, rural school district superintendents must have the understanding and ability to fulfill his or her roles and responsibilities within the 10 functions of the school district. The other component needed is the information, resources, and capacity to lead major organizational change.

Five Roles of a Superintendent

Although the sizes and student enrollments of rural school districts are but a fraction of the sizes and student enrollments of larger urban school districts, rural school district superintendents fulfill complex roles that might be more complex than the roles fulfilled by large urban school district superintendents. Rural school district superintendents are tasked with implementing new legislative reform with the same fidelity as large urban school district superintendents; however, they do not receive the necessary information, accommodation, funding, personnel, or support needed to implement organizational change that will progress student achievement in their respective school districts. Instead, rural school district superintendents are forced to spend a disproportionate amount of time acting as manager. Manager is only one of five roles of a superintendent outlined by Bjork (2014) and Callahan (1966). The other four roles are political leader, instructional leader, applied social scientist, and effective communicator.

Due to legislative reform over the past decade, rural superintendents' roles have leaned heavily on manager or compliance officer. Due to a lack of human capital at the central level, mandates and report requirements are left to the rural superintendent to understand the mandate, learn how to complete the report and then ensure both are done within the federal or state timeline. These are managerial duties that pull rural school superintendents from their other roles. Many of the mandates are not applicable for rural districts, but due to a lack of differentiated policy, rural school districts are left to complete mandate and reports for the sake of compliance.

With student achievement at the forefront of past and previous legislative reform, rural school district superintendents were faced with meeting compliance with no perceived avail. As McCloud (2005) found, rural school districts have unique needs that cannot be met with a one-size-fits-all plan of education reform. The Department of Education stated one reason for the new legislation, Every Student Succeeds Act (2015), to be enacted resulted from the prescriptiveness of the No Child Left Behind Act (2002): "The law was scheduled for revision in 2007, and, over time, NCLB's prescriptive requirements became increasingly unworkable for schools and educators." The superintendents' Compliance Mentality is because of the prescriptiveness of past legislation.

To fully realize the intent of any legislative reform made by policymakers to improve student achievement among all students, more than just a facelift to is needed from policymakers. Until then, rural school district superintendents will be forced to simply comply with requirements and mandates which inevitably causes them to lean towards the managerial role. Rural school district superintendents concur with Barley and Beesley's (2007) findings that rural school districts achieve successful school results when rural school district superintendents

can build and sustain close relationships among individuals, school, and the community. These relationships can only be realized when superintendents spend proportionately appropriate amounts of time performing all five roles as instructional leaders, applied social scientists, managers, effective communicators, and political leaders.

Ten Functions of a School District

As noted earlier in this chapter, rural superintendents have the same responsibilities as large urban school district superintendents. Every district requires the operation of the 10 functions of a school district to operate (Olivarez, 2014). When one function is not efficiently operating, a district, as a whole, including the students, suffer. Rural school superintendents are charged with not only overseeing each of the 10 functions but also doing the work of each of the functions first-hand. This experience differs greatly from urban school district superintendents who delegate the 10 functions to executive-level administrators.

It is common for rural school district superintendents to drive school busses, serve lunch to students, or mow their campuses' lawns because the hired person for that job might be unavailable due to illness. The rural school district superintendent wears many hats. When legislative reform assigns mandated policy, it becomes one responsibility to add to their already large plate. Policymakers lack consistent messaging to get information to rural school district superintendents. This lack of consistency in messaging causes rural school district superintendents to react quickly to mandates they learned about immediately before, or even slightly after, the implementation of the mandates or the report's due date. Like with the roles of a superintendent, time spent on fulfilling mandates and complying with regulations reduces time spent on the 10 important functions of running a school district.

