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Most public school district superintendents across this nation serve for fewer than five years. This relatively short tenure for a district chief can create uneven leadership and contribute to instability within the district. From an organizational standpoint, it is difficult to assess an environment, conceptualize a vision, implement strategies connected to that vision, and sustain those changes for a meaningful length of time in 5 years or less. While a superintendency of 5 years or longer does not ensure that the district chief will be innovative or transformational, longer tenures do create a wider window of opportunity if the leader seeks to make significant changes.

The existing research and literature suggest communication and relationship-building are essential components in determining a superintendent's effectiveness and longevity. But, much of the literature does not examine the specific leadership behaviors that long-serving superintendents use to communicate and build relationships. If novice superintendents become aware of specific communication and relationship-building behaviors that long-serving superintendents use, they may be able to replicate those behaviors and provide consistent leadership for a longer period of time.

In this study, I focus on the specific communication and relationship-building behaviors that 7 long-serving (5 years or more in one district) superintendents believe supported their ability to successfully meet district challenges and increased their longevity. I also examine contextual factors connected to the superintendency along with training and support. I conducted a qualitative study that consisted of 2 one and a half

hour interviews with each of the long-serving present or past superintendents. As a long-serving superintendent myself, my positionality seemed to create a level of trust with the participants that encouraged uninhibited responses and honest transparency.

The findings in my study, based upon the data generated from the 2 interviews with each of the 7 superintendents, resulted in 4 themes. These themes express the common perceptions of the participants. The themes that emerged from the data are the following:

- Long-serving superintendents recognize the importance of communication and relationship-building
- Long-serving superintendents understand and give prominent attention to school boards and community
- Long-serving superintendents attribute their longevity to specific communication and relationship-building behaviors
- Long-serving superintendents express concerns about superintendent training and support approaches and services

Based on my findings and the related literature, in this study I make 3 recommendations for superintendents who want to increase the likelihood of extended longevity. These 3 recommendations include 8 specific leadership behaviors that support communication and relationship-building. Each of the 8 behaviors in the recommendations were singled out by all of the long-serving superintendents as foundational in contributing to their longevity.

THE PERCEPTIONS OF LONG-SERVING SUPERINTENDENTS
REGARDING SPECIFIC BEHAVIORS THAT
CONTRIBUTED TO THEIR LONGEVITY

by

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

It is not the critic who counts, not the man who points out where the strong stumbled, or how the doer could have done better. The credit belongs to the man who is in the arena, his face marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly, who errs, who and comes up short again and again: There is no effort without error. But he who tries, who knows the great enthusiasms, the great devotions, who spends himself in a worthy cause, at the best knows the triumph of achievement, and at the worst, fails while daring. His place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know neither victory nor defeat. Theodore Roosevelt, Sorbonne, Paris, France, April 23, 1910 (B. M. Thomason, 2003, p. 6).

With legions of vocal critics, an unending list of responsibilities, and countless legal and cultural parameters, some might argue that school superintendents are gladiators in the arena of public education in this country. Theodore Roosevelt's gladiator imagery is reflected in comments from one of my study's long-serving superintendents. After this superintendent took steps to ensure the legal rights of LGBTQ students in his school district, the community's ministerial association began a public attack on his reputation and sought his removal from office. His response to their attacks put him in the "arena." He said,

They (the community's ministers) were preaching against me in the pulpit. We had a meeting in the Baptist church basement, 28 preachers. Everyone damn one of my board members showed up, and buddy, it was on. I said, "You are the most low-life sons of bitches I've ever been around all my life . . . The audacity of any one of you to preach from the pulpit about something you know nothing about. I'm going to promise you this in this House of God: you put your hand on my back to push me out of this position, you'll think you've touched the devil"

. . . As a superintendent you don't run to that fight, but you are in it . . . And damn, you don't have the option of leaving, you're going to fight.

He added that clashes with segments of the community are inevitable for district leaders and ultimately create factions of supporters and detractors. He said, "Ninety to ninety-five percent of the people (in the community) will tell you that I am the best thing since sliced bread and 5% will tell you I am Satan's spawn."

Such is the professional life of a school district superintendent. Superintendents sometimes have to fight *with* segments of their community as they fight *for* all of their community. The complexity of leading a school district that includes stakeholders with personal agendas, unimaginable legal parameters, and a budget that becomes more challenging each year, while at the same time ensuring equity, social justice, and academic excellence may cause a superintendent to feel like a modern-day gladiator or idealistic Don Quixote.

The superintendent of a school district serves as the chief executive officer for the school system. As such, the person holding the office is relied upon to lead the district's efforts in creating a vision, facilitating strategic planning, implementing initiatives, overseeing the evaluation and realignment of those initiatives, and engaging stakeholders. According to Waters and Marzano (2006), "Superintendents of high performing districts ensure that the necessary resources, including time, money, personnel, and materials are allocated to accomplish the district's goals" (p. 13). The superintendent must not only provide the organizational and logistical leadership to support instructional efforts in each school, but he or she is also expected to be the instructional leader in the district. Adding

to this complexity is the fact that the definition of instructional leadership, and the superintendent's role leading it, may vary from district to district and community to community. To be an effective school superintendent, one must have good communication skills, understand the political terrain of the district, build authentic relationships, and connect with the cultural norms of the district while engaging in sound decision-making each day (Sergiovanni, 2007; Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2003).

Public school systems in our country are charged with educating children in a constantly evolving culture. To keep pace with the ongoing cultural and legal changes and remain educationally relevant, districts must be open to systemic change and be able to sustain change initiatives. Beginning with *Brown v. Board of Education* and continuing through the launch of Sputnik, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, Title IX, No Child Left Behind, and the Every Student Succeeds Act, transformational efforts in public schools have been driven by both legal and cultural changes. District leaders must constantly assess current practices to determine what adjustments should be made and how to successfully implement those changes. The constant flux in public education is exemplified in Larry Cuban's (2013) chronicle of a California high school from the mid-1970s until 2011. His detailed report of one particular school's attempt to find the brass ring of perfection is exhausting. The changes he describes run the gamut from cooperative learning to technology-based instruction. Cuban's account of the ebb and flow of change in this school represents the norm rather than the exception for schools across this country. School systems experience almost continuous change as they attempt to keep up with societal evolution and educate students for a future that is hazy, at best.

The task of leading this systemic change falls on the shoulders of the school district's leader. To be successful, superintendents need sufficient time to design appropriate district initiatives, mobilize support for his or her agenda, make adjustments as implementation unfolds, and work to institutionalize new practices that have improved the quality of school (Yee & Cuban, 1996).

While longevity for district superintendents fluctuates annually, a 2014 study stated the average tenure for urban superintendents was 3.18 years (Council of Great City Schools, 2014). The national average for all superintendents is also difficult to determine with older research finding the tenures averaging between 4 and 5 years (Casserly, 2010; Kowalski, McCord, Petersen, Young, & Ellerson, 2011; Natkin, Cooper, Alborano, Padillo, & Ghosh, 2002; Pascopella, 2008). More recent studies suggest 3 years in one study and 3-4 years in a second study as the national average for all district leaders (Chingos, Whitehurst, & Lindquist, 2014; Grissom & Mitani, 2016). Regardless of the exact number, this swinging door of leadership may create a disjointed and uneven environment that does little to advance sustained progress in public schools.

According to Fullan (2005), it has been estimated that for a school district to experience foundational and sustained initiatives, a minimum of five years of consistency in leadership is needed. A tenure of less than five years does not preclude the possibility that a superintendent may initiate sustained foundational changes during that shorter time span. In fact, Waters and Marzano (2006) found that some positive effects of superintendent leadership may begin to show up as early as the second year of a district leader's tenure. But, if a superintendent prioritizes and focuses on initiating and

embedding new practices in a district, it stands to reason that the longer he or she has to analyze the environment, build support, initiate reform, and readjust initiatives, the more likely it is that significant and sustained change might occur (Giaquinto, 2011; Grissom & Anderson, 2012; Williams & Hatch, 2012; Yee & Cuban, 1996; Yock, 1990).

Superintendents whose tenures are at least 5 years have a larger window of time in which they can initiate and lead foundational change or embed in the district's culture successful strategies if they choose to do so.

There is some disagreement among scholars as to whether the longevity of a superintendent has a significant direct effect upon student learning within a school district. Some studies suggest that superintendents have little direct impact on student achievement (Chingos et al., 2014), while other studies suggest that superintendents do create an environment where change can occur and be maintained in the district (Hackett, 2015). Though a longer tenure does not guarantee that a superintendent will initiate transformational practices, a longer tenure by a district's chief opens wider the window of time that can be used to initiate significant changes. A wider window can also lead to more consistency and the opportunity to sustain changes if they are initiated. But, there are no assurances that longevity will produce innovative answers to challenging situations or create transformative leaders. Some think that an extremely long tenure (10+ years) might actually inhibit innovation and change if the longevity has created an environment of comfort and an acceptance of the status quo (Alsbury, 2008; Duke, 2010). One of the long-serving superintendents in my study concurred. He said,

One of the things that I realized after I left (a long-term superintendency) . . . I probably was not as sharp in years ten, eleven and twelve as I was earlier as I got to know the people and they became my people and I became comfortable with them. I was not quite as strategic and sharp . . . The other thing I realized was that . . . board members were starting to get on my nerves . . . even great board members.

Alsbury (2008) found in his study of small districts that some superintendents managed to maintain an extremely long tenure in their school districts by avoiding change and reform to curry peace, minimize conflict, and keep their list of enemies as short as possible. Balance and staying “sharp” are essential elements that district leaders must consciously embrace if they are to use extended longevity as an opportunity to effectively face challenges and initiate needed change efforts. Duke (2010) explained that “a key to long-term effectiveness is the ability to maintain a sense of balance with regard to such perennial issues as mission and vision, continuity and change, creativity and caution, and control and support” (p. 254). District leaders who experience a long-term superintendency have to find the balance between continuity and change, as well as creativity and caution, if they are to use the opportunity their extended tenure creates to forge a better environment for their students. Long-term superintendents must also remain motivated and combat complacency and stagnation that political self-preservation may cause.

Regardless of conflicting opinions on the direct or indirect influence superintendents have on student learning, consistent leadership within a district does at least create an opportunity to enhance an organization’s ability to provide an environment conducive to initiating and sustaining change. Giaquinto (2011), in a case study of

superintendents in New Jersey, agrees. He states, “Since organizational change takes time, there exists a need for superintendent longevity” (p. 17). In other words, school and district reform may be stunted by the constant disruptions in leadership. In many, but not all situations, for significant and sustained practices to become embedded in a district, consistent leadership is needed, for at least 5 years (Fullan, 2005). This premise is supported by Williams and Hatch (2012) when they state, “superintendents with short tenures cannot bring about sustainable and successful change to school districts” (p. 38).

If superintendents have the capacity to be authentic change agents within a district’s culture, then one must consider the turnover rate of superintendents as a significant variable in reaching and sustaining accomplishments. The 3- to 4-year nationwide average for superintendents’ tenures cited in the most recent studies is only one aspect of the turnover problem (Chingos et al., 2014; Grissom & Mitani, 2016). Additional urban data indicate 23% of all active city superintendents are in their first year, while 80% have been in office 5 years or less (Council of Great City Schools, Fall, 2014). A separate study of 215 superintendents found that within three years, 45% had left their district’s superintendency (Grissom & Anderson, 2012). Because of the short tenure of most superintendents and considering that district leaders do not generally initiate foundational changes in the first year or two, it is easy to understand why deep and sustained changes are not the norm in school districts across the nation. This national problem of superintendent turnover is also significant in North Carolina. According to Jack Hoke (personal communication, August 30, 2016), Executive Director of the North Carolina School Superintendents’ Association, in the period of just over 4 years, from

March 1, 2012, until August 30, 2016, 90 of the 115 school districts in North Carolina replaced their superintendents at least once. On average, superintendents' tenures are too short to provide consistent effective leadership, or to create a large enough window of time for those leaders to make foundational changes, if needed.

Statement of the Problem

Superintendent turnover may be a problem if we desire an increase in consistent leadership and opportunities for sustained change within school districts. Studies indicate that when districts experience multiple superintendent tenures of less than 5 years, it creates a high degree of flux and uncertainty within the schools and decreases the chances of meaningful and lasting initiatives in districts. While a tenure of 5 or more years does not ensure consistency in a superintendent's leadership or guarantee that sustained changes will be initiated by the district leader, extended longevity does give the district's chief a larger window of opportunity to evaluate, implement, assess, and sustain initiatives and practices in his or her district. The opportunity for both a consistent vision and the sustainability of change efforts is enhanced by superintendents whose tenures surpass the national average.

One way to begin to address the high turnover rate of superintendents is to understand some factors that influence superintendent longevity. To become a long-serving superintendent, one must communicate effectively and create significant relationships with both the community and the board of education (Bolman & Deal, 2010; Byrd, Drews, & Johnson, 2006; Kowalski et al., 2011). Relationship-enhancing communication rather than top-down directives is necessary to move educational

initiatives forward (Kowalski, 2008). Alsbury (2014) asserts that communication is significant for effective district leaders. He explains, “the primary tool and influencer . . . among and between students, teachers, administrators, board members, and the community is communication” (p. 55).

In this research study I examine the perceptions of past and present superintendents who have led or are currently leading the same district for a period of 5 years or more, and explore the communication and relationship building strategies that the district leaders believe contributed to their extended tenure and supported their efforts to address systemic challenges. Superintendents who have led a district for at least 5 years are more likely to have developed sufficient roots to maintain a consistency of vision and to initiate changes if they chose to lead change. The literature supports the premise that the first 4 years of a superintendent’s tenure are the most crucial for relationship building (Fullan, 2005; Grissom & Anderson, 2012; Yock, 1990). The purpose of this study is to understand which specific communication and relationship building behaviors long-term superintendents believe contributed to their longevity and supported their efforts in addressing systemic challenges and to explore why they chose those specific behaviors.

Research Questions

The main research question is: *What can we learn from long-serving superintendents about their communication and relationship building behaviors that may contribute to their longevity?*

The research sub-questions are:

1. What contextual factors shaped the communication and relationship building behaviors that long-serving superintendents report using?
2. How did superintendents use communication and relationship building behaviors to face district challenges?
3. What training and support do long-serving superintendents report as effective in increasing their leadership capacity?

Methodology

This study, which was designed to discover how individuals interpret their experiences and construct their worlds, is considered a basic qualitative study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The participants in the study were seven long-term present or past superintendents who were purposefully selected. In order to answer the research question and the three sub-questions in the study, I adopted the following guidelines for this study.

1. It focused on meaning, understanding, and process.
2. It used a purposeful sample.
3. Data collection was conducted via interviews, observations, or documents.
4. Data analysis was inductive and comparative.
5. Findings were richly descriptive and presented as themes/categories.

(Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 42)

This study used a basic qualitative methodology that consisted of interviewing, recording data, interpreting the data, identifying prominent themes in the interview data, coding and categorizing the information according to themes, reflecting upon the possible

meanings and consistencies, and writing the results (Creswell, 2003). The coded information from the interviews was grouped into categories and then themes. I then compared the data from my study with the existing research literature on superintendent leadership. In this study, I sought to understand from the recorded interviews the perspectives of seven long-serving superintendents regarding the effectiveness of specific communication and relationship-building strategies that they believe contributed to their longevity.

Organization of the Study

This study is comprised of six chapters. In Chapter I, I introduced the study by discussing the statement of the problem, the purpose for the study, the research question and sub-questions, organization of the study, and the significance of the study. The superintendency is a complex, volatile, impactful, and pressure-packed position that can produce far-reaching outcomes for both students and communities. The average tenures for district superintendents have hovered below 5 years for the past decade. These short tenures for district leaders are problematic if we believe that consistent leadership can improve an organization. While longevity does not ensure innovative leadership, it does create an opportunity for sustained change and consistent practice.

Chapter II is a review of related literature. In this chapter, I point out that the literature supports the idea that superintendents who use both effective relationship-building and communication behaviors are more likely to create a foundation of cooperation and trust that may increase their tenure. While the literature does not suggest that longevity will equate to innovation in leaders, it does emphasize that longer tenures

create a larger window for superintendents to make changes if they choose and sustain those changes over time. Building a district based on trusting relationships and utilizing clear communications that provide a tight culture while allowing individual freedoms will, according to researchers, provide the opportunity for superintendents to practice long-term and consistent leadership. Although researchers are consistent in recognizing that communication and relationship-building are important practices for superintendents, most of the related literature do not describe specific communication and relationship-building behaviors. I also present in the review of literature comments on the quality of practice in both pre-service and in-service training and support for superintendents.

In Chapter III, I discuss the technical aspects of the study that include the guiding questions, the key terms, my conceptual framework, and the study's methodology. In this chapter, I also present my positionality. I fit the description of a long-serving superintendent when using the same criteria that I used for selecting participants in this study. As such, I believe that my background experiences helped the participants become comfortable during the interview process. I also believe that the professional connection (due to our similar experiences) that I built with each participant during the interviews not only allowed me to build an authentic relationship with each, but also contributed to unfiltered and open responses that a "civilian" interviewer may not have elicited from the superintendents. My professional experiences also provided me with a more knowledgeable foundation on which to base my final conclusions.

In Chapter IV, I present descriptions of the participants and data from the interviews grouped according to one of four themes that emerged. In the section in which

I describe the superintendents, I provide a brief background into the thoughts, ideas, and perceptions that the participants have on both leadership and the superintendency. I intend for these descriptions to allow the reader to better conceptualize the individual participants as they view the data and consider my findings. As I coded the data, placed them in categories, and then grouped the data in themes, I found that those themes provided logical groupings for the findings that I present in Chapter IV. The four themes are listed below.

- Long-serving superintendents recognize the importance of communication and relationship-building.
- Long-serving superintendents understand and give prominent attention to school boards and their community.
- Long-serving superintendents attribute their longevity to various communication and relationship-building behaviors.
- Long-serving superintendents express concerns about superintendent training and support approaches and services.

In Chapter V, I analyze the data by using my findings to answer the main research question and the three sub-questions. In answering the questions, I connect my findings with the existing literature to create a wider theoretical basis from which to consider the data. Overlaying previous studies and relevant literature increases the significance of my findings and supports my analysis of the data.

In Chapter VI, I present three recommendations that include eight specific behaviors for superintendents that may increase their effectiveness and increase their

opportunity for extended longevity. The recommendations suggest specific behaviors that support contextual awareness, effective communication, and focused relationship-building. In the final chapter I also suggest an area for possible future research. There are implications in my findings and the literature that suggest that excessively long superintendent tenures (over 10 years) may have a negative effect on a district. Finally, I conclude Chapter VI and this study with my thoughts about the data and the long-term superintendents' views of the superintendency. The participants invested at least 3 hours in this study. During these 180 minutes, each superintendent openly discussed their thoughts about the specifics of district leadership, and also during these 180 minutes each superintendent, through their tone, body language, and passion conveyed their emotional feelings about district leadership. Their feelings are the essence of the final comments.

Summary

The success or failure of superintendents is a subject that is challenging to research since so many different factors are at play, and even the very notion of success is ambiguous (Hoyle, Bjork, Collier, & Glass, 2005). My study identifies factors that shaped the communication and relationship building practices that long-serving superintendents believe have contributed to their longevity. Additionally, this study details how superintendents leverage their longevity through communication and relationship-building strategies as they meet significant challenges and lead educational initiatives that address those challenges. Donaldson (2008) points out that leaders gain much of their knowledge about how to lead by reflecting on their own experiences and relying on the proven successful actions of peers. He wrote that a leader's own

experiences provide more insight into successful practices than knowledge gained from a book.

As mentioned previously, superintendents have myriad issues that must be addressed on a daily basis, and a significant amount of literature has been devoted to their various leadership responsibilities. The massive number of expectations placed on superintendents makes it important for practitioners to stay abreast with the latest research. This study joins the conversation about leadership actions that are important for district superintendents. It focuses on leadership behaviors recommended by authentic practitioners, long-serving superintendents.

Beginning superintendents can gain a wealth of knowledge and enhance their leadership toolbox by understanding the best practices of those who have weathered the storm of the early years of the superintendency and surpassed the norm in longevity. For the novice superintendent, gaining an understanding of effective strategic practices and how to develop those practices will increase his or her leadership capacity and enhance his or her skill set. In addition, by using these findings school board members may also be able to gain a clearer insight into what leadership actions meet the expectations of other boards of education. Grissom and Anderson (2012) noted, “Reasons for poor relationships between superintendents and their school boards include role confusion, tendencies among some board members to micromanage, and incompatible approaches to decision making” (p. 13). By broadening school board members’ perspectives, these individuals may be more inclined to understand the nuances of shared responsibility between themselves and the superintendent.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

I begin this review of literature with an introduction followed by a section on the length of service for superintendents in one school district and the reasons for their eventual separation from those districts. The literature suggests that there are multiple reasons that a superintendent either chooses to leave a district or is released by his or her school board. In the third section, I examine superintendent challenges and how the community views district leadership responsibilities and assesses superintendent performance. This section also describes effective district leadership and the importance of sustainability in moving districts forward. In the fourth section, I examine a sample of studies that link superintendent longevity to specific superintendent characteristics. These studies represent both qualitative and quantitative efforts to frame a causal link between superintendents' actions and the length of their tenures. The studies stretch from 1991 to 2016. Each study is unique, but all find a connection between specific superintendent characteristics and length of service.

In the fifth section, my focus is on the longevity and the impact of school district superintendents. As the chief executive officer of a school district, the superintendent is given the responsibility for a vast array of non-traditional education areas, not just reading, writing, and arithmetic. Olivarez (2013) points out ten critical functions of a

school district that must be managed and supported by the superintendent: governance operations, curriculum and instruction, campus operations, instructional support services, human resources, business and finance, facilities and plant services, accountability and technology, internal and external communications, and safety and security. This list seemingly grows longer and more complex each year. In addition to the managerial and instructional responsibilities, district leaders are also charged with providing appropriate legal, emotional, and psychological support for the children in their charge. As Kowalski (1995) noted, “superintendents are expected to have the expertise necessary to deal with social and institutional ills such as poverty, racism, gender discrimination, crime, and violence” (p. 11).

The leadership expected from the district chief is unique because it touches on academic, legal, logistical, and moral topics that are embedded in the fabric of public schools. In addition, the superintendent is held accountable for the decisions and actions of others. Responsibility for decisions that are made throughout the district by principals, teachers, and staff eventually fall back on the shoulders of the superintendent. Sergiovanni (2007) maintains that schools have special circumstances and need special leadership because of their unique political realities, cultural implications, and government requirements. There can be no denying that a school system leader has to wear many hats and be able to focus on a number of issues concurrently. The complexity and pressures of the superintendency may be contributing to the relatively short tenures for district leaders across the country. The literature underscores the need for understanding the turnover dilemma in school districts and justifies further examination

of the topic. Grissom and Anderson (2012) explained, “The importance of the district superintendent and the potential consequences of superintendent exits make understanding the factors that drive superintendent turnover a key topic for empirical research” (p. 3).

In section six, I describe the role of school boards and in section seven, I look at the role of the community as it relates to school system leaders. Both school boards and communities have the ability to create an environment that will either support or impede the district chief’s leadership. Support from one or both groups can assist the superintendent in moving initiatives forward. But, negativity from either of these stakeholder groups can create a hostile terrain and barriers that the superintendent must overcome to lead effectively. “A superintendent’s leadership role, professionally and politically, has always extended to the local community . . . public schools and the local communities they serve are inextricably intertwined” (Kowalski, 1995, p. 136). The governing school board is a functionary of the community. And, as such, most boards are sensitive to the needs, hopes and dreams of the community. “School boards invest the hopes of a community, in a superintendent, who is charged to sustain a successful system, improve a middling one, or resuscitate a collapsed district” (Cuban, 2010, pp. 140–141). With the stakes so high and the results so visible, it is logical that most communities might attempt to exert significant influence on their school board members when it comes to selecting, evaluating, retaining, or dismissing their superintendent. Although a district’s school board has the statutory responsibility and power to retain or dismiss a

superintendent, most boards reflect the wishes of the community when it comes to employment decisions related to the superintendent.