Rural school district superintendents rely heavily on the service centers as a source of information, human capital, and financial relief. As Lamkin (2006) and Wylie and Clark (1991) found, rural school district superintendents are responsible for interpreting, implementing, and overseeing policy implementation with minimal human capital at the central level. Rural school district superintendents perceive policies as wordy and difficult to understand. Therefore, they turn to the service centers to provide interpretation, guidance, and support to meet legislative requirements. Rural school district superintendents are responsible for all 10 functions of the district; however, due to lack of human capital in rural school districts, rural school districts' superintendents must contract a variety of services with their service centers. These contracted services provide knowledgeable and quality support to rural school districts at minimal costs and are critical for the success of the rural school district.

Organizational Change

True educational reform will require effective organizational change at the school district level; however, before organizational change can happen at the school district level, legislative reform must be developed, implemented, and revisited through an effective organizational change model at the federal and state legislative level. Yukl's (2013) 14 guidelines to implementing major organizational change, outlined in Chapter 3, provided a framework for effective organizational change implementation. Rural superintendents may utilize these 14 guidelines to implement organizational change for the implementation of ESSA; however, they lack the information, resources, and support needed to guide their districts through organizational change as it relates to ESSA.

Yukl's (2013) first four guidelines were to create a sense of urgency, communicate a clear vision of change benefits, identify supporters and opponents, and build a broad coalition to

support the change and required the leaders of a change or reform to have a deep understanding of the change to be implemented and the benefits of implementing the change. As learned through this study, rural school district superintendents lack understanding about ESSA and its benefits. The information they reported having has been inconsistently shared or only partially shared with them; therefore, rural school district superintendents are not equipped to build urgency or communicate a clear vision of the benefits to be gained by ESSA.

Revised Theoretical Framework

An assumption made by the researcher when developing the synergistic organizational change framework for superintendents found in Chapter 3 was that the effective implementation of organization change was dependent on the leadership capacity of the rural school district superintendent. However, the findings raise the need for policymakers to utilize Yukl's (2013) 14 guidelines to implement organizational change as a framework for developing, writing, implementing, and monitoring outcomes when legislative reform occurs. If legislation is to reform education or cause change toward greater effectiveness, organizational change implementation is needed at the legislative level to ensure effective organizational change at the district and school levels. This finding required a revised synergistic organizational framework in which legislative reform, not compliance, is regarded as the organizational change. Due to the findings in this study, service centers have been added to the framework because of the support and training offered to rural school districts that need human capital, information, resources, and support when implementing change that could lead to actual reform. The complexity of a rural school district superintendent's roles and responsibilities is represented in Figure 7.

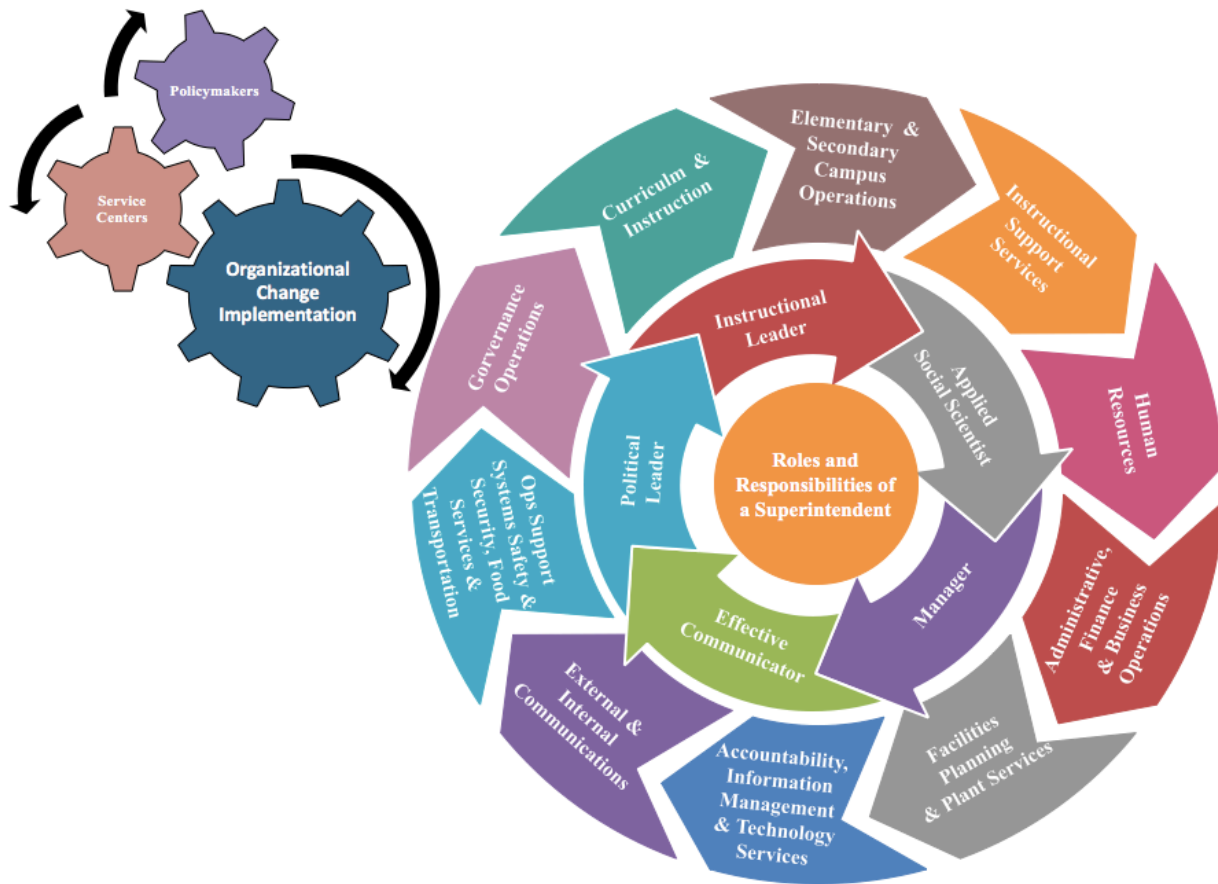


Figure 7. The emergent synergistic organizational change framework for legislative reform.

School district superintendents perform five roles while overseeing the 10 functions of the school district (Olivarez, 2013). All 10 functions of a school district operate simultaneously, and a school district superintendent serves multiple roles in a variety of functions at any given point in time (Bjork et al., 2014). Rural school district superintendents have minimal central staff; therefore, they participate in a hands-on role in fulfilling all 10 functions of a school district. Organizational change through legislative reform requires an additional layer of complexity to the role of school district superintendent (Bjork et al., 2014; James, Cambron-McCabe, Cunningham, & Koff, 2013; Olivarez, 2010). Policymakers must write legislative reform policy that is differentiated if the policy is to meet the unique needs of all school districts, and policymakers must develop effective plans of implementation. Rural school districts need

the service centers to play a vital role in the organizational change process, serving as a driving force for the policy and implementation and as a support to the rural school district superintendents.

Implications for Superintendents and Rural School Districts

Effective implementation of legislative reform from both the federal level and state level requires clear and consistent messaging from regulators to provide comprehensive and accessible information and to ensure superintendents understand policies, mandates, and accountability measures. Effective progress monitoring that evaluates the effectiveness of the mandates and the appropriateness of mandates for school districts of varying sizes and geographic makeup and makes adjustment when needed. Rural districts must be provided the resources needed to implement the change, such as those for financial and human capital. For rural school districts, service centers serve in the capacity of providing the human capital needed to implement the change and a primary source of information. Service centers also provide a financial break for their high-quality services at minimal cost.

Policymakers need to develop policy that is both differentiated and realistic for all school districts regardless of size or geography. Safeguards must be put in place to ensure that rural school districts are not at a disadvantage due to lack of resources and reform program applicability. To ensure policy applicability to rural school districts, policymakers need to spend time in the rural school districts to see the needs and potential unintended consequences to make informed decisions in policy adjustments or new policy. If policymakers want to move rural school superintendents from the Compliance Mentality to educational reform, policymakers, both federal and state, must design effective implementation plans to facilitate organizational

change at the district and school level. Yukl's (2013) 14 guidelines should serve as a starting point for the future legislative reform implementation planning processes.