In section eight, I explore two specific superintendent behaviors that I found consistently mentioned in organizational and school administration literature. These characteristics are effective communication and relationship building. For example, in a mixed methods study of six school districts, Schwartz (2011) found that “Board members look for . . . relationship skills, communication, being a visionary, having honesty/trust/reliability, skills connecting to the community” (p. 84). While a number of other superintendent behaviors might also be considered, the two that rise to the surface as common themes throughout the literature are relationships and communication (Cuban, 2010; Kowalski, 2013; Polka & Litchka, 2008; Schwartz, 2011).

A number of the references that are cited in this literature review surpass the 10-year mark in age. While there are studies, books, and articles on superintendent longevity that have been published within the last 10 years, many of the relevant and impactful studies and writings cited in the literature review stretch beyond that time frame. It appears that superintendent longevity has not been scrutinized as much by scholars over the past 10 years, as it had been the previous 25 years. This fact supports the need for a newer study on this topic, especially since much has changed in the educational landscape over the past decade.

In the ninth section in this review of literature, I discuss the pre-service and in-service training and support for superintendents. I focus on the areas of university-based preparation programs and the effectiveness of mentorships as a means of support and

professional development. And, in the final section, I provide a platform to view the myriad challenges that superintendents face as they lead school districts.

Superintendent Turnover

There are various reasons that superintendents and school districts part ways. When one examines the specifics, all separation decisions are rooted in one of two sources.

Turnover can flow either from the school board's decision to terminate a superintendent or the superintendent's decision to exit, which are determined by the respective considerations of the relative costs and benefits of retaining the superintendent [by the school board] and of staying in the district [by the superintendent]. (Grissom & Anderson, 2012, p. 9)

In analyzing the two root sources of a superintendent and a school board's dissolution, one cannot overlook the rise in the average age of superintendents. According to Pascopella (2008), this age has increased to an all-time high of 55. Because of this, many "older superintendents are not staying in the position for longer than a few years, because they are nearing retirement" (p. 3). Grissom and Mitani (2016) asserted that more superintendents are using one district superintendency as a stepping stone to a more preferred and higher paying role in a different district. Grissom and Anderson (2012) suggest that

some turnover is driven by factors that inform school boards' decisions about future decisions (e.g. superintendent performance) while other turnover comes from superintendent's decisions to leave, which is informed by other factors (e.g. working conditions, external opportunities). Still other turnover is the result of retirement decisions, which appear to be primarily determined by age. (p. 39)

Outside of the factors of retirement and a stepping stone position, most school system and superintendent separations are a result of a deterioration of the relationship between both parties. Part of the reason that relationships erode between school boards and superintendents is confusion over roles. By law, the school board is the employer and supervisor of the superintendent. Yet, the two parties are expected to co-create a vision and a pathway for the school district to grow and flourish. While some members of local boards of education may have experience with one of the following—educational philosophy, personnel supervision, business budgeting and expenditures, transportation, food service, professional development, or strategic planning—very few board members possess an extensive background in all the areas. Board members are required by legal statute to supervise and evaluate the district’s superintendent. There is a wide gulf of knowledge between what the professional educator (superintendent) is expected to know and what the lay members of his or her board of education cannot be expected to know. This knowledge gap can erode the relationship between the two parties. Poor relationships between superintendents and their school boards are often marked by role confusion and tendencies among some board members to micromanage the superintendent (Grissom & Anderson, 2012). The role confusion for a board member can directly lead to attempts to micromanage the district or its personnel. Once this happens, it is almost inevitable that there will be differences between the board member and the superintendent. Most states, by statute, limit school board members to policymaking. Yet, there is a difficulty for some board members in differentiating between being a policymaker and a policy administrator (Kowalski, 2013).

Adding to the fragile relationships between school board members and superintendents are the individual personalities of those in the relationship. For board members who run for public office and get elected or are appointed, there is often a euphoric feeling of being chosen as a leader in the area of education. This feeling is affirmed and conferred upon these board members by a majority of voters in the community or elected officials. For the superintendent, he or she is hired from a pool of similar applicants to be the district's top professional educator. It is a natural tendency for those chosen as the superintendent to also feel a sense of extreme gratification (Townsend, Johnston, Cross, Lynch, Garcy, & Novotney, 2007). Taken within this context, it is easy to understand how board members and superintendents can have ego and territorial issues that may lead to irreparable damage to their relationship. Townsend et al. (2007) said,

Board members and superintendents tend to have strong egos and personalities . . . Relationships between the superintendent and board members may be so strained that the only decision the superintendent can make is to leave the district, and either go to another district, retire, or leave the profession altogether. (p. 91)

Superintendents are placed on islands of responsibility and are expected to discern the power structure within the school board as well as manage the school district. Additionally, the district leader must have the ability to both communicate with the community and understand their perspectives while leading change. As Giaquinto (2011) explains,

Change must match the values and priorities of the board and school community and be planned and implemented in a skillful manner . . . the superintendent needs

to be aware of the board's priorities, as well as effectively fulfilling the leadership, management and political roles. (p. 6)

The superintendent must juggle a number of balls in the air while implementing change and providing an acceptable level of comfort for school board members. When a superintendent chooses to become a change agent within a district, he or she must realize that it is likely to result in some degree of negativity and political turmoil. Many, if not most members of a community will not embrace foundational change. The status quo brings comfort and a sense of stability. Litchka et al. (2014) point out,

The innovator has enemies in all those who are doing well under the old order, and only lukewarm defenders in all those who would do well under the new order. Thus, it happens that whenever his enemies have the opportunity to attack . . . they do so with zeal . . . and the others only defend . . . tepidly. (p. 26)

When those who defend the superintendent do it with less fervor than those who attack the district leader, it can tip the scales of public support against the innovative superintendent. Superintendents who do not understand political leadership theory can become confused, disillusioned, and disheartened.

It is not only a superintendent's ability to communicate with his or her school board that is essential for creating a long tenure. Cuban (1988) points out that superintendents must also be able to effectively communicate with the citizens in the community. Board members are likely to feel a sense of responsibility toward those whom they represent. But, like many board members, most citizens have little knowledge of educational philosophy, personnel issues, legal statutes, or strategic planning methods. If the superintendent cannot interpret the community's level of knowledge and transmit

information in an effective way, a wave of misunderstanding will develop from the community in opposition to the superintendent and the ideas of change. Without an understanding of the need to change, ideas that disrupt the status quo will be viewed by the public negatively. The public's negative reaction can reach board members and either spark disharmony or fuel existing disharmony between the superintendent and the board.

Cuban (1988) describes an essential piece of district leadership when he says that at the heart of the relationship among a school board, the community, and the superintendent is the need to educate a community that has little if any knowledge about the depth of work involved in school business or the legal parameters that dictate leadership decisions. The superintendent must not only lead change, but must also lead in dissemination of effective and concise communication.

The present educational world is driven by high stakes tests and school district accountability. State departments of education annually create lists of low-performing schools, at-risk schools, and failing schools. These lists label and condemn schools, staffs, children, and in a global sense, communities. In this world of educational sorting and ranking, one can only imagine the pressures that school board members experience as they search for a leader to take the district's reigns and cure-all that ails public education in their community (Kowalski, 2013; Litchka et al., 2014).

The pressures that can lead to an end in a superintendent's tenure come from various situations and individuals. These pressures include a community's comfort with the status quo, a community that does not understand change, role confusion for board members, ego clashes, and poor communication (Gianquinto, 2011; Grissom &

Anderson, 2012; Litchka et al., 2014). These variables are inherent in all superintendencies. Without proper attention, one of these or a combination of several may bring a premature end to a superintendent's tenure.

Superintendent Challenges

All superintendents face significant challenges regardless of whether they oversee a district that is large or small, rural or urban, diverse or homogeneous. In school leadership literature the terms “challenges” and “problems” are sometimes used interchangeably, as are the terms “reform” and “effective change” (Cuban & Usdan, 2003; Duke, 2010; Hess, 1999). While there is no definitive correct or incorrect perspective on which terms should be used when discussing school leadership, this study considers Duke's descriptions as the benchmark for understanding these crucial concepts. Duke notes, “the term *challenge* is preferred over *problem* because of the belief that only challenges that are inadequately addressed become problems. Challenges are a normal by-product of complex organizations” (p. xix). Duke undergirds his perspectives of educational challenges and changes with the descriptions of a challenge being a situation or issue that poses a potential threat to the ability of the school district to provide effective teaching and learning in a safe, equitable, and student-centered environment. He describes the concept of effective change as the ability to understand, adapt, and implement new practices to areas of the external or internal environment that run counter to the mission, vision, and goals of the school district. In addition, the new practice must be sustained and change the direction or outcome of the items or practices that are running counter to the district's mission (Duke, 2010).

For some people, educational change is not considered significant unless it can be described as transformational instead of transactional. These terms are significant for understanding change. Sergiovanni (2007) defines these two change strategies as being on opposing ends of the motivational scale, with transformational change being rooted in a moral obligation to “do the right thing” and transactional change being based upon “what gets rewarded gets done.” But, the author contends that these two types of change are not mutually exclusive to one another. He believes that in the middle of the spectrum of this change theory lies a hybrid that relies on intrinsic gain and is built on “what is rewarding gets done” (pp. 61–70).

Another criterion that is sometimes considered when determining the significance of an educational change in a school district is whether the adjustment is global in nature or a subsystem reform. Cohen and Mehta (2017) argue that subsystem or niche reforms often succeed when global efforts do not because “they are founded and created in bounded educational and political territories in which they could survive” (p. 4). They contend that while many niche reforms are small, others are larger and become adopted by others. “A final tension resonates in the idea that the small-scale reforms have demonstrated success, but the policy makers and external funders still prize large-scale reforms” (Peck, 2017, p. 11).

In considering the philosophical tensions that represent both the transactional vs. transformational and global vs. niche, this study did not attempt to distinguish the motivational aspects or whether the changes can be mobilized or replicated on a grand scale. Instead, the changes that each superintendent chose to discuss in the interviews are

considered significant in his or her unique environment and in his or her contextual and situational perspective.

When considering whether a superintendent's actions are effective or not, Duke (2001) suggests that "the difference between more successful and less successful school systems often boils down to the ability of leaders to anticipate and address the unending challenges" (p. xi). Superintendents who have the ability to be situationally aware and lead proactively to address situations when problems are still minor and have not yet become monumental, should be considered more adept in their leadership. But, this leadership ability sometimes runs counter to the standard that a community may set for considering whether a superintendent is effective or not. Hess (1999) contends that many communities have a love affair with the idea that effective superintendents should wear the cape of a superman or superwoman and should always be in the throes of saving the day or forging a new path in the educational wilderness. Hess believes this is an unrealistic and an oversimplified concept as it can create friction and misunderstanding for some stakeholders in school districts.

A more reasonable approach for describing effective leadership when addressing challenges seems to be the inclusion of a wide array of stakeholders in both the planning and the implementation of change. "The key to effectively leading districts toward educational improvement is to first construct a 'capacity for change' in the district" (Hess, 1999, p. 14). This capacity for change must be inclusive of the players and respectful of their roles in both the organization and as educators. Peck (2017) asserts that school reforms must include both top-down and grassroots efforts and not exclude either

group. This idea of inclusiveness is at the heart of building the capacity for change that Hess mentioned.

The final piece when judging the effectiveness of district change lies with the sustainability and inclusion of the change in the authentic culture of the district. “School improvement initiatives become real only when they become institutionalized as part of the everyday life of the school” (Sergiovanni, 2007, p. 67). When a change has significance and meaning for those in the district and they understand and agree with its purpose, the initiative has a greater chance of becoming infused in the culture of the district. But the stakeholders and the actors must embrace the change with a passion. Hess (1999) contends that “reforms will sometimes take hold when they happen to match the inclinations, strengths, and preference of the people in the classroom” (p. 178). Educational changes, regardless of how positive they may be, will flounder without the support and leadership of teachers and principals who do the actual work of organizing and delivering instruction and improving students’ academic achievement.

Cuban and Usdan (2003) believe that superintendents are expected to restore hope and confidence in schools and convince parents and the business community that the schools in their district can be world class. To fulfill these expectations, superintendents must be aware of their environment, that includes all stakeholders, and be able to identify potential challenges to the vision and mission of the district. Duke (2010) explained that “effective district leadership calls for a balance of attention to mission and vision. Leaders need to make certain that they do whatever is necessary to accomplish the district mission” (p. 250).

Characteristics of Long-Serving Superintendents

In this literature review, the selected research studies connect superintendent longevity with specific superintendent or district attributes. Each of the studies looks at the length of superintendent tenure through a different lens. Servant leadership, rural school districts, political climate, job satisfaction, superintendent and board role confusion, and age are some of the factors addressed in the studies. While each study reflects the overarching topic, each also uses a unique lens to not only draw summary conclusions, but also to formulate guiding questions. The studies with narrower perspectives use lenses that vary from servant leadership (Williams & Hatch, 2012) to district demographics (Chance, Butler, Ligon, & Cole, 1992; Wilson, 2010). Some of the studies reverse the lens and scrutinize the reasons that cause superintendent turnover (Byrd et al., 2006; Grissom & Anderson, 2012). Others take a more holistic approach and look at superintendent attributes that contribute to retention and to deficits that accelerate superintendent and district separation (Giaquinto, 2011; Mountford, 2004; Petersen & Short, 2001; Russell, 2014; Shand, 2010). Still others (Alsbury, 2003) suggest that community satisfaction and engagement are the driving factors that affect board and superintendent relationships and ultimately superintendent longevity.

The selection of participants varies among the sample of studies. The very nature of quantitative studies calls for a larger pool of subjects than does qualitative studies. The quantitative selection process casts a larger net for participants, but may have results that are biased due to the voluntary opt-out option. In the following quantitative studies large numbers of subjects participated, but a larger number of those invited did not participate.

In Williams and Hatch's (2012) study, 32 superintendents participated. The study by Byrd et al. (2006) includes 142 superintendent surveys. In Grissom and Anderson's (2012) study, responses were given voluntarily by 159 superintendents to the research survey. While these numbers make for a wide pool of subjects, one cannot overlook the fact that the sum of superintendents not responding to the requests of the researchers in all three studies was 625. The large number of superintendents not responding might indicate that there is a reason that they did not participate other than a lack of interest. If a conscious decision was made not to participate, the cause might be crucial information that is related to the study but excluded from the survey results. In Petersen and Short's (2001) mixed methods study, the quantitative phase included randomly selecting 250 school districts with just over 50% or 131 choosing to participate in the study. Again, the reasons behind why the 119 districts chose not to participate may be important information that is excluded from the study.

In these four studies, three discuss both relationships and communication as part of their conclusions. Byrd et al. (2006) find, "improved relationships between the school board president and the superintendent is vital in determining superintendent tenure" (p. 17). The authors emphasize that good relationships between the superintendent and the school board, particularly the chair, are vitally important. This summary conclusion is echoed by Williams and Hatch (2012) who point to how important trust and relationships are to superintendent success. Petersen and Short's (2001) conclusions also cite communication and relationship building between the superintendent and the board, particularly the board chair, as key factors in determining both the longevity and the

effectiveness of the superintendent. In the study by Grissom and Anderson (2012) they state that there are multiple reasons for superintendent turnover including working conditions, superintendent performance, and external opportunities. This study focuses more on external factors that may contribute to superintendent turnover rather than the behavior and leadership strategies of the superintendent. The authors do mention relationships as one factor that can strengthen a superintendent's leadership style.

The sample of qualitative studies covers almost 25 years. Even though the studies are separated by a significant number of years and take place in different states, there is a thread of commonality among all of them in the selection of participants. The oldest looks at long-term superintendents in rural Oklahoma (Chance et al., 1992) and the most recent study's (Russell, 2014) participants are superintendents from Texas. The other studies are from 2010 and 2011 and were done in Indiana, New Jersey, and Missouri (Giaquinto, 2011; Shand, 2010; Wilson, 2010). Four of the studies use six long-serving superintendents and one (Chance et al., 1992) includes 24 participants. The criteria for long-serving superintendents vary according to each study. One uses a minimum of 12 years of superintendent experience serving in one district as a criterion (Chance et al., 1992), one (Shand, 2010) considers 10 years of superintendent experience as long-serving, two use 6 years (Gianquinto, 2011; Russell, 2014), and one (Wilson, 2010) uses superintendents with 3-6 years of experience in a single district as the standard.

I find the omission of race and gender problematic in all the studies. A very brief reference is made about the purposeful exclusion of that information in one of the studies (Russell, 2014). The reasoning given by the author is that in a sample group so small,

identifying additional descriptive demographics would reveal the participants. I believe that it is necessary to include racial and gender information to ensure a diverse sample of participants for the researcher to authentically generalize about his or her findings. This study uses a purposeful random sampling that ensured a more diverse group of participants.

Of the qualitative studies, one (Russell, 2014) identifies eight crucial superintendent characteristics: communication, relationship building, visibility, common ground, strategic planning, student focus, courage, and personal energy. In that study, four of the six participants indicate that communication and relationship building with the board are the most important. Wilson's (2010) literature review identifies vision, communication, visibility, inspiring followers, collaboration, professional growth, political awareness, and building relationships as the attributes that successful superintendents should display. Three of the six participants in the study identify communication as the most important of the eight characteristics.

The oldest and the largest study (Chance et al., 1992) includes 24 participants and the consensus of the individuals who participated includes "open communication" with the board and community as an essential factor in extending the tenure for superintendents. Even though this study utilizes open-ended questions during the interview process, a majority of participants identify the same crucial characteristic, communication, as essential. Shand's (2010) participants also recognize communication and developing relationships as important characteristics that help superintendents work

longer in one district. This study focuses on variables in the community that drive superintendent behaviors that are essential for district leaders to be successful.

Mountford's (2004) study specifically examines the relationship between superintendents and school board members as it relates to each member's perception of power and their motivation for serving. She cites the relationship between the board chair and superintendent as a pivotal factor in determining the effectiveness of the superintendent. The study's conclusion suggests that when a superintendent understands the board's conception of power and each member's motivation for serving, he or she can build a stronger relationship with the board. This understanding may allow the superintendent to lead more effectively and possibly over a longer period of time (Mountford, 2004).

Giaquinto's (2011) study focuses on the political environment in a district. One important factor the author cites in her study that may contribute to superintendent longevity is the need for both the school board and the superintendent applicant to assess each other prior to employment. She cites this pre-employment assessment as foundational in creating an environment where the superintendent and board can build a productive professional relationship (Giaquinto, 2011).

While each of the sample studies present their summary findings through a unique lens, there are two common threads that are included in all of them. Over half of the studies identify both relationship building and effective communication as being essential behaviors for long-serving superintendents (Byrd et al., 2006; Petersen & Short, 2001; Russell, 2014; Shand, 2010; Williams & Hatch, 2012; Wilson, 2010). Of the others, each

highlight either relationship building or effective communication as an essential attribute for successful district leaders (Alsbury, 2003; Chance et al., 1992; Giaquinto, 2011; Grissom & Anderson, 2012; Mountford, 2004).

The studies are unique and use different methodology. Each attempts to connect through causal relationships superintendent behaviors and their longevity. The studies come close to consensus, however, in recognizing that both communications and relationships are keys to length of service for superintendents.

Superintendent Longevity and Its Impact

The longevity of school superintendents has significantly declined over the past 50 years. “During the past several decades the demand for school accountability has increased . . . since the 1950s there has been a marked decline in the average longevity of superintendents” (Giaquinto, 2011, p. ii). This downward slide in length of service for district chiefs has not gone unnoticed. According to Metzger (1997), “The superintendency is the least stable and secure position in education” (p. 4). The data reflect that the average decrease in superintendent longevity is a universal trend that is not dependent upon the individual demographics of the district or the superintendent. The reduction in superintendents’ longevity has increased across the country in both rural and urban districts and among superintendents without regard to race or gender. The tenure of superintendents has dropped from an average of 20-plus years 3 decades ago, to a current average between 3 and 4 years depending upon which study is cited (Council of Great City Schools, 2014; Giaquinto, 2011; Grissom & Mitani, 2016).

District superintendent turnover can be brought on by either a school board's determination to terminate or the superintendent's decision to exit the school system. Turnover is driven by factors related to decisions by school boards to make a change or superintendents' decisions to leave due to working conditions, external opportunities, or retirement (Grissom & Anderson, 2012). An increase in the average age of superintendents has also contributed to a jump in turnover rates for district chiefs. Commonly, older superintendents are not staying in the position for longer than a few years. The fact that a number of superintendents are entering their first superintendency at an advanced age and soon retire may help explain why the research on superintendent longevity has decreased in recent years (Glass, Bjork, & Brunner, 2000; Pascopella, 2008).

It only makes sense that the longer the tenure of the person charged with providing and implementing the school system's vision, the more likely the district is to sustain the changes and initiatives. Studies have borne out the fact that instability in district leadership negatively affects school district performance. This point is supported by Grissom and Anderson (2012) when they claim that "research concluding that successful systemic reforms take five or more years of a superintendent's focus [and] suggests that negative impacts of turnover could be felt even longer" than 5 years (p. 3). In light of the fact that the nationwide average for superintendents' tenures is 3-4 years and the fact that most superintendents do not enact sweeping changes their first year, it is easy to understand the disruptive cyclical nature of starting and stopping district initiatives. While Waters and Marzano (2006) have found that some superintendents

initiate foundational and sustained reform in their first 3 years, 36 months may not be long enough for many district leaders to assess the system's terrain, implement a strategic plan, analyze the results, and refocus the plan using data from the initial implementation. Widespread and sustained district reform may be constrained by a constant disruption in leadership, vision, and organizational continuity.

Like many areas in our culture that depend on healthy collaborative relationships, there is not a formula for ensuring the longevity of a district chief. Yock (1990), in an older study that elicited responses from over 2,000 school board members, found that the crucial period for a superintendent occurs during the first 4 years. In the random survey he concluded from the results that if a superintendent made it beyond year five, he or she was likely to retain the position indefinitely.

There is some contradiction in the literature on whether the longevity of a superintendent has a significant effect on student learning and the quality of a school system. Chingos et al. (2014) issued a study for the Brookings Institute that contended that superintendent turnover has little or no meaningful impact on student achievement. Duke (2010) suggests that a long tenure might inhibit innovation and change if the longevity has created an environment of comfort and the superintendent advocates for the status quo. Alsbury (2008) agrees with Duke's assessment in findings from his study on small, rural districts. Alsbury found that the lack of superintendent turnover in smaller districts was even linked to declining test scores. "Superintendents managing to maintain long tenure in [these] school districts frequently accomplished longevity by avoiding

change and reform in an effort to curry peace, diminish conflict and keep their list of enemies as short as possible” (Alsbury, 2008, p. 253).

Other studies maintain that the length of service by a superintendent contributes to long-term and sustained improvements and change within school districts. Waters and Marzano (2006) reviewed and analyzed 27 research studies conducted from 1970 through 2005 that included data from 2,817 school districts. They concluded from their meta-analysis of district leadership on student achievement that

the longevity of a superintendent has a positive effect on the average academic achievement of students in the district. The positive correlation between the length of superintendent service and student achievement affirms the value of leadership stability and for a superintendent remaining in a district. (p. 19)

This strong belief in the positive impact of stability in school district leadership was affirmed 10 years earlier when Yee and Cuban (1996) made the same argument, stating “Superintendents need sufficient time to design the district changes, mobilize support for a reformist agenda, make adoptions as implementations unfolds, and work to institutionalize those innovations that have improved the quality of school” (p. 616). Longer tenures by superintendents expand the window of opportunity, from a timeline perspective, if the district leader is inclined to follow a path of innovation and change.

Superintendent-School Board Relations

School boards and school district superintendents have a very unique and complex employee-employer relationship. The board is the superintendent’s statutory employer and supervisor, while at the same time looking to the superintendent for direction and leadership. The dynamics of multiple influences on both boards of

education and superintendents create a fragile and oftentimes brief tenure for district leaders. This complex environment of confusing responsibilities requires superintendents to navigate in a virtual minefield of potential career-ending decisions. There is no doubt that the long list of job responsibilities for a school district chief includes at a minimum, “three roles instructional, managerial, and political at different times and in varying combinations there are circumstances during which one role must become predominant” (Giaquinto, 2011, p. 25). Superintendents who do not have the acumen to discern the influences on immediate problems and the vision to anticipate future problems will not grasp both the subtleties and the magnitude of particular decisions or understand which of the three roles needs to be called upon to address a specific problem.

There have been a number of studies that focus primarily on superintendent and school board relationships (Hess & Meeks, 2010; Mountford, 2008; Petersen & Fusarelli, 2008; Walser, 2009) and several identify a positive relationship between the district leader and the board as the most important factor for the district’s success (Mountford, 2008; Petersen & Fusarelli, 2008; Walser, 2009). In addition, studies also identify effective communication as vital to a positive superintendent and board relationship (Smoley, 1999; Walser, 2009).

A board-superintendent relationship is greatly affected by the uniqueness of a school board hiring its own leader. The situation can create misunderstanding, confusion, and sometimes a blurring of the roles and responsibilities for both sides. Without adequate parameters that all parties understand, the employer-employee dynamic for boards and superintendents may become a tug-of-war with no clear understanding of

responsibilities by either side. As Grissom and Anderson (2012) point out in their mixed methods study of 222 school boards and superintendents in California, poor relationships, role confusion, and micromanagement create daunting barriers for boards and superintendents to overcome. Muddying the waters further is the fact that even though the board is the employer by legal statute, both parties usually work together to compose and approve the policies that direct the actions within the school district. There is a difficulty for some board members in differentiating between being a policymaker and policy administrator (Kowalski, 2013).

A significant variable enters the superintendent-school board dynamic when a board of education seeks a significant overhaul in the district and hires an outside change-agent superintendent to come into the district. Sometimes school boards move in this direction without a complete understanding of how critical change affects parents and other stakeholders. If board members are unprepared for the fallout from a massive systemic change implemented by a new superintendent, it is difficult for those board members to understand why their constituents are unhappy. In school districts where a change-agent superintendent is employed, enemies are quickly formed among the ranks of those who are doing well in the old system. Those who will benefit from the newly initiated changes only give lukewarm support. But, those who have the most to lose with the change zealously attack the innovative superintendent (Litchka et al., 2014). This uneven balance of a ferocious attack and timid defense creates the perception that little or no authentic support for the critical changes or the superintendent exist. Board members often interpret the inconsistent and sometimes unsupportive responses from the

community as a signal that the superintendent has made bad choices and that his or her leadership is flawed (Fussarelli, 2006; Litchka et al., 2014; Townsend et al., 2007).

Superintendents who are thrust into the expectation of being district innovators have this weight layered on top of the normal stresses of coming into a new district and learning its culture. Fusarelli's (2006) perception underscores this idea. He wrote,

When school boards seek out nontraditional superintendents, it is often an attempt to find a heroic leader . . . it is not the fact that they are educational outsiders that make the difference, but . . . they have the interpersonal qualities, political acumen, and leadership skills required to lead a school district and work with a school board. (p. 46)

While external variables affect board-superintendent relations, the individual characteristics of superintendents play a major part in determining the success or failure of that individual. These characteristics include, but are not limited to, the superintendent's ability to build authentic relationships and to communicate effectively. These attributes are essential if a superintendent is to successfully maintain a collaborative relationship with his or her board of education and have the opportunity to make critical organizational and academic changes. Boards are almost always comprised of lay persons with very little if any prior knowledge or experience of the school district they were elected to govern (Eadie, 2005). Communicating effectively with those who are working to learn practices, protocols, and legal parameters of public schooling as they govern is paramount if the superintendent is to be successful. Clear communication between the board and the superintendent can lead to a substantive relationship that will enhance collaboration and empower all parties. Petersen and Short (2001) explain, "The

relationship of the board and superintendent is a critical component in the effective operation of the school . . . If the relationship of the superintendent and the board deteriorates, it will affect the business of the board and the district” (p. 559).

Superintendent-Community Relations

Identifying the appropriate political, managerial, or instructional lens through which to view a particular issue is of vital importance to superintendents. But, because public school systems are functionaries of a larger community, superintendents must also have the ability to communicate effectively and build authentic relationships with parents and the community at large. If a district leader does not possess the skills to both interpret and transmit information that heretofore was foreign to community members, it is likely that misunderstandings will develop, creating opposition to the superintendent. This public pushback will eventually reach board members and create disharmony between the board and the superintendent. Cuban (1988) wrote,

At the very core of the relationship between an elected lay school board, its superintendent, and the tax-paying community is the tacit understanding that effort must be expended in creating public favor for the community’s schools . . . if children must be schooled, the community must be educated. (p. 126)

Cuban emphasizes the need for superintendents to not only lead change, but also lead in effective and concise communication.

Successful dissemination of information into the community requires the superintendent to understand the power structure of the locale in which the school district is located. Each community, just like each school district, is unique. While there are relative degrees and some overlap in the four types of community power structures, most

communities have characteristics of one, or a combination of the following: elite-dominated, factional, pluralistic, or inert (Hoyle et al., 2005). Descriptions of these four power structures stretch from a small group of elitists wielding power in an elite-dominated structure to a sluggish community satisfied with the status quo as described by the inert structure. Regardless of whether a community's power is based on a few elite citizens or can be described as laissez-faire or somewhere in between, the superintendent must read the signs of power and deliver effective, informative, and convincing communication to the citizenry. If he or she does not, there will be a deterioration of board-superintendent relations that can be traced back to the superintendent's misunderstanding of the community. Giaquinto (2011) noted, "Even when superintendents and their boards seemingly have positive working relationships, if vocal community members become displeased and board members feel the pressure, the superintendent's status with the board can rapidly deteriorate" (p. 18). Board members act as a magnet in the community for complaints and criticisms of the district and the superintendent. If the complaints begin to overwhelm a board member, he or she may act on them, regardless of their validity.

Alsbury (2003), in a mixed methods study of 176 school districts in a Northwest state, suggests that three theories—continuous participation, decision-output, and dissatisfaction—all are directly connected to the communities where districts are located and each can affect the relationship between a board and its superintendent. The continuous participation theory describes a community that has no real competition for school board seats and those who step forward are generally recruited by special interests.

The decision output theory describes the connection communities have to school districts through the demands and resources of the districts and the subsequent programs and policies the district implements. The dissatisfaction theory describes cycles of inactivity and disconnection by the community in school affairs, followed by dissatisfaction with a number of changes that creates a tipping point of change that results in massive leadership turnover and policy change (Alsbury, 2003). While the three theories and four power structures are not formally linked, one can interpret a possible alignment between continuous participation theory and an elitist power structure. The same can be said about the dissatisfaction theory and an inert power structure.

Regardless of the specific power structure or political participation model of a school district, superintendents must have an awareness of their community and communicate to the specific audience in that locale. If a district's communications are effective and informative, the district leader will take away one potential factor that can cripple a superintendent-board relationship—an unhappy community (Alsbury, 2014; Bjork & Lindle, 2001; Pascopella, 2008).

Insightful superintendents seek out the influencers or power bases in communities and enlist their support by building authentic relationships with them. By utilizing power bases, they demonstrate to those individuals that they are important, valued, and have the ability to make a significant difference. Black and English (2001) said,

Power bases in communities can be used to improve the system and, in fact, *want* to be used. No one becomes powerful and influential for the sake of having power and influence. Until that power and influence are actually *used* for something, they may as well not even exist. (p. 61)

There are additional issues that contribute to the quality of a district leader's relationship with the board and community. Fusarelli (2006) stated,

Several distinct issues have served as lightning rods for school-community conflict including an increasingly tough fiscal situation; proposed budget cuts, declining test scores, public mistrust, weak rapport between parents, district officials, and board members; high administrative turnover; and unpopular budget proposals. (p. 46)

With the number of hot button issues that are cited above and myriad others that are district-specific, it is no wonder superintendent turnover has increased dramatically over the past 60 years. The superintendency requires individuals to engage in a balancing act with scores of items being addressed daily. One misstep and the superintendent becomes the target of an unhappy school board. For some, it may seem that a superintendent's journey to the end of his or her tenure in a district begins on the day he or she is hired.

Superintendent Behaviors that May Contribute to Longevity

Several studies identify superintendent characteristics that researchers positively correlate with longevity for superintendents. These include the following: communication, relationship building, visibility, seeking common ground, strategically planning, stakeholder involvement courage and perseverance, energy, inspiring followers, vision, moral leadership, and professional growth (Byrd et al., 2006; Russell, 2014; Shand, 2010; Wilson, 2010). Two behaviors, communication and relationship building, are identified as key actions that support superintendent longevity in almost all the selected studies. Communicating effectively is defined in the literature as “establishing

procedures and opportunities for systemic, equitable, and honest communication with school board, district personnel, community members, and community organizations” (Russell, 2014, p. 118). Excellent relationship-building skills are defined as “learning how to manage relations with both allies and opponents . . . express confidence in others, encourage others, inspire others, and make emotional connections through face-to-face interaction” (Wilson, 2010, p. 30). My study is based upon a conceptual framework that aligns with this research—effective communication practices and authentic relationships with stakeholders may contribute to superintendent longevity.

Throughout the literature, superintendents and researchers consistently describe the importance of superintendents using clear communication with board members and the community. Most superintendents participating in longevity research studies identify effective communication as a factor in increasing longevity. In a study of 24 superintendents in Oklahoma, “Almost all respondents mentioned open communication as the key to their longevity” and recommended for success that a “new superintendent needed to strive to communicate with the board, the staff and the community” (Chance et al., 1992, p. 471). These strong assertions come from practitioners whose longevity surpasses the national average. Schwartz’s (2011) findings from a study of superintendents, board chairs, other board members, and principals found the majority agree that it is of critical importance that superintendents embody trust and utilize positive relationship-building experiences.

Bolman and Deal’s (2013) seminal work on organizations and leadership presents various theories on effective leadership, but the theme of clear and consistent

communication is threaded throughout their work on “reframing organizations.” The authors connect the necessity for clear communication to interpersonal and group dynamics as well as power, conflict, and politics in an organization. School districts are complex organizations with multiple layers of bureaucracy. In such an environment when dealing with powerful stakeholders that are, for the most part, uninformed regarding the academic, legal, financial, and human relations aspects of a school district, it is incumbent upon the superintendent to practice transparency through communication. The two most powerful stakeholders in a school district are the board of education and the community. If those stakeholders are expected to sign on to the superintendent’s vision and support his or her vision with resources, they must have a clear and deep understanding of the district, its needs, and its potential. Only the superintendent can reasonably be expected to sift through information and determine what is vital for the community and board to know, translate the educational jargon, and transfer the necessary information to them. Honest communication to these stakeholders is both for informational purposes and to win their support for initiatives and decisions. Cuban (2010) believes many superintendent decisions are based on compromise and as such must be communicated effectively. He explains, “superintendents whose tenure lasts five to ten years have learned to sell these compromises to powerful influentials in and out of district” (p. 86). “Selling” in this context is not a bad practice as long as it is done using honest and transparent communication.

Building authentic relationships with board and community members is an ongoing and continuous process for a district leader. The significant players are

continuously changing. Board members transition on and off the governing body intermittently by vote or appointment. And, the community members most connected to the district are those with children attending its schools. That dynamic is fluid and often ends when the community member's child graduates from high school. Relationships are an influencer on how communication takes place. According to Kowalski (2013), "our relationships provide behavioral contexts that determine how we communicate with and act toward other people and how they communicate with and act toward us" (p. 136). If Kowalski's premise is valid, then effective communication is linked inseparably with relationship building. The process of building relationships is time consuming and sometimes unsuccessful. But, in educational administration, like most other organizational structures, decision-making has evolved from a context of top down authoritarianism to consensus building. "The days of leading a school district via the style of the Lone Ranger or 'my way or the highway' have, on the surface, been replaced by building consensus and shared decision-making" (Litchka et al., 2014, p. 54). This changing dynamic in decision-making requires relationships to be built upon trust if they are to be productive and positive. Ethical and honest communication based on positive interactions can foster trust and build relationships only if it is anchored in sincerity. It takes a deliberate effort on the part of a superintendent to successfully navigate and connect with individuals and groups. Schwarz's (2011) findings from the mixed methods study of superintendents, board chairs, other board members, and principals found the majority agreed that it is of critical importance that superintendents embody trust and utilize positive relationship-building experiences.

Superintendent Preparation and Support

Superintendent preparation and support can take many forms. Most pre-service programs are university based while in-service activities may or may not be initiated through a formal educational institution. The quality and substance of both preparation and support programs varies and both have had their critics over the years. Kowalski (2013) believes that the lack of uniformity in preparation programs stems from the varying licensure requirements among the states. He believes that some special interests and private foundations also complicate matters when they advocate for superintendent licensing deregulation. Kowalski (2013) compiled a list of concerns regarding the quality of university programs expressed by prominent professors. He listed,

- A preoccupation with management and insufficient attention to leadership
- A lack of curricular relevance
- Inadequate funding and staffing for professional education
- Inadequate clinical education
- Inattention to gender-related issues
- Low admission and graduation standards
- The absence of a national curriculum for preparing superintendents (p. 29)

Kowalski's list of criticisms comes from several experts in the field who have spent much of their lives devoted to higher education and superintendent preparation.

Studies have been done that also found inadequacies in some university-based preparation programs (Grogan & Andrews, 2002; Wells, 2010). While these studies found issue with consistent quality of instruction and content, they also offered

suggestions for redesigning schools to include specific improvements. Some of their recommendations include the following:

- Programs must be redesigned to reflect the collaborative instructional leader.
- The knowledge base must be organized around problems of practice, and delivered in collaboration with practitioners.
- Programs must be organized in such a way that there are opportunities for novices and experts to reflect while-in-action and reflect about action.
- Programs can create internships for aspiring administrators and ask them to practice leading professional development.
- Programs should be exemplars of the process by modeling the same practices that are taught and embedding assignments for program evaluation in their courses.
- Programs must be organized in such a way that the aspiring superintendents understand their ethical and moral obligations to create schools that promote and deliver social justice.
- Programs should utilize their professors to collaboratively review their expectations for course and compare them with institutions across the United States.

These recommendations, along with others from the two studies, are not condemning the university-based superintendent preparation programs as much as they are gleaning what they believe are best practices from a wide array of programs for future superintendents.

These studies stress authentic coursework that balances the managerial, philosophical,

and problem-solving complexities of the superintendency, and they stress the need for exemplary future leaders. Wells (2010) said, “Superintendents are the leaders for this vision to occur; and universities have a fundamental role in the training of all leaders for these transformative roles” (p. 7).

Much of the superintendent in-service support that the literature discusses is focused on peer mentoring. Mentoring is a collegial collaboration that takes place among two or a group of superintendents. It can be structured or informal in nature. Mentoring can focus on socialization of a novice superintendent. But, according to Alsbury and Hackman (2006), other benefits are derived from quality mentoring of novice superintendents. They stated that “mentoring should provide protection from damaging decisions, encourage novices to undertake challenging and risk-taking activities that they may otherwise avoid, increase novices’ confidence and competence, and help diminish role ambiguity” (p. 171).

Quality mentoring provides opportunities for peers to interact, share their perspectives, and challenge one another’s decision-making. Effective mentors do not solve their mentees’ problems, but they push their mentees to think critically about challenges and consider various alternative. Mentoring can enhance the professional development of proteges by awakening wisdom through the development of reflective practice (Alsbury & Hackmann, 2006; Kamler, 2006).

Summary

When considering the world of a district superintendent, a useful image might be of a person treading water in the ocean surrounded by dozens of circling sharks.

Superintendents are constantly surrounded by an unimaginable number of expectations, tensions, and conflicts. Any one of the circling conflicts can deliver the fatal bite that will lead to his or her demise.

The sheer number of different types of stakeholders with which the superintendent must interact is enough to strike fear into the hearts of most sane individuals. Students, parents, board members, and community are at the top of the stakeholder's list. Local business and industry representatives, along with governmental officials, usually also count themselves high on a superintendent's priority list. And, from a management perspective, teachers, teaching assistants, clerical and financial personnel, custodians, bus drivers, food service workers, administrators, technology and maintenance personnel, coaches, social workers, and school nurses are also essential stakeholders. One or multiple individuals from any of these groups can become embroiled in a conflict that warrants the superintendent's intervention. As I point out in my review of the literature, there are behavioral strengths that successful and long-serving superintendents believe can resolve many of the interpersonal conflicts that arise among stakeholders. The use of effective communication practices along with ongoing relationship building can lay a foundation for cooperation and trust that can be the bedrock of a solid school district.

The very nature of the superintendency may bring about conflict if communication is not clear and trust through relationships does not exist. Cuban (1976) points out,

Superintendents must be impartial in the execution of school policies. It is unethical to give preferential consideration to any individual or group. . . . Yet the ethical administrator recognizes that equal educational opportunities for all pupils may require greater or different resources for some than others. (p. 83)

Ensuring fair instead of equal treatment can lead to resentment and misunderstanding among the board and the community if the superintendent does not or cannot communicate the basis for the equitable not equal decision.

Conflict management is a skill that relies on clear communication and authentic relationships to be successful. It is up to the superintendent to understand the district, board, and community. Townsend et al. (2007) explained, “The superintendent has the responsibility for establishing a climate and implementing processes that minimize conflicts so that the real work of the district can move forward” (p. 51). Building a district based on trusting relationships and utilizing clear communications that provide a tight culture while allowing individual freedoms, will, according to researchers in the field, provide the opportunity for superintendents to practice long-term and consistent leadership.

In Chapter III, I discuss the methodology, conceptual framework, and design of my study. Specific terms and the selection of participants are also described. My positionality as a current long-serving superintendent is an important aspect to be considered in both the interview process and my analysis of data. I include an extensive section in Chapter III on my positionality.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY AND PARTICIPANTS

Introduction

In this chapter I describe the methodology, conceptual framework, and the study design for collecting, analyzing, and interpreting the data, and define important terms. The design that I chose is a basic qualitative methodology. I conducted interviews that sought to elicit the reflections of present or past long-serving superintendents regarding their communication and relationship building strategies. The study sought to determine if there were common leadership behaviors among the participants, who remained 5 years or more overseeing one district, that they believe made them more effective leaders and influenced their length of service. My conceptual framework is based upon the idea that if communication and relationship-building are foundational for effectiveness and contribute to superintendent longevity, then there may be specific behaviors supporting those areas that are consistent among long-serving superintendents and those behaviors may be discoverable.

This chapter includes my discussion of the role and positionality of the researcher and the steps taken to ensure validity and trustworthiness. As a current long-serving superintendent, my positionality is important to note and is described in detail in the *Researcher's Positionality* subsection in this chapter. I believe that my experience and longevity in the superintendency helped to create a collegial relationship with each of the

participants during the two interviews. This relationship seems to have contributed to more relaxed interviews with participants that subsequently influenced the openness of their responses and in some cases the use of colorful language and stories.

Research Problem and Guiding Questions

The research question for this study is: What can we learn from long-serving superintendents about their communication and relationship building behaviors that may contribute to their longevity?

The following sub-questions were used to guide the interview process:

1. What contextual factors shaped the communication and relationship building behaviors that long-serving superintendents report using?
2. How did superintendents use communication and relationship building behaviors to face district challenges?
3. What training and support do long-serving superintendents report as effective in increasing their leadership capacity?

Definitions of Terms

Challenges: This is used to describe any development, situation, or issue that poses a potential threat to the ability of the school district to provide effective teaching and learning in a safe, equitable, and student-centered environment (Duke, 2010).

Communication: This term is used to describe transmitting and receiving information accurately with all stakeholders. This should may done in multiple ways (Yukl, 2012).

Community: This includes all the individuals who are housed or do business in the school district (Kowalski, 2013).

Effectiveness: This term is used to describe how well district leaders are able to understand, adapt, and implement new practices to areas of the external or internal environment that run counter to the mission, vision, and goals of the school district. In addition, the new practice must be sustained and change the direction or outcome of the items that are running counter to the district's mission (Duke, 2010).

Initiatives: These are actions or reactions of the superintendent to address challenges to the school district (Duke, 2010).

Leadership strategies (behaviors): These describe what leaders do. It does not include personal traits or characteristics (Kowalski, 2013).

Longevity: This descriptive term refers to the length of service of a superintendent (Glass, Bjork, & Brunner, 2000).

Long-term (serving) Superintendents: For this study, this term describes superintendents who have served a minimum of 5 years as the chief administrative officer in one school district (Grissom & Mitani, 2016).

Relationship-building: This action is used to describe the process through which a superintendent builds and secures trust with an individual or group by clearly communicating and exhibiting honesty, integrity and ethical standards (Cuban, 1976; Kowalski, 2013; Litchka, Polka, & Calzi, 2014).

School boards: This term is best defined as corporate bodies that gain their legal authority to organize and operate a school district for the state with the statutory responsibilities of policy, budget, personnel, and programs (Blumberg, 1985).

School district: This is the specific area inclusive of residents, homes, and businesses that are defined by boundaries defined in state statute and governed by a school board (Kowalski, 2013).

Stakeholders: Stakeholders refer to students, parents, staff, community members, and business interests who live within the statutory boundaries of the district or have a vested interest in an entity within the district and compete with each other for limited resources (Bjork & Keedy, 2001). This term and the term “community” are used synonymously in this study.

Superintendent: This term denotes the chief administrative officer of a school district. This person is responsible for all actions within the district and works at the discretion and pleasure of the board of education (Cuban, 1976).

Tenure: Within this study, tenure refers to the length of time a school superintendent serves one district during an uninterrupted period (Grissom & Mitani, 2016).

Vision: This term describes the ability to communicate an objective, mission, and/or a focus on what is intended to be accomplished. A vision can allow a leader and his or her followers to be united in common work and goals (Drucker, 2001).

Conceptual Framework

While the literature is consistent in recognizing that communication and relationship-building are important practices for superintendents, there is less information in the literature pointing out which specific behaviors long-serving superintendents believe are most effective when engaging in both practices. A number of related studies discuss in a general way how communication and relationship-building may enhance both longevity and effectiveness, but there is less written in the literature regarding the specific behaviors that superintendents use to communicate and build relationships. I base the conceptual framework for this study on the existing literature and relevant studies on the topic of superintendent longevity. While both the literature and the studies consistently cite communication and relationship-building as foundational practices that contribute to extended tenures (Byrd et al., 2006; Chance et al., 1992; Cuban, 2010; Giaquinto, 2011; Kowalski, 2013; Polka & Litchka, 2008; Schwartz, 2011), the literature is less specific identifying which behaviors long-serving superintendents consistently use in these two areas. The conceptual framework for my study is based on the idea that if communication and relationship-building support superintendent longevity, there may be specific behaviors common to long-serving superintendents in these areas. If novice superintendents recognize and engage in these specific communication and relationship-building behaviors that have been effective for long-serving superintendents, they can increase the possibility for an extended tenure and enhance their opportunity to successfully meet challenges by lengthening the time to implement and sustain significant changes.

Methodology

Communication and relationship-building are leadership practices frequently cited in the literature that support superintendent effectiveness. The literature surrounding these practices guided the formation of the interview questions. The specific strategies that emerged from this study's data may encourage discussions and further research about improving school leadership and provide valuable information to new superintendents.