Rural school districts' resources, including financial and human capital, must be evaluated for the ability to fulfill legislative mandates for accountability. Policymakers are causing hardship to rural school districts by stretching the already limited financial and human capital resources in rural school districts. Rural school district superintendents play five roles across 10 major functions of school district. When unfunded mandates trickle down the legislative pipeline, rural school districts are put at a disadvantage. This disadvantage, along with a lack of differentiated policy and lack of comprehensive information concerning new legislation, such as ESSA, causes the Compliance Mentality. To facilitate reform in rural school districts, policymakers need to understand the needs, limitations, advantages, and disadvantages rural school districts face, compared to large urban school districts. This knowledge and perspective can provide policymakers with the information needed to write policy that allows rural school districts to progress towards realizing the Fifth Freedom.

Recommendation for Future Study

As noted in the limitations section, this study involved collecting perceptions from 10 rural school district superintendents in one state. This study could be replicated to look at the perceptions of rural superintendents in varying states to develop a deeper understanding of reform versus compliance in rural school districts. Since ESSA has offered states some flexibility with school ratings, goals, and interventions, each state has developed a state-specific roll out plan for implementation in the schools. Therefore, a between-states study of legislative implementation among rural school districts could render important information concerning legislative reform and organizational change as it pertains to rural school districts.

Future studies could also examine the perceptions of rural school district stakeholders including teachers, parents, students, board members, and community members about how they perceive the implementation of new legislative reform such as ESSA. Each stakeholder could be interviewed utilizing an open-ended question guide with data analyzed to extrapolate emerging themes. These themes could be compared between the stakeholder groups to find overarching emerging themes. This study could provide a deeper understanding of effective implementation of legislation-driven change from multiple viewpoints.

Current research on rural school districts is limited. In the state of Texas, almost half of the school districts are rural school districts; therefore, the need for growing research in rural school district student achievement, teacher retention, and effective reform implementation exists. Future rural school district studies need to examine financial constraints and equitable funding allocations. Within the rural school district classification in Texas, there are two groups, small and large rural districts; future researchers could address the differences between small and large rural school districts.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of rural school district superintendents on the implications of new federal regulations, legislative reform. Current rural superintendents were interviewed about their perceptions at the forefront of new legislative reform, ESSA. The timing of this study provided a real-time look at rural school district superintendents' perspectives while they are experiencing the new legislative change. The purpose of the study was achieved, and all research questions were answered.

Legislative reform is either compliance driven or reform driven. At the time of this study, participants perceived, current legislative reform is compliance driven. Rural school

district superintendents are not equipped with the information or resources needed to effectively implement legislative reform. Currently, in the state of Texas, the resource that is most utilized by rural school districts are the service centers. Policymakers have an opportunity to start changing the face of rural school district legislative reform in the state of Texas by funding the service centers and work with the service centers to provide the needed consistent messaging across the state.

The goal of legislative reform is to ensure all students receive and equitable opportunity for successful student achievement. “The Fifth Freedom is freedom from ignorance. It means that every man, everywhere, should be free to develop his talents to their full potential-unhampered by arbitrary barriers of race, birth or income” (“Lyndon B. Johnson,” 1979). For rural school districts, location is an arbitrary barrier for educators and students to develop talents to their full potential.

Rural school districts might be marginalized because 20% of the national student population is rural. Thus, rural school districts constitute a minority of all school districts. Policy is written for large urban school districts; therefore, rural school districts may not have equitable opportunities to guide and influence legislative reform. Legislative reform was developed to ensure historically marginalized students received a quality and equitable education; policymakers must take a close look at the rural school districts and design policy to meet their needs. ESSA requires the department of education to conduct a study of rural school districts within the first 18 months the policy is in effect. This is an opportunity for policymakers to better understand the needs of rural school districts and to evaluate current legislative reform practices to ensure the students in rural school districts do not join the already too large group of marginalized students.

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