This is a basic qualitative study involving interviews with seven present and past long-serving superintendents from both North Carolina and Tennessee. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016),

A basic qualitative study would be interested in (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 their experiences. (p. 24)

This study focuses on the perceptions of the participants regarding the success of their leadership strategies in meeting challenges and extending longevity in one school district. Merriam (1998) points out that qualitative studies are well-suited to generating an understanding of the perspectives of those studied. Thus, a basic qualitative study is well-suited to examine the perceptions of long-serving superintendents regarding their strategies as they relate to effectiveness and longevity. Additionally, using the qualitative method allowed the adjustment of questions and the development of unforeseen areas of inquiry as they emerged from the first interviews. Creswell (2003) defines the qualitative process as

emergent rather than tightly prefigured. Several aspects emerge during a qualitative study. The research questions may change and be refined as the inquirer learns what to ask and to whom it should be asked. Qualitative research is fundamentally interpretive . . . The qualitative researcher adopts and uses one or more strategies of inquiry as a guide for the procedures in the qualitative study. (pp. 182–183)

I interviewed each participant twice during this study for approximately 90 minutes in each session. Because qualitative research is emergent rather than tightly prescribed, a number of answers from the first interview with each participant allowed the researcher to refine and adjust questions for the second interview. I used data from individual interviews with the seven current or past superintendents, each of whom has a minimum of 5 years of experience leading one school district. I conducted two face-to-face interviews of at least one and half hours each with each superintendent for a minimum total data collection time of 21 hours. The interviews were conducted at a time and a place convenient to the participant. By employing a two-interview format, I hoped to develop a trusting relationship with participants during the first session and also become familiar with each individual's perception of their district, community, and school board. In the second interview I utilized questions about specific strategies and efforts that the participants use or used to initiate and lead foundational reforms in their district.

Qualitative research has the advantage of allowing the participants to provide information about their perspectives and for the researcher to have control over the questioning. One disadvantage of both qualitative and quantitative educational research includes researcher or participant positionality. I address this concern in the section on

trustworthiness and reliability. Additionally, Creswell (2003) believes another possible disadvantage in qualitative research is that the participant may be affected by the interview process and being a part of a study. I believe that my experience as a long-serving superintendent helped build a unique level of trust between the myself and each participant. I also believe that in overcoming their uncomfortableness due to my ability to authentically relate to their experiences, the participants revealed significant data that may not have been given to someone who had not been a long-serving superintendent.

The first 90-minute interview with each participant helped me build a healthy and comfortable relationship between the participant and myself. Additionally, during the first interview I became familiar with each participant's perception of their district, community, and school board. In the second interview, I focused the questions on specific strategies and efforts that the participants use or used to initiate and meet challenges in their district. I used face-to-face interviews exclusively. Interviews were audio-recorded and stored securely. I had the recordings transcribed for the purposes of evaluation and analysis by a third party professional transcriber. Then, I verified the transcripts by listening to the tapes while reviewing the written rendition.

Sample Selection and Participants

This study involved face-to-face interviews with seven present or retired superintendents in two states—North Carolina and Tennessee. Once the study was approved, I contacted potential participants via e-mail. To qualify as a potential participant, individuals had to be presently serving as a superintendent in a district for beyond the fifth year or to have served in a prior district for 5 years or more. The

literature helped me determine that a minimum of 5 years of experience in one district exceeded the national average for superintendent longevity and contributed to an expanded window of time that a superintendent could use to address challenges and sustain changes.

My intent was to include participating superintendents who represented both urban and rural districts as well as districts with varying socioeconomic and racial demographics. My experience as a superintendent in both Tennessee and North Carolina contributed to the decision to seek superintendents from both states. This decision allowed me to create a more diverse group of participants from which to choose.

I used a nonrandom and purposeful selection method and considered convenience within the process. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) explained, “One of the criteria might be that you want as much variation as possible; hence you would be employing a maximum variation sampling strategy in the selection” (p. 100). To ensure that participants represented demographic diversity, as part of the purposeful selection process, I considered the candidate’s race and gender. By using a purposeful sample, I hoped that “Any common patterns that emerge . . . are of particular interest and value in capturing core experiences and central shared dimensions of a setting or phenomenon” (Patton, 2015, p. 283).

Besides practicing superintendents, I also considered retired superintendents as candidates for the study. I included this set of possible participants due to the belief that retirement does not negate the validity of a participant’s perceptions of his or her behaviors. In fact, without the possibility of a current employer becoming privy to

sensitive comments, it is possible that retired superintendents may have felt freer to openly discuss their perceptions regarding former school board members and community.

I compiled a list of ten eligible participants that I knew in North Carolina and Tennessee. Seven responded positively. One of the eligible participants indicated that he was extremely busy and could not participate at the time. Two superintendents did not respond to my initial email contact. In the initial e-mail to prospective participants, I included information that outlined the anticipated purpose and time commitment of being a part of the study. After I received a positive response from each participant, a hard copy of the informed consent form, along with a demographic survey (Appendix A) was mailed to the respondents with an addressed stamped envelope for the return of the documents. The informed consent form contained details that included the purpose of the study, voluntary participation, the right for participants to withdraw from the study, the right to request a copy of the study, an assurance of privacy, and the signatures of the participant and myself (Creswell, 2003).

Interviews

I conducted all interviews face-to-face at a time and a place convenient to the study's participants. I conducted nine of the 14 interviews in offices of the participants while I met with three participants individually at a state superintendents' conference. I held one interview in a school district's office not associated with the participant, and I conducted another interview in a private setting at a restaurant. I interviewed each participant twice, with each of the interviews being approximately one and a half hours. Approximately 4-6 weeks separated the participant's first interview from the second. This

allowed time for the participants to reflect on their answers and their perceptions prior to the second interview. I audio recorded the interviews, and they were transcribed verbatim. I followed the interview guide for the appropriate participant, but I employed unscripted questions or follow-up questions to gather more in-depth information regarding specific answers. In the first interview, I used two sets of interview guides. One interview guide (Appendix B) was for currently serving superintendents, and a second interview guide (Appendix C) was used with retired superintendents. Patton (2015) suggests qualitative interviewers consider six different types of questions: experience and behavior, opinion and values, feeling, knowledge, sensory, and demographic. Both interview guides for the first session and the interview guide for the second session contain examples of all six types of questions.

The time between the first and second interview was advantageous for me as well as the participants. The 4-6 weeks between interviews allowed me to transcribe the audio recordings, compile the results, code the first set of data, and use relevant information from coding to tailor specific questions for the interview guide (Appendix D) of the second interview.

To ensure confidentiality for the participants, I assigned a pseudonym to each for confidential identification purposes. In the findings, I did not use comments from interviews that contained the names of identifiable individuals or school districts.

Data Analysis

I designed the interview questions to encourage long-serving superintendents to share their experiences about leadership practices through stories about their strategies

when meeting district challenges. Then, I analyzed the data by taking the larger story and coding for categories nested within the larger stories (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). My hope is that this study provides information from the superintendent interviews that the readers can make sense of and apply to their own leadership situations. Merriam (1998) suggests that qualitative research allows researchers to use the data from interviews to provide a thick, rich description of the study. I hope that it is possible for the conclusions to provide useful tools for other school superintendents.

The literature on methodology provides strategic steps for organizing and analyzing qualitative data (Creswell, 2003). First, interviews are conducted, recorded, and transcribed. This is followed by the researcher doing a first read of the data to get an overall sense of what is being said and possible meanings. The next step that Creswell suggests is a careful coding of the data. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) explain, “Coding is nothing more than assigning some sort of shorthand designation to various aspects of your data so that you can easily retrieve specific pieces of data” (p. 199). There should be no assumptions prior to the coding regarding predicted categories and eventual themes.

I analyzed the data using both inductive and comparative methods. The development of coding patterns aligned with the sub-questions as the data emerged. During the analysis process I remained open to the development of new categories from unanticipated data from the interviews or field notes. This resulted in new categories emerging for coding. Patton (1980) stated, “Inductive analysis means that patterns, themes, and categories of analysis come from the data; they emerge out of the data rather than being imposed on them prior to data collection and analysis” (p. 306). No definitive

formula exists for transforming data into findings. Miles, Huberman and Saldaña (2014) noted, “The ultimate power of field research lies in the researcher’s emerging map of what is happening and why. Any method that will force differentiation . . . of that map, while remaining flexible, is a good idea” (p. 93).

I began initially analyzing data during and shortly after the first interviews with each participant. I recorded, transcribed, and coded the data from the first interview prior to refining the second interview guide. The follow-up questions and the guide for the second interview with the superintendents were based upon the responses and my interpretation of those responses from the initial interview. This process is aligned with Merriam’s (1998) suggestion that “the right way to analyze data in a qualitative study is to do it simultaneously with data collection” (p. 162).

Following the second set of interviews with each participant, I transcribed, coded, and categorized the data. “Categories should reflect the purpose of the research. In effect, categories are the answers to your research questions” (Merriam, 1998, p. 183). During the comparison and analysis of the interview transcripts, I used questions such as:

- Are there similar ideas or strategies being conveyed in different words by different superintendents?
- Did one participant understand a question in the same way as another?
- Is there significance in body language or tone in a participant’s answer?

Questions such as these were a part of the analysis to help in determining the context in which comments were said and the intention of what the participant meant.

Creswell (2003) wrote that the analysis of data in qualitative research should involve continual reflection by the researcher as the transcripts are coded. As additional interviews were completed and transcripts became available, I made comparisons and revisited previous interview transcripts in an attempt to discern, organize, and categorize information.

During the first cycle of data analysis I used two types of coding and applied codes to the information that was obtained through the interviews. In the initial cycle of coding, I used both in vivo and values coding to take segments of information out of the transcript text. Using two codes simultaneously in a coding cycle is referred to as eclectic coding. Saldaña (2016) explained, “Eclectic Coding employs a select and compatible combination of two or more first cycle coding methods . . . purposeful to serve the needs of the study and its data analysis” (p. 213). In this study, using in vivo and values coding simultaneously allowed for a unified scheme of collecting inductive data that “honored the participant’s voice” (in vivo coding) while at the same time “reflecting a participant’s values, attitudes and beliefs” (values coding; Saldaña, 2016, pp. 105–135). Since this study’s research question and sub-questions sought to learn the perceptions of the participants about their own effectiveness, both in vivo and values coding were well-suited to capture the values and voices of the superintendents. In the first cycle, 238 open codes were produced during the detailed review of the data. Additional analysis and review of the transcripts enabled the 238 codes to be consolidated under one of the three groupings of stakeholders, characteristics and strategies, or role and training.

In the second cycle of coding, I used pattern coding. “Pattern Codes are explanatory or inferential codes, ones that identify an emergent theme configuration . . . They pull together a lot of material from the first cycle coding into more meaningful and parsimonious units of analysis” (Saldaña, 2016, p. 236). The 238 codes that were identified as part of three groups in the first cycle were reduced down to 105 Pattern Codes. Then I identified key words and concepts that ultimately enabled the emergence of the nine categories under which all 105 codes were aligned. I used the data supporting the nine categories to determine the four themes. I illustrate my process of determining how the codes connected to the nine categories in Appendix E.

Trustworthiness and Validity

Qualitative research must include multiple strategies to intentionally meet the demands of dependability, trust, and validity (Bowen, 2005; Creswell, 2003; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). To ensure the quality and trustworthiness of this study, I used the following strategies: member checking; a rich, thick description; disclosure of limitations; and discussion of researcher’s positionality. The following sections summarize how these measures were implemented during the study.

Member Checking

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) suggest that member checks are the single most important method of determining whether any misunderstanding has taken place or that the researcher has included personal biases in the findings. Creswell (2015) describes member checking as taking the themes or stories back to the participants to determine their accuracy and whether the accounts are accurate or if themes are missing. I provided

each participant, through e-mail, their specific quotes that I used in the findings. These quotes came from the transcripts of the interviews. I invited each participant to provide feedback on the accuracy of their comments. Their input was considered and if a response conflicted with the findings, I did a follow up review of the recorded transcripts. If changes to the findings were justified, I made adjustments to the study's findings.

Rich, Thick Description

The ability to transfer or replicate a qualitative study is a measure of validity. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) describe a *thick, rich description* in qualitative research as “a detailed description of the setting and participants of the study, as well as a detailed description of the findings with adequate evidence presented in the form of quotes from participant interviews, field notes, and documents” (p. 257). To meet the criteria of an effective rich, thick description, demographic forms and three sets of interview guides are included in the study. Details about how I selected the participants, how I collected the data, and how the themes emerged are included in the study.

Limitations of the Study

The following limitations defined the scope of this study. The sample of participants was limited to seven present or past superintendents of public school districts in North Carolina and Tennessee. Because of the low number in the sample, the findings of this study are not generalizable to other districts. In addition, while I selected the sample group purposefully to obtain some diversity in gender and race, the low number of representatives from each subgroup makes generalizations to race and gender unsupportable.

Each participating superintendent answered questions based upon his or her interpretation of events seen through his or her own lens of experiences. It must be noted that each school district is unique just as every superintendent is unique. The conclusions in this study reflect what superintendents said works best for their leadership within the context of their individual school district. It is my hope that each person objectively looked at how his or her own behaviors impacted the outcomes.

If this research is repeated, it might yield different results. If this occurs, it does not negate the findings in this study. Different interpretations can be made from the same data. It is generally accepted that results in qualitative studies are reliable until contradicted by new evidence (Merriam, 1998). If this study were repeated, a different group of superintendents would provide a different level of subjectivity from their experiences in different district environments. Considering an individual's subjectivity and the uniqueness of each school district, variations from the conclusions in this study are likely in a replicated study. While the results may be from a small sample, the depth and breadth of data from each of the participants is significant.

Researcher's Positionality

In a qualitative study, researcher positionality is always a factor. Creswell (2015) explained, "In a good qualitative study, you should always write about the biases, values, and experiences you bring to a study" (p. 223). Knowing the researcher's background and experiences helps the reader understand how personal experiences may have shaped the interpretation of the study's findings.

I have been an educator in public schools for 37 years. The last 16 years I have served as the superintendent in two districts in the two states where the study's samples have been selected. I also served as the principal of a high school, a stand-alone freshmen school, and as a junior high and high school English teacher. During my career I have seen the pendulum of educational values in public schools across our nation swing back and forth between the standards-based formulaic-world of high stakes testing to the pragmatic whole-child approach that stresses character education and social justice. The ebb and flow of educational change has been maddening. And, as a school superintendent, I have witnessed peers in two different states struggle to lead their organizations in an educational world filled with uncertainty. I have also witnessed in both states two contrasting groups of superintendents. The larger group, by about a three to one margin (my estimate), held their leadership position in the district for 4 years or less. The second group, about 25% of the total, have stayed in the same district 4 years or more.

My positionality and how it relates to this work is important. I studied a group of participants who qualified for inclusion in this research based on criteria under which I am also included. To qualify as a participant in the study, a person had to have served a minimum of 5 years (long-serving) as the superintendent in at least one school district in either North Carolina or Tennessee. These participants could either be active or retired. While I am not included as a participant, I can be described as a long-serving superintendent by this study's criteria. I have served as the district chief in two districts, one in Tennessee and presently one in North Carolina. I am both retired (from one state)

and an active superintendent (in another). I believe that the similarity of my experiences with those of the participants contributed to the depth of this study. I believe that this professional similarity not only allowed me to build a comfortable relationship with participants that contributed to extreme candor in their interview responses, but it also provided me a more knowledgeable foundation from which I based my conclusions from the findings.

I bring to this study a preconception that superintendents who are able to maintain their positions beyond the national average are engaging in some behaviors that may have contributed to their longevity. As I entered this research study, I did not know what those specific behaviors might be. After reviewing the literature and previous studies, I found two characteristics mentioned more than any other as being essential for superintendent success. Effective communication and relationship-building emerged as two of the most identified characteristics for long-serving superintendents in the literature.

The positionality that I bring to this study is not that I think the characteristics of communication and relationship building are the only two areas of leadership that foster long tenures for superintendents. Rather, it is my belief that these two areas are among many that may contribute to the effectiveness and longevity of superintendents. It is also my belief that there may be specific behaviors in each of the two areas that can be identified as common among long-serving superintendents that provide the keys to superintendent longevity and possible effectiveness.

Summary and Preview

In Chapter III, I explained the methodological aspects of the study including the key terms, conceptual framework, the selection of participants and the analysis of data. I also included sections on reliability and validity that described my positionality in depth. In Chapter IV, each of the participants are profiled in detail. I hope that these descriptions allow the reader to better conceptualize the long-serving superintendents and connect their data to each one. I present the data as it is grouped according to four themes. Each theme is divided into subsections to allow the reader to bracket responses on similar topics from different participants together for clarity. The long-serving superintendents discussed a vast amount of information in the interviews. Some of the responses by the participants may seem unusual for a superintendent in a professional setting. I believe that the participants' apparent comfortableness talking with another long-serving superintendent put them at ease and allowed them to be more candid and open in their responses. When one of the participants read his unfiltered comments during member checking he laughed and said, "Well, I said those things, but I'm not sure they are quote-worthy . . . I trust you will use them wisely." I believe this response confirms my perception that the participants trusted me and were open in their responses.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

Introduction

In this chapter I present descriptions of the participants and the findings of my study. The descriptions include each of the long-serving superintendents' perceptions of both district leadership in general, as well as their thoughts on their community and school district. I then present the findings grouped by the four themes that emerged from the data. Using themes allowed me to organize and make sense of the perceptions of the participants, as well as connect similar data that the individual superintendents contributed during the interviews. In spite of the fact that each superintendent led a district different than the others, there was a significant amount of commonality in the answers from all the participants. As I mentioned previously, some of the language that the participants reported in the data may seem unusual in a professional setting. But, I think that their reporting these unfiltered conversations is a testimony to their openness and honest transparency.

Demographic Composite and Background of Participants

The seven participants in the study included four from North Carolina and three from Tennessee. Six participants were men and one was a woman. Six of the participants were White and one was Black. Four participants were retired. Two superintendents represented school districts with enrollments over 20,000 (Large), one's district had an

enrollment between 6,000 and 20,000 (Medium) and four led districts with enrollments under 5,000 (Small). All participants served in districts where some of the schools were classified as Title I and some schools were not, based on the percentage of economically disadvantaged children in the school. Three of the seven participants had served in at least one leadership position in the same district prior to being elevated to the superintendency of the same district.

Five of the seven earned some type of doctorate degree and two had attained an educational specialist degree. Three of the seven spent at least 10 years in the district prior to being appointed superintendent. Four of the seven participants entered their district as the superintendent. The average superintendent tenure for the seven was 13 years, with 27 being the longest tenure and 5 years being the shortest. One participant served as superintendent in a total of four districts, two participants have overseen two school systems, while four served as the chief administrator in one district. Three of the participants, in addition to qualifying as a long-serving superintendent, also held or are presently holding a high level administrative position in either their state's department of education or in their state's superintendents' association. One participant currently facilitates their state's official professional development services for first-year superintendents. This training includes orientation and capacity building for individuals new to the position.

For the purposes of this study, and to preserve confidentiality, I gave the seven superintendents the following pseudonyms: Harold, Mike, Tom, Leon, Sharon, Gregg, and Harmon. Before the study began, I took precautions to protect the confidentiality and

to ensure that there was little risk involved regarding the identification of participants. Responses to the demographic questions are found in Table 1. Due to the small sample size, some demographic information is disguised to protect anonymity.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Participant	Race	Gender	Total Superintendent Experience	Last or Present District's Size	Previous Experience in District	Presently Serving
Harold	W	M	21	Large	No	Yes
Mike	W	M	13	Small	Yes	No
Tom	W	M	5	Small	Yes	No
Leon	W	M	27	Small	No	Yes
Sharon	W	F	10	Small	Yes	No
Gregg	B	M	7.5	Large	No	No
Harmon	W	M	9.5	Medium	No	Yes

As previously stated, the superintendents were considered long-serving because each had tenures of 5 years or more leading at least one school district. With that depth and breadth of experience comes some strong opinions on the superintendency. The following background information includes some general perceptions of each participant on the role of a superintendent and includes some specific examples and experiences that the participants used to illustrate their points.

Harmon

Harmon came to his present position from a smaller school district. “I came to my second superintendency because I was looking for other opportunities” said Harmon. He proudly stated that his best days as a superintendent are seeing kids learning and watching the results of things that his leadership team have planned. But he also added that adequate preparation for the superintendency is not possible. Harmon’s thoughts on the enormity of responsibility associated with the superintendency was common among the participants. He said,

No one can explain or teach you how to lead a district, you have to jump in and experience it, if you don’t have the experience to navigate the waters of politics, you don’t survive. No one can prepare for the politics of leading a district.

Harmon also noted, “It is important to surround yourself with people that bring you up, not tear you down.” Harmon felt like he was hired to unify the community and to initiate a building program.

Tom

Tom served for the shortest superintendent tenure of all the participants, 5 years, in the smallest district. With an enrollment of about 2,800, Tom held positions as a coach, principal and assistant superintendent prior to assuming the superintendency. He worked for 24 years in the district before becoming superintendent. Tom entered educational administration because “I was working too many hours as an athletic coach,” he said. After being a middle school principal and assistant superintendent, Tom was given the superintendency in the district. Tom stated,

I did not have a dream to want the superintendent's chair. To me that was just another job. I thought, "If I don't take this job, who will?" . . . I felt that the superintendency was a good fit . . . I liked best having an impact on the entire climate . . . [what] I liked least was dealing with people that were not professional and were negative.

Tom's low-key approach is reflected in his statement that prior to assuming the role of superintendent he felt that the superintendency is "just another job." Tom felt that he was hired by the school board to maintain, not change the district. He felt his board wanted to keep the leadership consistent.

Even though Tom had spent 24 years in the district prior to becoming superintendent, he still believed "coming in [to a superintendency] you have to take the time to evaluate the district." He expressed his opinion that "superintendents have to depend on each other, no one else understands what we go through." The idea of the superintendency being an island of isolation was suggested by Tom and was similar to Harmon's comments about good preparation for the position being nonexistent.

Gregg

Gregg, the only Black superintendent, assumed his superintendency in a large urban/rural district where he had not been previously employed. Prior to his appointment as superintendent, he had served as a chief operating officer in a large urban school system. Gregg's formal training for the superintendency was non-traditional. He had a law degree and a background in administration working for a large urban school district. This non-traditionally trained superintendent brought some unique insights about the superintendency to the study. His unusual rise to the superintendency led him to make the following observations:

My experience would suggest that there are multiple ways to arrive at the seat of the superintendent . . . My interactions as the Chief Operating Officer [in another urban district] allowed me to learn the academic side of the house by osmosis . . . I think you cannot have some experience in a school system [before becoming a superintendent], if a person has no school experience, hopefully that person has been in significant leadership roles and has dealt with an elected body . . . I felt as prepared as I could have, not being an educator.

Gregg shared, “The things I liked were seeing kids do well . . . The least favorite were challenging Board meetings or parent meetings and going to kid’s funerals or to the hospital to see kids.”

He characterized his leadership style as the following:

I was blessed to have great people to work with so I thought it was important to prioritize everybody . . . [I believe] listening to others allows others to feel alive . . . The way I tried to lead was to say, “We are a team together. And everyone’s got great ideas, great thoughts. How do we come together and move forward?”

Gregg said that he followed an innovative and brilliant superintendent. But, Gregg felt his predecessor had not invested the time to cultivate great relationships in the community or among staff. He believed he was hired to bring a sense of unity and warmth to the large district. The school system had undergone a consolidation from several smaller districts into a large comprehensive school system a few years earlier. Despite the passage of time, there still seemed to be a fragmentation of support in both the community and the schools due to the consolidation. Gregg felt his job was to get all stakeholders on board with a consistent message of academic excellence and community service for students.

Harold

Harold served as a superintendent in three school districts for a total of 21 years. In his current superintendency, he was lured out of retirement and initially hired on an interim basis. But, the district had a number of polarizing issues to work through and the Board subsequently offered him a permanent contract, which he accepted. Harold said that his goal in the district was to work through a controversial redistricting initiative in order to help create a more equitable educational experience for students. Then, once he accomplished that, he would step back and let the Board hire a new district leader who would not have the baggage of a contentious redistricting effort restricting their ability to lead.

Harold related how his journey in administration led from a principalship to a superintendency.

I was a principal in a district and did not like the focus or what we were doing. I complained to my father who said, “If you don’t like it, quit or if you can do a better job, be superintendent, but as long as you work for him, be loyal” . . . That’s when I decided that I wanted to be superintendent.

Harold articulated that the best part of being a superintendent is developing people and his least favorite is budgeting. He believes that he has grown and become a better district leader because of his experience. “When I was a young superintendent, I was more combative than I am now—maturity more than preparation helped me . . . This is not a young man’s job,” Harold said.

With 21 years of experience leading three districts, Harold had some definite ideas about where he had the greatest effect and how he believed he achieved that effectiveness. He said,

We are pretty much about developing adults as we are developing children . . . I take great pleasure in watching people develop including young principals and young superintendents . . . [I believe] that as superintendent, my direct impact is on principals . . . I think it is 21 or 22 people who have worked for me who have gone on to be a superintendent, I'm proud of that. The best part of the superintendency is developing people. . . . Superintendent [is] kinda a keeper of the vision, promoting the vision, clearly articulating the vision and it has to be a sharing vision, then you need to recruit, select, develop, entertain the people that can make the vision a reality and create a culture that can make the vision a reality.

When he referred to his leadership style he focused on empowerment. Harold stated,

Surround yourself with good people and empower them. If you give away authority you give away power, and that causes your influence to grow exponentially. When I let people do things, they're not only getting the job done, they're not only growing, but they are becoming more loyal to me. The more you empower people, the more power you have . . . Power of authorities expand with time. If you hold onto it, it's not going to grow.

He believes his success and most leaders' success is built upon a self-awareness. Harold explained,

I think a lot of my success is knowing your strengths and limitations. I've surrounded myself with good people whom I empower and develop positive relationships. I think the superintendent needs to be a learner and portray himself as the lead learner within that learning organization . . . Look at any of the literature, the foundation for any organization is trust. So, if they have confidence in you, they can trust you, people will take some chances.

Mike

Mike spent 13 years as a teacher and a principal in the small district where he was named superintendent. “I was successful and well liked as a teacher and principal and that was the foundation for allowing me to get away with a little [as superintendent] just because I said so,” stated Mike. He added that he got into the superintendency because he thought he could do a better job than the previous superintendent. Mike said, “I always thought there was a better way to communicate and a better way to address situations.”

Mike also admitted, “I was terribly naive when I entered the superintendency.” He shared some additional feelings about the superintendency. He said,

I liked best watching the kids benefit from what you were doing. You see knotheads that make it because of certain decisions you’ve made . . . I liked least the hours, just a lot of tedious hours, you are always on in a small district . . . You never get away . . . As a leader my personal preference is to be implementing things that are growing and can grow. When you have no more rabbits up your hat, it is time to step aside.

Mike described how his district leadership had driven the stakeholders’ opinion of him:

A superintendency is a position of power in the community . . . Just be fair and honest, that’s tattoo material, man. Treat everyone the same, and build a relationship . . . You don’t have a lot of conflicts if you are doing the right thing most of the time . . . If you are fair and if you are not being untruthful . . . 90% to 95% of the people will tell you that I am the best thing since sliced bread and 5% will tell you I am Satan’s spawn.

He credited his ability to navigate the waters of the superintendency on his instinctual natural abilities. “It was just a natural characteristic . . . God has granted me

the strangest gift, I can pretty much say anything to anybody and they'll smile . . . I think some degree of leadership is a just a natural characteristic," said Mike.

Mike indicated that he believed he was hired by the board to maintain the consistency within the district. He said that he faced challenges, but he was not expected to transform or radically change the small district.

Leon

Leon has spent the past 25 years in this, his second superintendency. He was recruited from another region of the country and is currently enjoying the second longest superintendent tenure in his state. He is in a relatively small city district that includes citizens that reside in low-income housing as well as multimillion-dollar estates. He said that working for a bad superintendent as a teacher and principal motivated him to move toward the superintendency. Leon also said that he gains a great deal of pride from working with younger administrators and becomes frustrated when he is faced with problems he can't solve. Leon said,

I am proud of grabbing a generation of folks, grooming them out for leadership positions to change the generation after me . . . Legacy building is important to me . . . The worst part of the job is facing a situation that I know nothing about, and I can't fix because it's already gone south at the first level and it became worse at the second level and now I cannot fix it . . . When someone is already backed into a corner the problem can't be solved.

He expanded on his description of the superintendency:

For me what is important in the job is being able to read people and being able to understand, not why we think they are there, but why they are really there and why they are really at the table with those questions and concerns. You've got to be responsive to their needs and understand their needs that are not global meta

issues but instead are individual issues involving kids which personally, I believe is why big school district superintendents don't last long.

Leon added his thoughts on his own preparation and learning curve: "Academic preparation is almost irrelevant in becoming prepared for the superintendency. I was prepared for the workload. I was not prepared for the political dialogue. I had to get more skilled at plowing the ground."

Leon felt that he was hired to maintain the academic excellence that the system had enjoyed. But, he said that the changing economic and racial demographics had made his job much more challenging.

Sharon

Sharon ascended to her superintendency from within the district. She was the supervisor of K-12 curriculum and instruction in the district for a number of years prior to assuming the superintendency. Her background prior to administration was in guidance and counseling. Sharon said her guidance background was the best and most pertinent training she received that prepared her for the superintendency. "Guidance focuses on relationships and communication. That's what the superintendency is all about," she said. Since her retirement, she has headed up new superintendent orientations for her state, sponsored by the statewide superintendents' association. Sharon explained her path to the superintendency and the workload of the position, noting,

I was absolutely unmotivated to be a superintendent . . . The only reason that I threw my name in the hat is because I did not want to train the next superintendent and hopefully if I got the job we could continue in the same direction. I replaced a brick and mortar guy and there were no more concrete

blocks to move. I was already working 70 to 80 hours a week in curriculum and instruction so the workload moving to superintendent was not huge.

Ironically, in spite of proclaiming herself as not a “brick and mortar guy,” Sharon says that her proudest accomplishment was with brick and mortar. “One of our school buildings got demolished by a tornado. We completely rebuilt the school and opened it back up in 106 days,” said Sharon. She explained that this accomplishment bolstered her popularity and support among all stakeholder groups in the community.

Because she presently mentors novice superintendents, her lens has widened concerning the intrinsic differences in large and small districts. “In big districts there are layers to get to the board chair or superintendent . . . Big district superintendents have more layers between them and a crisis . . . In a small system, it’s the superintendent’s face on every decision,” she said. Sharon echoed Harold’s comments on self-awareness and being reflective. Sharon said she suggests to new superintendents she trains, “Take some tests to analyze yourself. It helped me be more successful. I don’t particularly enjoy creating a confrontational environment so those are the things that found out and I worked on because sometimes you just have to be confrontational.” Sharon felt she was hired to elevate student achievement and growth. She said that the board that hired her wanted to move the emphasis from “buildings to books.”

Each of the seven participants has their own unique story. And, all worked beyond the national average for superintendents in a district that has its own unique story. The superintendents supplied interesting and complex descriptions of their community and their district.

Findings: Four Main Themes

This section presents the findings as four themes related to the behaviors that the participants perceived had a significant impact on their effectiveness and longevity. Together, the participants in this study held 12 superintendencies, and as of the date of this study they spent a total of 93 years leading both large and small; urban and rural; affluent and economically disadvantaged school districts. While the districts where each participant served has its own unique community, staff, and challenges, there is significant alignment among participants' perceptions regarding their leadership behaviors.

I present the data that support the following themes:

- Long-serving superintendents recognize the importance of communication and relationship-building.
- Long-serving superintendents understand and give prominent attention to school boards and the community.
- Long-serving superintendents attribute their longevity to specific communication and relationship-building behaviors.
- Long-serving superintendents express concerns about superintendent training and support approaches and services.

Theme 1

Long-serving superintendents recognize the importance of communication and relationship-building.

Relationship-building, along with communication, are the two areas that I identified in the literature as the most significant behaviors that can affect superintendent effectiveness and longevity. All of participants in this study also noted that relationship-building and effective communication are closely linked and are vitally important to their success. In this section, the superintendents speak to the importance of effective relationship-building and communication practices in leading a school district.

Relationship-building. Harold discussed his opinion about relationship-building that he shares with his principals and stresses to all his administrators. He tells all his administrators,

Think back about the teachers you remember most fondly. That's [the one you remember] not because they were masters of calculus or masters of Spanish. You remember them because of the relationships. And the fact that they cared about you as an individual and took an interest in you as a human being. Leadership is not a position. Leadership is not a job. Leadership is a relationship . . . You need to establish relationships with internal, external, all over the place.

In his 21 years as a superintendent in three districts, Harold said he has evolved in his opinion of the importance of relationship-building. He said,

When I first became a superintendent, I said, "No feel good professional development. Curriculum is the focus." But I was wrong, you've got to build good relationships . . . As the years have gone by, I've shifted and recognized that relationships are crucial. Relationships with the community, the Board and the staff is the key . . . Just getting in and being visible and interacting with people. I tell people whenever I leave a school [after a visit], or whenever I leave a teacher's classroom, I'd always ask them, "Is there anything I can do for you? What can I do for you?" Every now and then they'll ask if you can deliver, which is pretty good.

Mike's perception of the importance of relationships to the success of a superintendent is aligned with Harold's. "Relationships, relationships and relationships. A good relationship means you don't do for one what you can't do for others," asserted Mike. He added,

Relationships change everything. If you're an entity in an office (superintendent) that makes more [money] than most people in the community, they (the public) can be judgmental on you pretty quick. If they don't know your wife and they don't know your kids and they don't know anything about you, they don't know how much time you've spent worrying about all this stuff. It is easy to blow you up at the hairdresser. But, if you have been to their ball games and you've been to their Baptist church and senior citizens center . . . you get a lot of credit when there is a negative thing that happens.

Leon shared that he believes that relationship-building is crucial, but a superintendent must be authentic and accessible as part of relationship-building. Leon said,

It's one thing to say that the relationship is important, but if you don't really provide access by being where they are then you can't move to the next step. That idea of respecting their opinion, respecting their expertise, respecting their knowledge and respecting their hopes and vision for the future is pretty important. I think conveying clearly that you are there seeking improvement, not necessarily seeking [the] sales of an idea. They're not gonna buy trust if you've already made up your mind and you're just there informing . . . Accessibility would be one thing that has helped me build relationships. Then, respect. Respecting others opinion.

Leon said that he began working on building significant relationships in his first year of his superintendency because of his belief that relationships are the basis for success. Leon said,

My vision for the first year was to develop an understanding of the strengths and the weaknesses (of the district) and to correct those weaknesses, to establish relationships, to establish a rapport, to establish a dialogue that had me serving as the point person for the school district.

Sharon stated that she liked relationship-building the best of all the different aspects of the superintendency. “What gave me the most peace of mind was the relationship building,” she said. Sharon added,

The single most effective relationship-building strategy was listening. It didn’t matter who you were listening or when. If they came in at 4 o’clock crying because the bus didn’t run that morning, let them be heard. Let them know, “I don’t know what else I can do, but I’ll be happy to listen to you” . . . [As a superintendent] you have to bring a shared vision and build a relationship with stakeholders that allows everyone to commit to the shared vision.

Sharon shared her affinity for relationship-building, explaining, “I like the relationship building . . . I spent a lot of time taking people that really wanted to do well and trying to improve their situation so they could be successful.”

Gregg believes that time and location were very important as he built relationships in his district. He explained,

I invested a lot of time building relationships. A lot of time and being present. I’d be present at lots of different places and different parts of the community. Relationship-building was critically important for the staff and for the board. I tried to meet people where they were. Instead of coming to the superintendent’s office to have a meeting, I said, “I wanna be in your environment to have meetings” . . . I’d go to football games and sit alongside parents and just listen. That is huge for building relationships. The idea that the superintendent sat next to me and talked to me spread like wildfire throughout the community.

Gregg stressed that building relationships was about investing time and being positive with others regardless of whether they were staff, community, or board members.

Tom also felt that the relationships he had with all the various stakeholders helped him navigate the waters of the superintendency even when test scores were not exemplary. He said,

I think the personal relationships I had with folks was huge. I really do. I think when people saw the passion that I had for our children our community, it was who I was. That personal relationship I had with folks and a genuine passion and in some ways compassion for our children, I think people saw that, I really do. Cause, if you look straight at the (test and graduation) numbers, they were not great when I was here . . . A big part of what I did as a superintendent was a relationship piece . . . they'll accept it more if you got that relationship built up.

Harmon added, "The most effective way to build relationships is to talk to people and listen. Listening is probably more important than talking. Listen to people and have a genuine conversation, one-on-one." Harmon said,

I pride myself on having a good relationship with the community. Are there a couple of people and a handful of people in this community who hate my guts? Absolutely, there are, because I've stood up to some dirty politics several years ago and said we're not gonna operate that way . . . but there are a ton of people who would give me, you know, whatever I need to be successful.

Leon connected superintendents' longevity to the ability for smaller district chiefs to build sustainable relationships that larger district superintendents cannot. Leon explained,

You work for a community . . . and you've got to be responsive to their needs and understand there are needs that are not global meta issues but instead are individual issues involving kids which personally I believe is why big school

district's superintendents don't last as long . . . They can't develop that relationship and they can only deal with global meta issues.

Mike suggested that the relationships create an environment for success and that relationships are borne out of effective communication. He said,

Communication and relationships are so connected . . . Relationships put everything in the right context, it de-escalates everything, it's just so paramount. To be in a void in an environment void of relationships, you're basically reading emails and reacting to it and I'd just say there's guys (superintendents) that do that.

Communication. Each of the participants shared their feelings that relationship-building and effective communication are intertwined. The superintendents shared their perceptions of how effective communication impacted their leadership. Harold noted,

Perceptions are reality through the eyes of the perceivers. So, I think in 90% or better of any organizational problem, you look at the root of that problem was somewhere along the line of a failure to communicate. I think when superintendent-board relations break down 95% of the time there's not a particular issue that caused the rift. It's a breakdown in communications.

Gregg underscored the same thought that Harold mentioned regarding the importance of clear and concise communication when he said,

In public education, you have to understand that this is a public environment and the best way to communicate is to actually be transparent and be open in your communications. Our ability to be transparent in communicating issues both positive and negative that occurs in the district is important.

Being flexible and being able to adapt the communication method to specific stakeholder groups and their interests is important for superintendents. Sharon mentioned,

I don't think there is one most effective way to communicate with all stakeholders. I think I have to go out and be present to staff. I think I always went to the parent-teacher conferences. That's where I saw the parents most pleased and most disgruntled . . . I spent untold hours doing newsletters to the board telling them everything I thought they needed to know.

Communicating with various groups of stakeholders who are diverse and recognizing that each has their own way of communicating is important. Leon reported,

It is important to effectively communicate whether you are in the pulpit or in the pool room and I've been in both. It is important to have a skill set that allows you to go from the pulpit of a church to the pool room and deal with both sets of clients telling both that you have their interest at heart.

Gregg pointed to effective communication as a contributing factor in his going beyond the norm in his length of tenure. Gregg said,

I think that the communication part was critical to me having the opportunity to stay as long as I did . . . I think that one thing would be that my methodology is always to listen constantly. What I think that it does, is it constantly allows others to feel alive . . . then I could reflect back [on] what I thought I heard or I could reflect back on some of the actions of the school system . . . I think that maybe leads to longevity.

Each of the participants stressed positive relationships through effective communication with both their community and their school boards as contributing to their longevity. The superintendents described these two groups of stakeholders as the most important in determining the length of their tenure. Sharon said that communication and relationship-building contributed to her ten-year tenure as superintendent in one school district. She noted,

Things that contributed to my longevity . . . I think in the communication piece, they felt so secure [with me]. So, it was definitely communication that kept me there 10 years. It was relationships with stakeholders that contributed to my longevity, too. I could still be there because of those relationships. Those people would have fought for me. I could have stayed another five years.

I found that there was consensus among all of the participants that successful superintendents built strong relationships with stakeholders by using sound and contextually appropriate communication methods. Harmon underscored the point that his communication with the board provided the transparency that supported positive relationships and led to his long tenure. “Open and frequent communication transferred to trust. I believe that is the only way we survived,” he said. Each of the superintendents suggested that effective communication and relationship-building contributed to their longevity.

Theme 2

Long-serving superintendents understand and give prominent attention to school boards and the community.

The participants identified two groups, their school board and their community, as vital stakeholders. Each of the long-serving superintendents emphasized that they targeted a great deal of their relationship-building efforts specifically toward these two groups.

School board. The participants gave a number of responses in both the first and the second interviews regarding the interactions and collaboration that each had with their board and their chair. Since all school boards in both states, Tennessee and North Carolina, have the statutory responsibility to hire and either retain or dismiss district

superintendents, each of the participants perceived their relationship with their board as a crucial piece in determining their longevity. While a number of participants indicated that they disclose the same information to all board members, each said that they had a closer relationship with the board chairs than the other members. The participants' responses covered a number of different aspects of superintendent-board and superintendent-board chair relationships.

Board expectations for superintendents. All of the long-serving superintendent participants had significant thoughts about how and why they were initially hired by their school board. They each said that knowing why they were hired was important in fulfilling their board's expectations and contributed to their longevity. "I was hired by the Board to keep academic tradition and make changes . . . [the board] was looking for someone with experience leading change and bringing people together," said Harmon.

Three of the remaining participants echoed Harmon's perception that they were hired to lead change. But, one of superintendents who was hired from within district where he was serving as an assistant superintendent did not believe he was hired to initiate or lead the district in a new direction. Tom explained,

I was hired to maintain. If it is not broken, don't fix it . . . [it was] the passion that I had for our children and for this community that they knew . . . I said to the Board when I was hired, "This is who I am."

The fact that Tom was currently serving as an assistant superintendent in the district prior to being named superintendent reinforces the idea that his board neither expected nor wanted change.

Mike was also hired from within the district. He was serving as a middle school principal. His perception is that the board that hired him did not have an expectation that he would be a change agent. He said that his leadership style was different than the previous superintendent, but that significant changes in curriculum or a change in the direction of the district was not expected.

One participant, Leon, was hired from another district where he was serving as that district's superintendent. He did not feel that change was something for which his new district was looking. Leon reported,

I was not given a charge to fix anything: that was not the expectation . . . The board wanted someone who would represent public education in our community and our region and maintain a high standard and keep the district on the cutting edge in the state . . . When I arrived, the board needed to know what I thought and what I did . . . I articulated my plan very clearly to the board. I said, "If you hire me, here's what you are getting."

Sharon was hired from within the school district where she was serving as the instructional supervisor for the entire district when she was appointed as superintendent. Sharon believes that she was hired to move the district in a new direction. "I was hired to be a change agent . . . When I was hired the Board said, 'The buildings are done. We need you to focus on academics,'" stated Sharon. She explained that the board knew what she believed in and supported her emphasis on quality instruction. "The board absolutely knew that if I thought a teacher was not good for kids, he or she was not going to be rehired," Sharon noted. She said that her board wanted a strong leader who put academics first.

When Gregg was hired from the outside to head a large metropolitan district, he felt he had a clear direction from his board to make changes. He explained,

I think I was hired to be a change agent . . . The board wanted me to be a different change agent than my predecessor, the community was not connected to the schools and they wanted someone to repair the damaged relationships.

Gregg emphasized and underscored the significant emphasis that he felt the board placed on him to build bridges to the community and create a sense of stakeholder ownership in the district's schools.

Harold also was hired from the outside to lead a large district. He replaced a superintendent who had been formally dismissed by the board in what he reported was a contentious split-vote by the governing body. Harold said,

I was hired to get us back on track and to bring stability to the school system . . . When I came in I said to the board, 'We have to stay focused on the big picture and if we do, we can come together. You have to settle down and behave yourselves . . . I felt like my responsibilities were to try to bring the board together. Build some positive relationships, let people know that they are supported and get that strategic plan started. Get [the district] in motion.

Four of the seven participants felt like their board gave them either an implied or specific directive to provide leadership that would take the district in a different direction. Three of those four were hired from outside the new district, while one superintendent was currently serving in the district where she was named superintendent. The superintendents from the three largest school districts represented in the study all believed that they were hired to be change agents in their districts.

Sharing information with the board and chair. All of the long-serving superintendents in the study discussed very specific strategies for what, how, and why they gave particular information to their board and/or chair. Mike was passionate about the need to disseminate all important information to board members often. He stated,

You can't talk to board members too much. Every week I send them a bulleted list of items. All board members get the same information. I have got to convince the board that I'm on top of everything . . . If you don't communicate with the board members they are communicating with somebody and they are getting their reality from somebody in the district . . . I talked to every board member once a week. If they had an opportunity to hear something in the public, I wanted them to hear it from me first. I wanted my spin on it because if you let it expand up into an issue before you do address it, you are likely dealing with much more heartache than necessary.

Leon cited the idea that he had to get important school news, good or bad, to board members prior to them hearing it first from someone else:

I embrace the idea that the only time a board member wants a surprise is on Christmas morning . . . In order to both survive and flourish . . . you have got to empower by information and empower by knowledge. That's what I did with the board.

Tom's emphasis was also on being transparent as well as timely. "I wanted to have nothing secretive. I mean if something was going on, I wanna be completely transparent. If something happened, I called them that day and said, 'Here's what happened. I want to give you a heads up,'" noted Tom.

The participants differed on how much information they shared with their full board and how much information they only shared with the chair. Most participants said

that they had a special relationship with the chair that helped them effectively communicate with the rest of their board. Harmon stated,

I think it's critical for a superintendent to survive that you don't just converse with one or two board members . . . [but] there are things that I bounce off the board chair that I don't with everybody, but it's just with him.

Mike reported that the board chair's support is critical to establishing and maintaining positive stakeholder relationships. He said,

You better have a board chair that's with you because if somebody comes up in Wal-Mart and says, "You boys need to fire this superintendent." They need to have the guts to say, "No, I don't think so. But, I'd be happy to go out there and talk to him with you if you want me to."

Harold uses caution when considering specific board members to discuss sensitive information. "With issues that were sensitive, I told the chair and vice-chair, but no other board members. Some will talk outside of the board room," according to Harold. He went on to discuss using the chair's input in whether to share information with the entire board, or not. He said,

My relationship with the board chair is good. I run stuff by him before I share it. I have two board members who will let stuff out of closed sessions . . . Sometimes I only share information with the chair and vice chair.

Mike used a similar filtering process with his board chair. "My board chair knew of everything, even the weird stuff—I would always call or meet with him," said Mike.

A different use of the board chair was discussed by Sharon. She utilized her board chair as the conduit to the other board members when a situation arose and information

needed to be disseminated. “I met with the board chair every week. He kept all the other board members informed,” Sharon said.

The superintendents all suggested that communicating with their boards was fundamental in creating a positive relationship with their governing body. And, each also said that he or she had a unique relationship with the board chair that was different from the other board members.

Coaching and understanding roles. All the participants referenced how board members perceived their roles and that coaching board members was a big part of their superintendency. The participants came to consensus on the importance of guiding and coaching board members. “I had to tell board members all the time to stay in their lane . . . Two of my board members felt like they wanted the superintendent’s role and to make all the personnel decisions,” Tom said.

Each of the superintendents had his or her own unique ways of coaching their boards. Each one had also faced the need to reign in one or more of their board members during their tenure. Harold said,

With the board—I treat them respectfully. Sometimes we get in trouble when we have the attitude that is driven by our ego. . . . Once a board member told me, “You be quiet and let me talk. Twenty years earlier, I would have walked out.” [But now] I don’t get into ego battles. I know at the end of the day what I can and what I can’t do. If you can find something that gets into what a board member wants to study and push, I don’t have a problem with that, because then it keeps them out of some of the big stuff.

But, even though Harold advocated for allowing board members some range of freedom, he also discussed having to pull back on them from time to time. “I check Facebook

every morning to see what our board members have posted. And, not infrequently, I have to call them on their posts,” stated Harold.

Mike articulated his perception of the difficulties that surround coaching school board members:

There is a fine line between coaching board members and communication and empowerment. I don't know what the balance looks like. I just know there is an element in all of that that you can't push too hard but sometimes you have to push a little bit and sometimes you have to plant your feet.

Mike discussed one instance when he had to plant his feet with a board member:

Board members who have a specific reason to be on the board can be challenging. One whom I clashed with came to my office and I had to tell him, “If you ever come in my office again and act this way again, and threaten me, I'm going to kick your ass all the way out to the parking lot. I will hurt you so bad that your mamma won't want to come in and see you . . . Now you need to decide if I'm playing or real” . . . In my younger days I would have jumped over my desk and whooped his ass. Now, I don't advise anybody to say that to a board member. But, I am not going to lie down for somebody. I don't deserve that.

Mike went on to say that board member did not speak with him for 3 months. But, after the board member's son intervened, the board member apologized and the pair began to heal their fractured relationship.

Coaching board members and keeping them gently nudged into their proper lane is a difficult and ongoing project, according to all the participants. Harold may have put it best when he said, “My coaching is to get the board members engaged . . . I told the board to stay focused on the main thing, kids—disagreements cannot be our focus.”

Community. When the participants talked about the community where their district was located, three consistent sub-themes emerged. They each talked about the perceptions that the community held about both public education and the local schools, the groups within the community that they considered to be the influencers, and strategies that they used to establish effective communication with those stakeholders in the community. Each participant stressed how critically important it was for the superintendent to understand the community and its views of the local district and public education. A majority of participants emphasized their connection and relationships with those whom they described as “movers and shakers” in the community. And, the third area that was repeatedly mentioned was the significance of good communication with the community, which most pointed out was a significantly different audience than parents or staff.

Community’s perceptions about schooling. Mike believed that he had a handle on his community’s perception of public schools. He told his principals,

Everybody wants a good school system and most people don’t know what it looks like. Here is what it looks like to most people: buildings have the grass cut, no kids outside smoking or making out, the path from the front door to your office is clean, smells good, looks good and feels good.

He went into a little more detail and said, “The community knew that education was the key to something better.”

Leon felt strongly that his community had traditionally supported rigorous educational programs and had high standards. “Even though we have become a poorer community, higher educational attainment has been retained . . . Expectations are pretty

sophisticated . . . Status quo is not good enough for this community,” explained Leon.

But, he did add that while the expectations are sophisticated, the information that comes out of the district has to be tempered to the audience. Leon stated,

I don't have parents who generally are sophisticated enough to understand and equate test A to test B. I don't have a parent who understands data. So they are confused in what we do. Even with the number of rocket scientists and engineers that I have in this community there is confusion.

Tom felt that his 24 years in the community prior to being appointed superintendent gave him a unique insight into the stakeholders' perception of public education. Tom said,

I had been there . . . So, I knew what was important to people in the community and I think part of that was how we came up with the strategic plan. I understood what the community was after. I knew what our community wanted and felt like. They wanted their children to have a quality education, they wanted them to be safe in school, and they wanted them to be treated fairly.

Tom also felt strongly about the community and their feelings about school athletics. He said,

Sports is a big part of our community. People take a lot of pride in that in our schools. They take pride in getting together for football games. It makes a difference in the community . . . Friday night lights brought us all together.

Harmon also stressed the role and perception of athletics in his district. He said that it drove the conversation regarding whether to construct a new comprehensive high school or multiple smaller high schools. “Building two smaller high schools instead of a

comprehensive high school was frowned upon . . . The average citizen wanted the high school to be a 4A (large school classification) powerhouse,” Harmon said.

The participant from the largest school district felt that there was not a uniform perception throughout the community about the schools. “The community expectation was across the spectrum—in parts of the community higher education was very strong. But, in other parts, education was not valued . . . But, there was a lot of pride in individual schools and with traditions,” said Gregg.

Sharon also had some very definite ideas about the perceptions of her community toward the schools and the district. “When I became superintendent the pride in the community for the district was in its schools . . . The community valued education . . . [they] want them to have a good job, be well behaved, be good citizens, and we want them in school,” she commented.

Community influencers. Most of the superintendents discussed specific groups and individuals who they thought were very influential members of their community. In some cases, they also related how they tried to connect with these individuals or groups. Sharon had an interesting perspective on the influencers in her small community. She said,

Members of the Ministerial Association I wooed the most . . . The religious leaders probably give you more uncontrollable drama . . . The sheriff, the DEA person, the city police chief, the fire chief and the city manager, I never missed a meeting where those five people were there. They had a lot of power over what would happen in our system and how people felt about what was happening in our system. The county commission did not hold power over me because I never asked them for a penny, so they had nothing on me . . . When you’ve got that many political players it’s unnerving a bit . . . I had to keep them all on the train.

She also connected with the civic groups because she identified them as influential in the community. “I was in Kiwanis and I went to speak at Rotary every year and the Lions Club,” Sharon stated. She had spent over 20 years in the district prior to being named superintendent. Sharon felt that she knew the stakeholders that wielded the most influence and power.

Tom had spent over 20 years in the district prior to being elevated to superintendency. He too felt like his history in the community aided in understanding who the influential groups and individuals were. “Coming from inside the district, I already knew who to talk to and who were in charge of things,” Tom stated. As a result of Tom’s background in the community, he selected individuals that he perceived had the most influence to become part of a community advisement team. He said,

We created a group with partners from the community outside of the school system. They were from the police department, the ministers, the politicians and parents. We met quarterly, so we had continuous feedback through that group on what we were doing in our school system . . . Sometimes you have to know the movers and shakers in the community. I think it is important to understand relationships and be in those relationships.

Leon had seen his community’s power group evaporate as the demographics of his school district has changed. Leon commented,

When I began, the power group was the noon, Rotary Club. Sometimes I would bring school programs like the technology department. And the program would serve as a genesis for where we were going. Rotary was that power group, but now with the economy, it has changed. There is a vacuum in the power structure.

Harmon definitely identified who he thought were the community influencers in his school district. Harmon said, “The business leaders, parents of children, retired grandparents, the Republican Men’s Federation, civic organizations, the Chamber of Commerce and ministers are all very influential.” While he indicated each of these groups had influence, it was a different group that he felt retained the most power.

Harmon stated,

There’s a group of men, business leaders that meet once a month, on Wednesday night and have dinner together. And it can be anywhere from 50 to 75 men across the community. I go to that regularly because I stay in touch. That’s a way for me to tell key leaders in the community what is going on . . . Being a part of the Wednesday night movers and shakers group absolutely contributed to my ability to be successful and maintain my position.

Mike believes that the number of district supporters affects the length of a superintendent’s tenure. He stated,

Ultimately, every year something is not ideal. You don’t get as big of raises as you want or you don’t get the new books that you need. It’s not peaches and cream. It is not an easy job. So the number of disgruntled people grow. It doesn’t go away on its own. So if you don’t have a bigger army out there that will answer the general question, “Look he’s doing the best he can. I know, we trust him.” Instead, if the biggest army is saying, “He really doesn’t know what it is like in the classroom and he doesn’t care about our kids.” If that makes it to a five-member board and three of them agree, then you are unemployed.

Mike also shared a story about an influential group in his community, the ministerial association. He stated that this group tried to push him out of office based on the district’s public acceptance of both atheist and homosexual student groups. He shared the experience of how he faced the religious leaders whom he described as influencers. He

believes that how he faced this confrontation contributed to his longevity. He shared the following story:

They were preaching against me in the pulpit. So, we (ministerial association and Mike) had a meeting in the Baptist church basement, 28 preachers. Every damn one of my board members showed up, and buddy, it was on. There ain't been that much cursing in a Baptist church since Jesus. I called them sons of bitches, I said, "You are the most low-life sons of bitches I've ever been around all my life. The audacity of any one of you to preach from the pulpit about something you know nothing about." I said, "I'm going to promise you this in this House of God: you put your hand on my back to push me out of this position, you'll think you've touched the devil . . . I said let me tell you what really happened." . . . I went through it all. Hell, they started boohooing and bawling and apologizing and making shit up as they went . . . As a superintendent you don't run to that fight, but you are in it . . . And damn, you don't have the option of leaving you're going to fight it.

Each of the superintendents recognized the power and the importance of transparent and effective communication and relationships with both their board and the community. The participants shared experiences that ranged from informational to coaching to rebuking with each of the two groups. They all emphasized the importance of being honest and courageous in their relationships and with their communications with both groups.

Theme 3

Long-serving superintendents attribute their longevity to specific communication and relationship-building behaviors.

The long-term superintendents in this study identified six specific common behaviors that they perceive enhanced their ability to successfully address challenges in their district and contributed to lengthening their tenures and allowing them to exceed the

national average for longevity. All seven of the participants referenced all six of the behaviors that are listed in this section.

Strategically plan. Each of the seven participants referenced formal planning as an essential behavior. There was some variance among the superintendents regarding the types of strategic plans that they could put together and implement, but the consensus was that some type of formal action plan was important. Each of the participants cited comprehensive district plans. Five of those seven superintendents indicated that the plan they initiated was a first for their district. Two of the participants cited a district-wide communications plan as an additional plan that was foundational to their success. Each of the participants also indicated that they used their respective plans as a vehicle for effective public relations, progress assessment, and redirection. Additionally, all the superintendents indicated that their strategic plans were active documents that evolved into part of the district's embedded protocol.

Uniquely significant, in five districts, no previous plan had been in place prior to the participants' introduction of their initial plan. One participant, Sharon, also discussed a district communications plan in addition to a strategic plan and Gregg also reported implementing both a strategic plan and a communications plan. Mike stated, "I started by assembling a team and laying out a plan so they (the board) knew what we were working toward, and I lived and died by that plan."

Harmon, who was not previously employed by the district when he was hired as superintendent, cited his unfamiliarity with the community as a barrier to his potential success. He stated that he used the strategic plan as the vehicle to allow him to become

acclimated to the culture of his new environment. “When I walked into the community, I didn’t know who all the key players were. So putting together the strategic plan allowed me an opportunity to get to know the board better and [who] the essential community members [were],” stated Harmon.

For Gregg, the strategic plan was a way for the Board and the community to progress monitor the successes and setbacks of the district. “The strategic plan was reported on at every meeting and gave feedback to what is and what is not working . . . An organized strategic plan allows us to always come back there, it helped bring people along,” Gregg said. In each of the above cited situations, the strategic plan was used as a way to enhance communication and transparency while connecting the superintendent with key stakeholders.

Harold cited his district’s strategic plan with contributing to his ability to combat political infighting among board members. He explained,

I think the strategic plan allowed us to come together . . . It was tough dealing with the political climate . . . But, that strategic plan, that vision were there and as long as you stay true to those and intentional around that thing it, it was really a pathway for me.

Leon also referenced initiating a strategic plan. He said the district did not have a plan, but “I needed a map.” Leon commented that his challenge was driven by a desire for more stakeholder inclusion, “I’ve got to get more buy in. I’ve got to get more folks involved . . . [I became] an evangelist for our school system . . . I was very visible and viable in the community serving as a community cheerleader.” But, while Leon

advocated and began planning for the future initially, he said that understanding the community was vital to his success facing the challenges in the district. He stated,

I'm not a believer in a plan in a box. My vision for the first year was to develop an understanding of the strengths and the weaknesses and build on those strengths and correct those weaknesses to establish relationships, to establish rapport, to establish a dialogue that had me serving as the point person for the school district . . . We coupled the plan with assessments from the community groups, from PTO groups, from principals and from our board.

Leon said building capacity within the board and among stakeholders allowed him to meet challenges with the support of the vital stakeholders. He indicated that he strategically planned how to roll out new initiatives months prior to implementation. He stated,

[I would say] here are some programs we want to look at knowing that we may do this six months before I introduce something. And, I guess it's a lot like planting seeds. I was planting a seed knowing six months from now, we're going to see something stick out of the ground and we're going to start talking about this particular issue or this particular program.

When Harmon became superintendent he saw that the community was in the middle of a budget battle concerning the school district. Two previous bond referendums had failed and the community was fragmented and polarized. Harmon stated,

There was a big debate on what to do with facilities and the board of education wanted to proceed with another plan immediately. I said, "Guys, this does not happen. We've got to have a strategic plan that focuses on not only facilities but what our academic purpose is. What our focus is with personnel. We've got to, if we're going to develop a facility plan, we've gotta have some background data and that takes time."

According to Harmon, the strategic plan covered everything from facilities to academics to athletics. Harmon said that he uses the strategic plan to measure the success of the district and as a vehicle to keep the community stakeholders up to date on both positive and the negative movement in the district. The bond referendum won an overwhelming victory at the polls and a multimillion-dollar high school complex was built as a result. Harmon gives credit to the planning process and the strategic plan itself for the election victory and success with this challenge. He admits that a referendum defeat would have cut his tenure short.

According to Gregg, the strategic plan that he initiated incorporated the goals for the district. He commented that it was the first comprehensive strategic plan that the district had ever had. Gregg indicated that the strategic plan was the blueprint that he and the district used to meet the challenges that they faced. He stated, “We presented the plan [which contained] all the goals, strategies, and initiatives that we planned over the course of the next four years. And under each of the initiatives was a launch date.” Gregg said that the strategic plan not only created the path for the district to follow, but it also gave him a tool to assess progress and redirect resources. He added that he reported on the plan each month to his board as a method of maintaining transparency. When asked if the strategic plan was successful in supporting and meeting the challenges of the district, Gregg responded,

The best I can say on that is that others have said it’s successful. I struggle with what success looks like because I had very, very high expectations. I never really felt like I—we reached a level of expectations that I wanted the district to reach. But many others have said that the strategic plan was very successful. There are a lot of goals that we met and surpassed.

Mike said that when he assumed the superintendency in his district, each of the board members had specific challenges and priorities that they wanted addressed. He stated that some wanted computers, some wanted new bleachers for the football stadium, and some wanted a reading interventionist to help the teachers teach reading. The biggest challenge that Mike identified was organizing and prioritizing the various individual priorities of the stakeholders. The district had never had a strategic plan. He used this document to bring order and logic to the decision-making process in the district. Mike said that by implementing a district plan, each board began to understand prioritizing through a wider more inclusive lens. Mike stated,

And I was able to basically and honestly say it was a tool that helped me say, “no” more than it helped me say, “yes”, and we would review it once in the middle of the year and then we would review it in our June retreat . . . I would scale it out five to eight years and say, “Okay, here’s what we ought to be doing over the next five years to get to here.” It really kept them focused.

Mike said that the comprehensive plan drove both the emphasis and the timeline for addressing district challenges. It also provided a platform that he thought enhanced the belief in all stakeholders that the district, due to his leadership, was being honest and fair. It created a feeling of transparency because the strategic plan was always the driver for which challenges would be addressed and when they would be addressed. Mike credited the implementation and sustainability of the strategic plan as playing a part in his extended tenure. Mike added the plan allowed him to communicate to all stakeholders by keeping the facts straight and keeping everyone informed equally.

According to each superintendent, deliberate planning is essential for district leaders. It provides a roadmap and an ongoing public relations tool that allows for stability and transparency with stakeholders. An important point was stressed by each of the superintendents regarding the strategic planning process. It provides a platform to engage diverse stakeholders and give voice to the community. By engaging the community in the process, it allows the contextual influences and perceptions among the stakeholders to surface and be understood by the superintendent.

Know the stakeholders. Each of the superintendents discussed the various stakeholder groups and the importance for district leaders to understand who they were and what each group desired from the local schools. The importance of this contextual concept resonated through the data of each participant. Staff, community, board members, and parents were all referenced as stakeholder groups by the superintendents. The participants each indicated that significant effort and authentic relationship-building must be initiated by the superintendent with the staff if he or she wants to have support when unpopular, but needed personnel decisions are made. Six of the seven superintendents related at least one narrative concerning a difference of opinion with a board member that resulted in a crucial conversation. The seventh participant stated that he was hired on a split vote, but after a year and in all subsequent years, he enjoyed unanimity from his board on everything he brought forward.

The consensus from all the long-term superintendents was that a deep understanding of the community and the district's stakeholders was fundamental in their decision-making. The participants were in agreement about the need to know the history

of the district, the perception of the community regarding the schools and the influential individuals or groups in the community. Knowledge of the community helped to determine their communication and relationship-building strategies. Additionally, each participant mentioned the value of connecting with peers. Gregg expressed the common feeling of the participants when he commented, “In any community you just want to be sure you say things in a way that’s not going to be offensive or misunderstood.”

Tom indicated his decisions about what to communicate were also driven by his knowledge of the community and what they wanted. “I knew what our community wanted and felt like . . . I knew what was important to our community . . . I felt like I understood what our community was after . . . Just having good conversations with the people . . . That was something I felt so strongly in,” Tom shared.

When Leon related how the community affected his communication and relationships he offered, “For me that’s kind of a big part of, what I think is important . . . being able to read people and being able to understand . . . why we think they’re really at the table with those questions and concerns.” His view was that the community’s investment and support in a public school system was paramount in determining how and what to communicate with them. Leon added,

It is important to effectively communicate whether you are in the pulpit or in the pool room and I’ve been in both. It is important to have a skill set that allows you to go from the pulpit of a church to the pool room and deal with both sets of clients telling both that you have their interest at heart.

Leon's strong belief in tailoring his message to specific stakeholders is most evident in a unique example of how he sought to communicate with community members who did not have children in his district. He stated,

In our community, we did a study that showed us that there were .29 of a kid per house in the district. So as we are understanding that, it let us know that roughly 70% of our homes didn't care what was coming home in the (students') backpack. They never saw it. We developed a newsletter and sent it out in every utility bill in the city.

Mike believed that the community drove his decisions regarding relationship-building and communication. He stated that listening was the cornerstone of relationship-building and that if a superintendent listened and showed his constituents that he was listening, it would likely build goodwill and positive relationships. Mike said that the community has to know who the superintendent is and what he or she represents. If the community believes in the character of the superintendent, there is a greater chance its stakeholders will connect and have a positive relationship with the district leader.

Sharon stated that the community was the bedrock for her as she built relationships and communicated on a daily basis. "I knew the community. I knew where the issues were going to come up. I knew who the people are that are gonna be most disgruntled from day one," commented Sharon.

Significantly, each participant discussed the importance of knowing and understanding the community when making communication and relationship decisions. This one factor drove and supported most of the decisions that the district chiefs made regarding their relationships with stakeholders. The superintendents shared that they

spent considerable time and effort getting to know who their constituents were and either aligning the district's goals to the community stakeholders' ideas or building capacity among the community stakeholders to understand why change was needed. I believe the data from long-serving superintendents in this study underscore the importance of understanding and using community context when fashioning messages, selecting ways to communicate, and targeting stakeholder groups in the community with which to build relationships. Knowing the audience and understanding which stakeholders are the ones who are influencers can help a superintendent sell an initiative, address a challenge, or build capacity for an impending change.

In the interviews the superintendents cited the community and parents as a constantly changing demographic. The stakeholders' evolution that they cited included economic as well as racial changes in the community. The superintendents affirmed that district leaders must know and understand their constituents, and they must know what is important to their stakeholders.

Be visible. Without exception, each participant spent a great deal of time citing reasons and examples of how and why they believed visibility in the district was a crucial behavior that supported both their effectiveness and contributed to their longevity. The superintendents stressed the importance of being seen in the community, at school functions, in the schools and among the various stakeholder groups was critical to their success. They each indicated that their personal visibility increased their accessibility to more stakeholders. Several participants suggested that some stakeholders were intimidated to come to the superintendent's office. But, by reducing staff and community

anxiety and initiating contact in a venue that was comfortable for the stakeholders, the participants felt that they were taking essential steps to connect with those who would have otherwise gone unheard and remained disenfranchised. All of long-term superintendents expressed their belief that being visible increased the opportunity for community and staff to express themselves and feel valued by the district's leader. In addition, the communication method that each of the participants cited as the most effective was face-to-face. By going to their stakeholders' location, the superintendents were increasing the opportunity to engage in the most effective mode of communication that they cited in the data.

Visibility by the superintendent was described by the participants in two subsets: staff and community. "Be visible. The most important thing I think I can do in a school system is get out, not only with our teachers, or faculty and staff, but also out in the community," stated Tom.

Harold captured his feelings about the importance of the superintendent being seen in schools and by staff members:

The big thing is visibility. Visibility breeds credibility. People need to see you in schools . . . The first thing is to be visible . . . Talk to teachers, people need to see you . . . Just getting in and being visible and interacting with people . . . My goal is to get in every school once a month.

The opinion that visibility in schools for superintendents went deeper than merely being a physical presence in a school was expressed by a number of participants. Sharon articulated her view that visibility needed to connect with substantive interactions with staff, "I tried to go to every school for at least one day every month . . . I was going into

schools, but you can't let it be redundant and you can't let it be fake," according to Sharon.

In some instances, superintendents felt school visibility supported their ability to lead successfully. "I was always in schools. So I could tell when things were rumbling a little bit. And I would say to the staff, 'Look, I'm here to explain what we are doing and I am going to take questions,'" Mike said. In addition to visibility creating a possible avenue for feedback from school staffs, it also allowed district leaders to express their own feelings and connect with the instructional staff.

A number of the superintendents singled out community visibility as a crucial behavior in supporting their longevity and success. Leon shared the following:

My first strategy as I hit the ground in the system was I'm going to be as visible as I can be to my community at large . . . I told folks I was an evangelist for our school system at Rotary, Kiwanis, and every place I could find. So, I was very visible and very viable in the community serving as a community cheerleader . . . Credibility wasn't something that could be communicated on paper . . . You have to get out of your office and engage with people.

Visibility was noted by each of the participants as an important behavior that contributed to supporting their leadership efforts and success. Closely aligned with the superintendents' perceptions of successful leadership behaviors was their affirmation that listening combined with visibility was a powerful and effective combination. "I think it was so important to be out there . . . I put in the time to be present and listen," stated Gregg.

The more that members of the community and staff feel personally connected to the superintendent, the more likely it is that the superintendent will get the support of

those individuals during times of conflict or when making controversial decisions. The superintendents said it is vital that district leaders go to school and community events with stakeholders to meet and talk with them in venues where the stakeholders are comfortable. Many parents and community members are intimidated and will not initiate a meeting with a superintendent in the formal setting of the district's office.

Listen to the stakeholders. While effective communication was included in the responses from all seven of the participants when asked about behaviors that contributed to their success and longevity, listening was cited by each of the superintendents as the foundational piece of effective communication. The long-serving superintendents felt that their knowledge about the district, the community, and the changing demographics of the student body was based upon their willingness to invest time listening to their stakeholders. The importance of listening to the community and the staff to help determine the direction of the district was taken a step further by three of the seven superintendents. They each discussed the importance of sending some type of message or signal back to the stakeholders that they were being heard. These three superintendents stressed the need to communicate the authenticity of their listening to stakeholders. Two of the participants mentioned allowing others in one of the stakeholder groups to make the final decision regarding a district issue if that decision did not create harm in any way. All of the superintendents connected visibility and listening as going hand-in-hand as they built relationships among the staff and the community. The participants singled out listening as a behavior that trumps most others in sending a message of support to stakeholders when facing challenges. Mike stated,

Listen and have evidence for stakeholders that you are listening. Whatever listening looks like in your community, listen. Then, have some evidence that you are listening . . . Engineer a win for somebody. If I have to do something and there are options, and I don't really care, let someone else make the decision and win. [That will] show us that you are listening and show us you care. Listen, listen, listen and show us evidence that you are.

Harmon echoed Leon's comments regarding the importance of both listening and demonstrating evidence of listening when he stated, "The single most effective way to build relationships is to talk to people, [no,] listening is probably more important than talking. It is critical that people know you got their complaint. [That] you heard their concerns."

Sharon also stressed the idea of not only listening, but also taking the time to hear the message. She commented,

Listening and it didn't matter what you listened to. Letting them be heard. If someone comes to you as superintendent, no matter how big or small your school system is, by the time they reach you there is an issue. And if you can't take the time to get a deep breath and really listen to that, [and] it is not about correcting them always. If you hear them, they feel empowered.

According to the superintendents, successful leadership in the superintendency requires district chiefs to empower constituents and allow them to have an authentic voice in the direction of the district. It is essential that superintendents listen to the stakeholders and not just give them an opportunity to talk. Public schools are functionaries of the community. As such, community members might be considered the shareholders in the public school districts. These shareholders, while not experts in pedagogy, finance, transportation, or facilities, are the parents of the children who attend

the district's schools. And, they are the taxpayers who financially support the district's schools. With so much invested in the public school district, most parents believe their voice matters.

Select a communication mode. Each participant indicated that they were selective in choosing the various methods that they used to communicate and build relationships. As previously mentioned, communication and relationship-building are closely related. The participants agreed that they had to understand which segment of that group they intended to affect with each specific communication or relationship-building behavior.

There was consensus that face-to-face was the most effective mode of connecting with stakeholders, and one-to-one was more effective than group presentations and advisory committees in that category. But e-mail blasts, mail outs, school events, and civic organizations were also mentioned as avenues to both communicate and build relationships throughout the community and within the district. Two long-serving superintendents discussed considering which type of social media vehicle to use (Twitter, Snap-Chat, FaceBook, etc.) depending upon the audience they wanted to reach (staff, mothers, students, etc.). While only two of the seven participants indicated that they had a formalized, written communication plan, only one of the seven indicated that he relied on intuition when deciding how to communicate or build relationships. A majority of the participants used information and data that they had about the intended audience to determine how they would connect with their stakeholders.

The participants outlined the different modes of communication that they deemed as effective for both outgoing and incoming communication. To a person, each participant shared the idea that face-to-face communication was the most effective. For most, one-to-one was the ultimate communication. But, group meetings were also considered very effective by each participant.

The superintendents were very cognizant of their audience when deciding which social media platform to use. Harmon stated,

Electronic works well for the masses, but there's nothing that replaces sitting down with someone face-to-face, even people who don't agree with you. In having those genuine conversations, I think there are some people whom we have turned around.

Gregg concurred, "I think it was so important to be out there in the community. I put in the time to be present and listen." Tom agreed and commented that his most frequently used strategy for communicating with parents, board, and staff was getting up in front of them. Mike said, "My most effective communication was face-to-face conversations . . . The only way I knew to communicate big things to staff and community was face-to-face or small groups. I am not a big fan of some minion carrying my bad news for me."

Leon's message of personal contact is consistent with what the other superintendents affirmed. He stated,

You have to get out of your office and engage with people, all people . . . As much as I am a social media person and spend time with YouTube videos and Tweets, there is still nothing as effective as face-to-face.

Harmon, who did his doctoral dissertation on communication in small school districts, shared the following strategy that was a result of his study. He shared,

We began a just in time, online newsletter. When confronting all sorts of misinformation that was being put out . . . We obtained email addresses through civic organizations and our employees and put together an email blast. If an inaccurate story came out in the paper, we could reach that population in a different way. It was extremely effective. I could blast out the real story to 6,000 people and it would get posted to Facebook and was on our Twitter feed. People started trusting us instead of the local news.

Leon embraced social media and according to him, it has become an important vehicle for disseminating information. His perspective was the most pragmatic of the participants. Leon stated,

We evolved to social media. We look at our utilization of Instagram, our Twitter presence and our Facebook presence . . . If I want to communicate with mothers of my students, I use Facebook. For my kids, I use Instagram. If I want to communicate with educators, I use Twitter. We shoot the same information to everyone in a different forum. In five years there will be other forums to use. Something different . . . It will be more ubiquitous. I would suggest that absent face to face this is a good model . . . It wasn't that we are going to choose between face to face and social media. We are going to do both concurrently. The preferred mode for me is face-to-face.

Solicit feedback. The strategies listed in the previous section are some of the ways the participants sent information out to their stakeholders. An equally important piece of communication is how the superintendents received information back from their stakeholders. Table 2 lists the seven avenues that the participants discussed as being the ways they sought information from their stakeholders. The methods that each superintendent discussed in detail when answering the interview questions are designated

in Table 2. This table should not be misconstrued or interpreted to convey the idea that if an area is not marked that the participant did not mention an area, he or she did not actively use it. Rather, the modes of information retrieval that are marked are the areas that the participants stated were the most effective for them in getting information to or back from the staff, community, and school board.

Table 2

Methods for Obtaining Stakeholder Feedback

Participant	Advisory Committees	Email	Group Presentations	Telephone	School Events	Surveys or Polls	One-on-one	Social Media
Harold	X	X	X				X	X
Mike			X	X	X		X	
Tom	X	X			X		X	
Leon		X	X			X	X	X
Sharon	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Gregg	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Harmon	X	X	X		X		X	X

When specifically describing communicating with the community at-large, the participants shared specifics about their strategies. All the superintendents stressed the importance of how, where, and what was communicated to the community. They each felt that lessening the stress for parents and community when they engage in communications with the district was vital to effective communication. Because the “movers and shakers” or segments of the public at large is sometimes different from the

parents, it is important that the superintendent and district know their audience to best tailor the message and the means of communicating.

Gregg included two-way communication in his description of how he effectively communicated with his community. He stated,

The parents and the community were on board and stayed on board and were very supportive. Part of that is that we communicated with them as often and in as many different ways as we could. So they knew where we were and what we were not doing well and where we were making gains . . . We did annual polls with the community members and the results were very, very positive and overwhelmingly positive about me. The people embraced me.

Mike gave a very specific example of how he communicated with individuals in his district that may have issues. The following example is probably more likely to be realistic in a smaller rather than a larger school district. Mike stated,

If Johnny's parents are not happy and I know they are going to the ballgame, I'm going to the ballgame and I'd find them. Then, I'd ask them if they wanted to talk. If they said "No," I left it alone. Ballgames, PTA meetings, Lowes, conversations can happen anywhere.

Sharon underscored her commitment to community communications and mentioned the errors she felt she made as well. She stated,

My first five years as a superintendent, there was not an ice cream social or community event or ballgame that I did not attend . . . I went to every parent meeting . . . because I was hearing and meeting with parents, they knew they could come talk to me . . . But, I do not think I listened enough to the grassroots community . . . I would do different in that communications piece . . . I would stop focusing so much on being the small community leader and I would assign somebody to do some of the stuff I was doing in the classroom with curriculum. I would spend more time at the country store having coffee with the guys.

The superintendents came to a consensus on the fact that successful district leaders must not flinch from meeting face-to-face with stakeholders. In fact, the participants agreed that face-to-face meetings are the most effective means of disseminating a superintendent's message. But, districts led by effective superintendents continuously look for supplemental methods to communicate with their constituents. Whether it is an ever-evolving social media platform, press conferences, telephone tree blasts, or the next new communication tool, the participants agreed that forward-thinking superintendents understand that communication is an evolutionary process. The superintendents stated that to stay connected to the stakeholders, a district leader must be vigilant and encourage using the next new communication method.

Use peers. The participants indicated that using peers is a significant behavior that affects their success. The fact that data from each superintendent in the study emphasized the power of peer connections makes it relevant when discussing essential behaviors. All of the long-serving superintendents either discussed how they relied upon the council of other superintendents to provide much needed support and advice, or the participants offered examples of how they had personally mentored and coached other superintendents and administrators through challenging situations and events.

Harold said, "I learned the most about being a superintendent from observing the superintendents that I worked for. I learned what to do and what not to do . . . I had a veteran superintendent coach me for the situation I stepped into." He also worked with and learned from his peers. Harold stated,

When I was a brand-new superintendent, seven or eight superintendents would get together once a quarter . . . We would just go to one of the other districts and have our own conference and we'd do a book study. This was very helpful . . . After that I've belonged to a couple of networks. There was one group of about 45 or 50 superintendents from across the country and we would get together quarterly . . . I would advise new superintendents to find a peer mentor.

Tom also commented that he was not prepared for the superintendency and gained more insight from peers. He stated,

We probably gain more knowledge and support and learn more from talking to different superintendents. I think I learned more from my peers . . . Spending more time with colleagues would have helped me understand the in's and the out's better. Just because you have the job doesn't mean you can keep it.

Harmon stated that he relies on his peers for support and guidance. He commented,

I got to know other superintendents that were doing things that I found were being successful and got to a network of communication with them because this is a very lonely job. There are things we do that you just can't talk about with anybody other than another superintendent and to be able to bounce ideas off each other. Talk with someone when you're going through a crisis.

The pool of active public school district superintendents is very small. In Tennessee there are 141 public school superintendents and in North Carolina there are 115. These relatively low numbers make it difficult for active superintendents to find sufficient data based on authentic practices when they need support for critical or controversial decisions that they face. But using other superintendents as mentors, reflective counselors and debriefers is an effective way for practicing superintendents to find support in an area that has a minimal number of peers with similar experiences.

Theme 4

Long-serving superintendents express concerns about superintendent training and support approaches and services.

All the participants shared some perspectives on either their pre-service preparation for the superintendency or the support that they received or took part in once they were in office. Some comments about the effectiveness of peer coaching and consultations have already been included in the *Use peers* section. While a few participants discussed a specific in-service training or a particular pre-service class that was beneficial, the general consensus from the participants was that no training can adequately prepare one for a superintendency.

Mike indicated that he did not feel prepared for the superintendency when he took the position. He said,

I was not at all prepared. I had a little bit of budgeting in classes and some law. My statistics and philosophy of modern education classes did not help me a bit. It would have been good to have some communication and relationship building classes on how to diffuse a situation and more finance classes. My classes did not prepare me for how big the job is. It's just sad how little it prepared me.

He added, "I don't know that there's any way to prepare anyone for just how big it is, how big the job is."

Tom also commented that he was not prepared for the budget side of the superintendency and gained more insight from peers. Tom stated,

We probably gain more knowledge and support and learn more from talking to different superintendents. I think I learned more from my peers . . . Spending

more time with colleagues would have helped me understand the in's and the out's better. Just because you have the job doesn't mean you can keep it.

Sharon currently teaches professional development classes for novice superintendents, but still believes that most academic preparation programs do not provide the most valuable information that new superintendents need. She cites her teaching experience in graduate programs as support. Sharon stated,

I wish somewhere along the way they would teach about Board relations . . . I have taught at five different universities. I've never seen a graduate program for administrators where there was a board relations class taught. Board relations is drastically missing for both superintendents and principals.

Harmon said that no one can teach another enough to prepare him or her for a superintendency. He added, "I watch other people and see how they manage a crisis. No one can effectively communicate the massiveness of the position."

All seven of the participants emphasized either peer support or peer mentorship as being significant in the development of the skills they needed to become effective in their position. Both formal and informal peer groups were mentioned by the participants as having the most positive effects on their job performance. Each participant indicated that their pre-service training did not effectively equip them for their superintendency.

Summary and Preview

In this chapter I provided a background description of each participant and reported the findings grouped according to the four themes that emerged from the coding of the participants' interviews. The four themes are listed below with a brief summary of the data that supported each.

- *Long-serving superintendents recognize the importance of communication and relationship-building.*

The data from the participants emphasized that they each believed that both communication and relationship-building enhanced their effectiveness and supported their longevity. The participants agreed that authentic positive relationships with stakeholders are only possible if superintendents are thoughtful and intentional in how they communicate.

- *Long-serving superintendents understand and give prominent attention to school boards and their community.*

The data for this theme was divided into one sub-section on school boards and one on community. Within the school board sub-section, the superintendents specified two areas, expectations and information, that they deemed important and affected their relationship with their governing body. They stated that understanding the board's expectations for them was essential in providing direction and leadership parameters.

The second area that the participants' responses addressed related to the board was information. The superintendents shared their thought that being open and transparent with their boards supported their longevity. They also discussed the importance of building a relationship with the board chair and using that person to bounce ideas off of or as a conduit to help manage the other board members.

In the community subsection the participants' data supported the topics of the community's perception of public education and identifying and using community influencers. The superintendents' data indicated that they each spent a significant amount

of time and effort learning about how the community felt toward public education in general and the school district specifically. There was also a significant amount of data that referenced their perception of community influencers and how they used them to support their leadership efforts.

- *Long-serving superintendents attribute their longevity to specific communication and relationship-building behaviors.*

The findings from the participants pointed to six communication and relationship-building behaviors that the long-serving superintendents identified as contributing to their longevity. These six behaviors include the following: strategically planning, knowing the stakeholders, being visible, listening, selecting a mode, and using peers.

- *Long-serving superintendents express concerns about superintendent training and support approaches and services.*

The superintendents were consistent in addressing both pre-service training and in-service support for the superintendency. Each of the participants singled out mentorship and collaboration with other superintendents as not only important, but essential in both their growth and their decision-making. In the area of pre-service training, most of the findings indicate that the participants had not gained very much usable knowledge from their university courses. In general, the participants did not believe their university preparation courses prior to assuming the superintendency were valuable.

The findings in this chapter revealed the thoughts, ideas, and perceptions of seven long-serving school district superintendents. In Chapter V, I refer to the four themes and

the supporting data in answering the main research question and the three supporting sub-questions. As I answer questions using the participants' data, I connect my findings to the broader scholarship by revisiting related studies I discussed in my literature review.

CHAPTER V

ANALYSIS

Introduction

I begin by answering the main research question and then answer the three sub-questions. My answers are based on the results of my study. In providing my answers, I reference existing research in order to identify and understand connections between my study and scholarship on the superintendency. In this way, I demonstrate how the findings from my study helps inform and enhance research on superintendents and, I hope, the work of practicing superintendents.

Research Questions

Main Question

What can we learn from long-serving superintendents about their communication and relationship-building behaviors that may contribute to their longevity?

I begin my response to this question by discussing the connection that superintendent longevity has with both communication and relationship-building. This is an important concept that is included in both the literature and in the findings of this study. It is also reflected in one of my study's themes: *Long serving superintendents recognize the importance of communication and relationship-building.*

Fundamentals of superintendent longevity. Existing research demonstrates that clear and honest communication and effective relationships with stakeholders support the

leadership efforts of school district superintendents and can lead to increasing their tenures (Byrd et al., 2006; Petersen & Short, 2001; Russell, 2014; Williams & Hatch, 2012). Chance et al. (1992) said that open and transparent communication with both the board and the community was a crucial factor in extending the tenure for superintendents. The long-serving superintendents who participated in this study concur. Gregg, for example, agreed that his communication efforts led to a longer tenure. He stated, “What I can say is that due to effective communication, there was not any surprises when it came to my annual evaluations and deciding whether to give me an additional year on my contract, annually.” Harmon, Leon, and Tom all agreed that effective communication and positive relationships with their boards were essential in extending their tenures. Several studies also cite the idea that a positive relationship between the board and the superintendent is the one most important factors in both a district’s success and in extending the tenure for a superintendent (Mountford, 2008; Petersen & Fusarelli, 2008; Walser, 2009).

Harmon discussed the point that for him communication with the board and the community provided transparency that supported positive relationship-building and led to his longevity. “Open and frequent communication transferred to trust. I believe that is the only way we survived,” he said. Leon also emphasized the idea that it was not just communication, but honest communication that supported his longevity as a superintendent. He added, “No doubt about it. I think it is credible communication that contributes to longevity. I think that communications that are less than credible . . . are communications that hurt you.”

Other studies reinforce the idea that communication that is effective, honest, and informative with the community takes away a potentially crippling and possible tenure-shortening factor for a superintendent-board relationship: an unhappy community (Alsbury, 2014; Bjork & Lindle, 2001). Tom stated that his relationships in the community drove his longevity. He said, “I think it was the personal relationships I had with folks. It was huge . . . I think the personal relationship piece was the key to my longevity . . . the tie to the community . . . I think people trusted me.”

Authentic listening is essential. Existing studies demonstrate that there is a significant link between communication and relationship-building for superintendents. Superintendents can build authentic relationships with stakeholders when they take the time to listen and let their stakeholders know that they are listening. Listening is an essential piece of the communication process that positively influences relationship-building for district leaders. Superintendents who take the time to listen to their stakeholders can build relationships with individuals and groups that may contribute to longer tenures. Hoyle et al. (2005) explained, “Listening is a skill not usually considered critical in the performance of a job. But in the superintendency a great deal of listening to many groups is critical” (p. 72). When the superintendent gives stakeholders attention and allows them an authentic opportunity to voice their opinions, it helps create a healthy environment and build trust (Kowalski, 2013; Schwartz, 2011).

Harmon specifically stressed the importance of listening in building authentic relationships. He stated, “The most effective way to build relationships is to talk to people and listen. Listening is probably more important than talking. Listen to people and

have a genuine conversation, one-on-one.” Each of the superintendents repeatedly mentioned listening as the pivotal piece of communication that creates a frame for relationships with community stakeholders and helps build a relationship that can contribute to longevity.

Similarly, Sharon explained, “The single most effective relationship-building strategy was listening. It didn’t matter to whom you were listening or when. If they came in at 4 o’clock crying because the bus didn’t run that morning, let them be heard.” She added, “If you hear them (the community), they feel empowered.”

Gregg also emphasized the strong connection between listening, relationship-building, and longevity. He shared, “Listen constantly . . . It constantly allows others to feel alive . . . I think that . . . leads to longevity.” In the end, listening and relationship-building were consistently linked by the long-serving superintendents in this study and is significantly mentioned frequently in the literature.

Accessibility and visibility enhance relationship-building. Accessibility and visibility are two important superintendent behaviors that contribute to positive relationships with stakeholders and may lead to an increase in longevity. Many parents and community members are intimidated or uncomfortable approaching the superintendent of schools when they have an issue or question. Superintendents who get out of their offices and meet stakeholders at community and school events increase the likelihood of building significant relationships with parents and community members. It is essential for superintendents who want to build positive relationships to seek out venues to connect with those community members. Visibility and accessibility can both

affect how stakeholders perceive the quality of a superintendent's leadership and help superintendents shape public perceptions when negative issues arise (Hoyle et al., 2005; Russell, 2014; Schwartz, 2011). Schwartz (2011) concluded in his study that being visible is critically important to a superintendent and helps develop trust, openness, and authenticity from stakeholders.

Leon concurred with the power of accessibility when he stated, "It's one thing to say that the relationship is important, but if you don't really provide access by being where they (community members) are then you can't move to the next step." He continued by saying that accessibility helped him build relationships within the community. Gregg agreed and added, "I tried to meet people where they were . . . I'd go to football games and sit alongside parents and just listen. That is huge for building relationships."

Visibility and accessibility in the community allow the superintendent to feel the pulse of the stakeholders and support the district leader's efforts. Kowalski (2013) believes that superintendents who are not accessible and who do not build relationships within the community are taking risks. He explained, "Detachment from the community increases the likelihood that the superintendent is initially unaware of the nature and magnitude of resistance. The lack of knowledge is problematic" (p. 240). Similarly, Mike believes that superintendent visibility and subsequent relationships help sway public opinion when bad situations occur. He stated, "If you have been to their ball games and you've been to their Baptist church and senior citizens center . . . you get a lot of credit when there is a negative thing that happens." Tom's comments support Mike's idea

regarding the power of relationships. He believes that the effect that positive relationships have on the public's perception can not only contribute to longevity and a sense of well-being toward the superintendent's leadership, but it can also minimize negative issues and deflect them off of the superintendent. Tom stated,

I think the personal relationships I had with folks was huge . . . If you look straight at the [test and graduation rate] numbers, they were not great when I was here . . . they'll (community and board) accept it (negative outcomes) more if you've got that relationship built up.

Petersen and Short (2001) concur with Tom's view that relationships and perceptions are powerful factors when a board and community consider the competency of a superintendent. They explained,

It is important for district leaders . . . to consider the perceptions that these individuals (board and chair) as well as members of the community have of them . . . [and] be aware of how these perceptions affect their ability to be viewed as . . . trustworthy in their leadership of the district organization. (pp. 561–562)

The long-serving superintendents all emphasized the power of stakeholder relations as a contributing factor to their longevity within their district. Specifically, the superintendents pointed to visibility and accessibility as necessary behaviors in building authentic relationships.

Being visible in the community and finding ways to be accessible to stakeholders not only builds positive relationships, but they also contribute to the community's perception of the superintendent. Positive perceptions can help district leaders overcome negative situations that could adversely affect their longevity. Both the participants and

the existing literature agree that visibility and accessibility contribute to lengthening the tenure of superintendents.

Knowing the community contributes to effective communication. Defining effective communication behaviors for superintendents is complex. The community that each school district serves is unique. With the individuality of each community comes significant variables that affect how superintendents should communicate with their stakeholders. But, from a wider lens, this community individuality is at the heart of successful communication for superintendents. I have concluded from this study that effective communication by a superintendent includes differentiating the message and the method to fit the stakeholders. This differentiation in communication includes understanding who the intended recipient of the message is, knowing what is their sphere of knowledge on the subject, and using the most appropriate form or mode of communication to connect with the intended audience. I have also concluded from the findings in this study that successful communication with stakeholders is enhanced when strategic preparations, regarding what and how to communicate, are made prior to important messaging taking place. As Kowalski (2013) explained, “Superintendents need to understand how factors such as prejudice, ethnic diversity, gender differences, and organizational structure can influence communications” (p. 349). Each district leader is subject to a unique community. To successfully communicate with the stakeholders, the superintendent must understand the perceptions and interests of those individuals and adjust his or her communications accordingly. Cuban (2010) agrees and said that when superintendents have tenures beyond 5 years, they learned to not only compromise, but to

sell those compromises to powerful influentials in the community using various (communication) methods.

Leon's comments underscore the importance of knowing the audience for superintendents. He stated, "It is important to have a skill set that allows you to go from the pulpit of a church to the pool room and deal with both sets of clients telling both that you have their interest at heart." Superintendents must also be flexible in how they choose to communicate with their stakeholders (Cuban, 2010). District leaders must be open to new ways to communicate and seek to understand their community and what modes of communication are the most effective for each group. Sharon emphasized that superintendents must be able to adapt their communication methods to specific stakeholder groups. She added, "I don't think there is one most effective way to communicate with all stakeholders." Sharon detailed how face-to-face interaction with staff was the most effective, and that she spent untold hours preparing weekly newsletters for board members. She affirmed that these were the two best methods to reach each of these stakeholder groups.

Russell (2014) asserted that for superintendents to maintain longevity, they must create a culture of openness and trust by using "effective and multifaceted communication structures and practices" (p. 105). She listed several possible ways for superintendents to communicate. The ways included in person, via telephone or text, through email, in weekly correspondence, and through board documents. The eight most common modes of communication identified by the seven participants in this study were the following: one-on-one, group presentations and e-mail, school events, social media

and advisory committees, telephone, and surveys. All the participants stressed that of all types of communication, face-to-face (which may look different than one-on-one) was the very best. Tom and Leon shared that they viewed the time they physically spent with people engaged in communication as an investment that would pay dividends at some later point.

All of the participants contributed specific opportunities and instances when they had provided for stakeholders, especially staff members, to voice their ideas and opinions, and provide feedback. This type of two-way communication coincides with Lencioni's (2012) idea that "providing employees with a means of communicating upward to their leaders is important in any organization" (p. 150). The various venues for receiving feedback that the participants mentioned were surveys, forums, one-on-one, and social media. Each stressed the importance that listening to stakeholders had on their ability to remain in office beyond the national average for superintendents.

Summary of response to the main research question. Communication and relationship-building are behaviors that can support an increase in longevity for superintendents. These two behaviors are linked due to the fact that most, if not all relationships are created and fostered by effective communication techniques.

Superintendents who authentically listen to their stakeholders are more likely to build significant and positive relationships with those individuals and groups. Superintendents who are visible and accessible to the community, the board, and the staff increase their ability to build strong and significant relationships. Superintendents who

have positive relationships with their stakeholders may be able to avoid negative feedback when controversial situations occur.

Superintendents who tailor their messaging to specific interests of individuals and groups in their district will be more successful in their communication. District leaders should be flexible in choosing their mode of communication and tailor it to the specific audience that they have targeted. Communicating face-to-face is the most effective way for superintendents to engage with stakeholders.

Research Sub-question 1

What contextual factors shaped the communication and relationship-building behaviors that long-serving superintendents report using?

I begin my response to this question by discussing three areas of contextual influence on superintendents. The first is the connection that a strategic plan for a school district has with contextual factors that may affect how a superintendent communicates and builds relationships. I follow this discussion with one subsection on the influences of the community and another on the influences of the school board. The discussion of this question concludes with a summary of my response.

Strategic planning supports contextual acumen. Superintendents who actively use a district-wide strategic plan to determine how to communicate and with whom to build significant relationships are more likely to be successful in their efforts. Kowalski (2013) said that superintendents who engage in the process of putting together a stakeholder inclusive strategic plan become more aware of who their constituents are and can address their specific needs more effectively. The formation of Harmon's plan

allowed him to get to know his community. “When I walked into the community, I didn’t know who all the key players were. So putting together the strategic plan allowed me an opportunity to get to know the board better and [who] the essential community members [were],” stated Harmon.

The participants’ views on the importance of strategic planning align with Kowalski’s (2013) model of inclusive planning. Kowalski’s model brings in a broad range of stakeholders from both the community and the district and it focuses on the organization from a social systems perspective. Kowalski points to some specific benefits of inclusive planning that contribute to the contextual influence it has on communication and relationship-building for superintendents. These areas include the following benefits: real needs are consistent with community values and beliefs, stakeholders are exposed to data that increase their understanding of the district and schools, and participation nurtures a sense of ownership among the district’s constituents. Each of these three benefits contributes to a superintendent’s understanding of the contextual environment and its influences upon the district. For Gregg, the strategic plan was a way for the Board and the community to progress monitor the successes and setbacks of the district and give him information regarding how to maintain or adjust his methods. “The strategic plan . . . gave feedback to what is and what is not working . . . it helped bring people along,” Gregg stated. The strategic plan was used by the long-serving superintendents as a way to enhance communication and transparency while connecting with key stakeholders.

Black and English (2001) include formal planning as a foundational cornerstone for a superintendent’s success. They believe that district leaders must know both where

and why they want to go somewhere before they figure out how to get there. The authors add that planning not only helps superintendents learn about themselves, but it also influences superintendents' decision-making and should ensure compatibility with the stakeholders and their wishes. Harold shared that his district's strategic plan reduced the political in-fighting among board members. He said, "I think the strategic plan allowed us (the board) to come together . . . It was tough dealing with the political climate . . . But, that strategic plan . . . it was really a pathway for me."

Townsend et al. (2007) agree that the planning process can be a way for the superintendent and the board to progress toward goals and maintain a team-like focus on providing the best education for students. They believe a comprehensive district plan can be a necessary first step in creating the team. They said, "The first step is to define and agree to the unique roles and responsibilities of each (board and superintendent), then to establish a set of operating procedures, called protocols, that all agree to follow" (p. 24). Using a plan and reducing the in-fighting allows the superintendent to process the contextual influences of board members as he or she makes leadership decisions. Leon's desire to align his actions to the community and the board's wishes drove his motivation for a plan. He stated, "I needed a map . . . to get more folks involved." Each of the long-term superintendents specifically mentioned that their efforts to put together a comprehensive plan for their district and how that plan allowed them to understand who their stakeholders were helped guide their efforts in connecting with those stakeholders.

Understanding the community's perceptions. Superintendents who understand their community's perceptions of both public schooling and their specific school district

have the opportunity to tailor their messaging and their actions to meet the expectations of their stakeholders (Cuban, 1988). Leon commented that he invested a significant amount of time learning about his community and that drove how he communicated. He said, “I don’t have a parent who understands data. Even with the number of rocket scientists and engineers that I have in this community there is confusion.” Leon added that instead of focusing his communication on test scores, he talks to his community about individual student’s successes, scholarship attainment, and narratives that are easily told and understood.

Mike’s view of his stakeholders, while a bit more cynical, also drove his methods and messaging. He stated in his community, “Everybody wants a good school system and most people don’t know what it looks like. Here is what it looks like to most people: buildings have the grass cut, no kids outside smoking or making out.”

Hoyle et al. (2005) suggest that superintendents need to grasp the complexities of a district and a community’s culture as they decide how to communicate with their stakeholders. They said, “chief school executives need the skills of a historian, an anthropologist, a demographer, and a sociologist . . . [and] an enhanced understanding of the diverse cultures that are represented in their district” (p. 28). Tom added that his 24 years in the community prior to being appointed superintendent gave him the knowledge to know and understand how and with whom to communicate. He said, “I had been there . . . So, I knew what was important to people in the community and I understood what the community was after.” Each of the three long-serving superintendents mentioned using

their knowledge of the community to fashion their actions, including communicating and relationship-building.

Superintendents who know and understand the individuals who are influencers in their community can target their relationship-building efforts toward those individuals. Superintendents increase their effectiveness when they build relationships with community influencers and are able to utilize those individuals as partners to advocate for the district or to minimize negative perceptions of the district (Alsbury, 2003). Sharon sought out relationships with two specific groups of influencers in her small community. She stated that both the ministers in the community and the local government officials were the stakeholders she sought out and used to support her efforts.

Black and English (2001) believe that superintendents who collaborate with and use community influencers or “power bases” will survive longer as the district’s leader than one who does not use the influencers. They said, “The key to using power bases is to let those who comprise them know they are important, valued, have the ability to make significant contributions . . . and that their contributions will be acknowledged” (p. 61). Tom openly engaged the influencers in his community to help advise the district on decisions. He commented,

We created a group with partners from the community outside of the school system. They were from the police department, the ministers, the politicians and parents . . . Sometimes you have to know the movers and shakers in the community . . . it is important to understand relationships and be in those relationships.

Russell (2014) said that every one of the six superintendents in her qualitative study acknowledged the need for connecting with “key communicator” groups that accessed and involved other community stakeholders. These groups were described by Russell (2014) as special action committees, task forces, and advisory groups. While these were the same type of groups many of the long-serving superintendents in this study mentioned, they also stressed the importance of more informal and loosely knit groups. Similarly, Harmon built relationships with those he identified as influencers in his district. He forged a relationship with a loosely knit group of business leaders who meet once a month. Harmon explained,

It can be anywhere from 50 to 75 men across the community. I go to that regularly because I stay in touch. That’s a way for me to tell key leaders in the community what is going on . . . Being a part of the Wednesday night movers and shakers group absolutely contributed to my ability to be successful and maintain my position.

Each of the superintendents in the study indicated that they were aware of the community influencers in their district. Each also agreed that they sought out those influencers and made efforts to enlist their help in both communicating and decision-making as they led the district.

School board is the boss. Superintendents who know why they were hired by their board are more likely to communicate and build relationships that are aligned with their board’s expectations and increase the possibility for a longer tenure. Black and English (2001) discuss the importance of school administrators knowing what their jobs are beyond the job description. This insight is relevant for all school administrators

including superintendents. They said, “The job is whatever it takes to satisfy your immediate superior . . . your job is to find out what the boss really wants and construct your own job description” (p. 145). Superintendents answer to the wishes of the full board. But, it is the individuals on the board who collectively give directives to the superintendent and evaluate him or her. So, the prudent superintendent learns all he or she can about the goals and visions of each individual board member.

All of the long-serving superintendent participants had significant thoughts about how and why they were initially hired by their school board. They each commented that knowing why they were hired was important in fulfilling their board’s expectations and contributed to their longevity. Harmon stated, “I was hired by the Board to keep academic tradition and make changes . . . [the board] was looking for someone with experience leading change and bringing people together.” Three other long-serving superintendents echoed Harmon’s perception that they were hired to lead change. Sharon felt she was hired for a very specific reason. She added, “I was hired to be a change agent . . . When I was hired the Board said, ‘The buildings are done. We need you to focus on academics.’” Gregg also understood his role and why he was hired by the board. He stated, “I was hired to be a change agent . . . a different change agent than my predecessor, the community was not connected to the schools and they wanted someone to repair the damaged relationships.”

Townsend et al. (2007) recognize the importance of superintendents understanding not only why they were hired, but also the goals and vision of each board member. They said,

A strong board and superintendent partnership does not develop by chance. Such a partnership is grounding in the superintendent's respect the opinions of each individual board member and communication with each one regarding their interests and goals for the district. (p. 4)

Three of the superintendents in the study stated they felt that their board hired them to maintain the status quo within their schools and district. Leon was one of those. He said, "I was not given a charge to fix anything; that was not the expectation." Tom's perspective was similar. Tom added, "I was hired to maintain. If it is not broken, don't fix it."

Four of the seven participants felt like their board gave them either an implied or specific directive to provide leadership that would take the district in a different direction. The remaining three long-serving superintendents indicated that they were specifically hired to maintain the status quo within the district. Hoyle et al. (2005) stress the necessity of a superintendent understanding whether the board of education wants a leader who can maintain the status quo or lead transformational change within the district. Superintendents who are acutely aware of their board's expectations for the district leader have the necessary information to frame their communications and target their relationship-building to meet those expectations. They have an awareness of why they were hired by their boards and can use that contextual factor to leverage support and increase their chances of lengthening their tenures.

Mountford (2004) believes that superintendents who build significant relationships with their board chairs and work collaboratively with their chairs can build capacity for supporting superintendent-board relations. Most participants explained that

they had a special relationship with the chair that helped them effectively communicate with the rest of their board. Harmon stated, “There are things that I bounce off the board chair that I don’t with everybody, but it’s just with him.” Mike used a similar process with his board chair to preview sensitive information. “My board chair knew of everything, even the weird stuff—I would always call or meet with him,” stated Mike. Sharon used her chair as the conduit to the other board members when a delicate situation arose and information needed to be disseminated. “I met with the board chair every week. He kept all the other board members informed,” Sharon commented.

According to Petersen and Short (2001), the relationship that develops between the board president (chair) and the superintendent is critical to not only the success of the school district, but also in determining both the effectiveness and the longevity of the superintendent. They explained, “The relationship of the board president (chair) and superintendent is a critical component in the effective operations of the school” (p. 558). Furthermore, superintendents who build authentic relationships with their board chairs can enhance their effectiveness when communicating with their full boards. The long-serving superintendents in this study all recognized the importance of building a relationship with their board chair and using that board chair as a conduit to filter information to the other board members.

Superintendents must also assume a coaching role when it comes to their relationships with many board members. This role may look different in different districts. But, in all districts, effective superintendents must be willing to speak candidly and openly to individual board members if they go beyond their statutory responsibilities.

Kowalski (2013) emphasizes the importance of superintendents being honest and addressing conflicts and coaching board members prior to the escalation of a disagreement. He explained, “Unmanaged or managed ineffectively, conflict can evolve into hostility” (p. 153). Kowalski (2013) points out that it is uncomfortable for a superintendent, who is in a subordinate position, to have to coach a board member on a topic of profound disagreement. But, he says that periodic conflicts that are managed effectively by the superintendent can result in improved communication and benefit the community, the district, and students.

The participants came to consensus on the importance of guiding and coaching board members. “I had to tell board members all the time to stay in their lane . . . Two of my board members felt like they wanted the superintendent’s role and to make all the personnel decisions,” Tom said. Each of the superintendents had their own unique ways of coaching their boards. Each one had also faced the need to reign in one or more of their board members during their tenure.

Sometimes keeping board members in their lane evolves into a heated discussion. Mike relayed this experience with a board member. He stated that he told a board member who was straying out of his lane, “If you ever come in my office and act this way again, and threaten me, I’m going to kick your ass all the way out to the parking lot.” Mike’s experience is probably a coaching anomaly for most superintendents. But, his experience does point to the fact that superintendents should be honest and not be fearful of pulling back board members when they are moving in a direction that may undermine the district or harm children.

Summary of response to Research Sub-question 1. Superintendents who use a strategic planning process and engage the community in that process can learn a great deal about their stakeholders that will enhance their ability to successfully communicate and build relationships. Superintendents who get to know their stakeholders can seek out community influencers who may be able to support the district's efforts and increase the effectiveness of the superintendent. Superintendents who know why their board of education hired them have the ability to direct their efforts toward meeting the expectations of that board. Superintendents who build a significant relationship with their board chair can leverage that relationship to enhance their success in communicating and working with their full board. And, superintendents who spend time coaching their board members have an opportunity to clarify roles and build significant relationships with those members.

Research Sub-question 2

How did superintendents use communication and relationship building behaviors to face district challenges?

My response to this question is based on a theme that emerged from the findings: *Long-serving superintendents attribute their longevity to various communication and relationship-building behaviors.* In Chapter IV, I detailed six behaviors that the long-serving superintendents identified as supporting their efforts when they confronted district challenges. These behaviors include the following: strategically plan, know the stakeholders, be visible, listen to stakeholders, select a communication mode, and use

peers for support. Superintendents who actively and consistently use these six behaviors as they face challenges and lead their districts will be more likely to do so effectively.

Planning to meet challenges. Superintendents who use comprehensive strategic plans to guide their behaviors as they meet district challenges increase opportunities to build capacity with their boards and their community. When district leaders engage stakeholders in identifying challenges and seeking solutions, a broader base of community engagement and support may result. This increase in stakeholder engagement enhances transparency and may result in additional resources. Superintendents who consistently revisit the progress (both positive and negative) of their school district's strategic plan in forums or other venues that are open to the public transmit a message of trust to their stakeholders.

Fullan (2005) agrees that engaging stakeholders in the planning process increases their system-thinking capacity. Strategically planning coincides with his thoughts on system-thinking by putting the content and strategies out for public consumption, by establishing learning opportunities for stakeholders to internalize the deeper meaning of the plans, and by providing periodic assessments and reviews in order to adjust or revise plans. Fullan (2005) said, "This is critical for what we have called 'adaptive challenges' . . . where commitment depends upon joint commitment and ownership" (p. 91).

Harmon's example exemplified the connection between Fullan's (2005) system-thinking and strategic planning. He was named the superintendent in a community that was locked in a budget battle concerning the school district. Two previous bond referendums had failed and the community was fragmented and polarized. He led the

district in initiating its first strategic plan and engaging the community in understanding and internalizing the need for passage of the referendum. Harmon believed that to achieve what had previously failed twice before under a different superintendent, he needed to engage the stakeholders and create a map for success. He credits the district's strategic plan for the overwhelming victory of the bond referendum at the polls.

Harold cited his biggest challenges as bringing his board together to work collaboratively and redrawing the district's school lines to create a more equitable learning environment for the students in the district. He shared that his strategic plan allowed him to focus on the redistricting goal and keep it in front of both the board and the community as well as bring the board together. Harold's experience also coincides with Fullan's (2005) thoughts on system-thinking. "I think the strategic plan allowed us to come together . . . it was really a pathway for me," Harold stated. He added that the strategic plan and the goals included in it were referenced twice a month, once in board meetings and once in separate monthly board work sessions that were less formal.

Seek out and use stakeholder input. Superintendents who understand their stakeholders, their opinions on education in general, and the school district in particular, can either fashion their messaging to fit the stakeholders' knowledge or work to build the capacity of the stakeholders when change is needed. According to Cohen and Mehta (2017), school leaders can only be successful when district challenges are met by solutions that are consistent with the community's prevailing norms and values.

When Gregg began leading a district-wide service learning character initiative, the proposed plan took time away from core curriculum. This did not sit well with a

number of his faculty members who “lived and died” with test scores. Gregg had an understanding of his district’s stakeholders who resisted surrendering instructional time to what they considered “fluff.” As superintendent, Gregg understood that for his character education initiative to succeed, he had to spend time and effort educating his staff on the benefits of the idea. He knew that without the support of each school’s staff, it was a top-down initiative that was doomed to failure. Gregg commented,

We had to spend [time and effort] internally. I think that internally a lot of educators have gotten so caught up on the accountability side but a lot of community members and parents really valued the idea that my kid is going to get more than just simply knowing how to pass a test. And so, it was a pretty positive reaction by the broader community. [It was] questioned by some educators internally.

Gregg’s understanding of his staff and their views allowed him to head off resistance and counter teacher negativity prior to the initiative failing.

Superintendents must know their stakeholders and what their stakeholders think is important prior to leading change or facing a district challenge. Duke (2010) agrees that understanding stakeholder perceptions is a key to effective leadership and facing challenges. He stated, “One key element in discovering whether a need for change exists, therefore, is getting to know what school is really like for stakeholders” (p. 220). Duke believes that students, teachers, and other staff members should be included in the group of stakeholders, along with the community. He wrote that understanding how the stakeholders feel is a necessary prerequisite for leading change and facing challenges.

Mike shared an example of how his knowing the stakeholders allowed him to pass an increase in property taxes for schools. In his district he had a huge retirement

community that had been primarily occupied by people from the North who were retired with no kids. They were very disconnected from the school system. He stated that there was probably more wealth in that retirement community than the rest of the county combined, and that they were against any kind of an increase in property tax. They had their own interfaith church. He said that he went there sometimes and was a little assertive. Mike shared his message,

You see this as paying a tax that you're not going to get any benefit from. But do you really want a lot of undereducated folks being unemployed, a high crime rate, your housing and your property values declining? You know it affects you indirectly, but it does affect you.

Mike credited his knowing the district's stakeholders and going to them with a clear message as the determining factor in getting additional funds for schools.

Visibility is an effective tool. Superintendents who are visible within and outside of their district are more likely to build authentic relationships with various groups of stakeholders. Visible district leaders send subtle messages to the stakeholders that they care about the students, community, and staff (Hoyle et al., 2005; Swartz, 2011). Harold said that when he came into his district, there was a real challenge of bringing people together. The previous superintendent had moved the district forward, but had lost the sense of team among the staff. Harold added that to counter that challenge he made in a point to spend one day a week in a school. He would be visible and accessible to staff members. And, once each semester he visited with each school's faculty. He would briefly talk to them then thank them, share his vision for the district and the school, and say, "Let me tell you how I support you." Harold shared that his intentional visits to the

schools helped turn around the moral within the district and help get everyone on the same page.

Kowalski (2013) advocates for superintendent visibility and suggests that four areas can be improved when superintendents meet with the stakeholders when challenges arise. He said that superintendents can accomplish the following:

Ascertain the depth of opposition and support, meet critics face-to-face and discuss conflicting points of view candidly and politely, remain focused on serving the needs of students and the entire community and encourage greater interaction between school personnel and community stakeholders. (p. 240)

Leon used his visibility in the community to meet the first challenge he faced. He stated that his biggest challenge coming into an academically successful district was to build back relationships with the community. He stated that the previous superintendent, while very intelligent and strategic, did not connect with the community on a personal level.

Leon explained,

My first strategy as I hit the ground . . . was I'm going to be as visible as I can be to my community at large . . . I told folks I was an evangelist for our school system at Rotary, Kiwanis and every place I could find. So, I was very visible and viable in the community serving as a community cheerleader.

Leon's success in using visibility to meet the challenge of the district was evidently successful in extending his longevity. Presently, he is the second-longest serving superintendent in his state. Additionally, a few years ago, he was offered a bigger contract by a neighboring district. When his board found out they not only met the substantial raise, they increased the amount that the other district offered.

Authentic listening sends a strong message. Superintendents who listen to their stakeholders and allow authentic feedback to be used in decision-making create environments where community members feel empowered and part of the school district. Superintendents who share their power with stakeholders through listening can increase the likelihood of extending their longevity in the district (Hoyle et al., 2005). Each of the seven long-serving superintendents discussed either building or strengthening the relationship between the community and the school district as a major challenge that they faced. While this challenge may not be considered transformational by some, engaging and successfully collaborating with the community is an important niche challenge for districts and superintendents who seek to be effective and meet the needs of the community that they serve.

The fact that each of the participants identified improving community relations as an important goal is significant. Hoyle et al. (2005) suggest,

The best way for a superintendent to ‘know’ the district is by systematically collecting feedback formally and informally and informally . . . informal . . . conversations with community members that occur on a frequent basis . . . formal . . . are sources such as newspapers, organizational newsletters, letters, radio and television programs. (p. 70)

Mike, Harmon, and Sharon all emphasized the importance that they placed on listening as they faced the challenge of building authentic and collaborative relationships within their respective communities. Additionally, each of these three discussed the importance of letting members of the community know you were listening to them. Mike explained, “Listen and have evidence for stakeholders that you are listening . . . Listen,

listen, listen, and show us (community) that you are.” Sharon emphasized the idea that when a superintendent listens, it allows stakeholders to engage and feel like a participant rather than a spectator. She stated, “Listening and it didn’t matter what you listened to . . . If you hear them, they feel empowered.” When Gregg assumed his superintendency in a large urban district, he shared that he spent four months touring the community and schools and listening to the stakeholders. He shared his perspective that those four months brought to him a deep understanding of the community’s needs and their hopes for the district.

The participants spent a considerable amount of time discussing the power of listening to stakeholders when they faced challenges. Mike even suggested that if the superintendent didn’t have a strong feeling about how to address a particular challenge that he or she should allow the stakeholders to determine the solution. He stated that if a district leader allows someone else to make the decision and have a win, it will show that the leader is listening and that they care.

Select an appropriate communication mode. Superintendents who know their stakeholders and fashion their messaging to coincide with individual differences of stakeholders are more likely to communicate effectively. Superintendents send a positive message to stakeholders when they tailor their messaging to modes that stakeholders use frequently and are comfortable using (Kowalski, 2013).

This behavior is closely tied to knowing the stakeholders in the district. But, a number of the participants stressed that understanding the stakeholders and their interests were not enough when facing challenges and communicating about those challenges.

While each long-serving superintendent discussed the impact of one-to-one discussions and their desire to use face-to-face communications with all constituents, they also agreed that differentiating how to use both electronic and personal modes of communication should be dictated by the specific group that was targeted.

Gregg, Mike, and Sharon all stressed the importance of getting out of the office during the school day and interacting with staff members in their buildings. Harmon felt that using e-mail blasts to contact civic organizations and staff members was extremely effective. Leon discussed social media and how different platforms connected with specific groups. He said, “If I want to communicate with mothers . . . Facebook; . . . kids . . . Instagram; educators . . . Twitter.” He added that his district puts out the same information but uses different forums to reach different audiences. Leon added, “If you’re not communicating the stories and successes of your schools via social media, you’re missing a great opportunity and it’s how our communities get information.”

Black and English (2001) also noted the importance of understanding and being flexible when incorporating technology into school administration practices. They said, “School administrators who are at the mercy of others who have the skills of new technologies relinquish to them some of their power” (p. 301). Superintendents who are disconnected from social media outlets, however, are relinquishing opportunities to effectively communicate with their stakeholders and diminish their chances of effectively meeting district challenges.

The superintendents talked about the hurdle that non-English speaking students and parents present when communicating how the district is facing challenges. Sharon,

Gregg, and Harold mentioned translators and placing a priority on finding out how the different cultures represented within their district accessed information. They mentioned churches, language specific newspapers, and messages from the district in multiple languages as methods that they used to reach groups of stakeholders. Understanding who you are trying to communicate with and selecting the most appropriate vehicle is paramount in effectively reaching the stakeholders in a school district.

Use peers' experiences. Superintendents who connect with their peers to either mentor or be mentored create a foundation for collaboration that can provide support as they lead the district. Alsbury and Hackman (2006) said district leaders can learn a great deal from their fellow superintendents that can provide alternative ways to view solutions to challenges. Each of the participants in the study discussed the importance of relying on other superintendents to help them by either suggesting alternative solutions to challenges or affirming their own ideas. While Harold mentioned observing other superintendents as a way that he learned from others, all seven participants, including Harold, specifically discussed either individual or group mentoring as a vital behavior for determining how they faced challenges in their district.

Kalmer (2006) defines traditional psychosocial mentoring functions as the following: "Role modeling, acceptance, confirmation, counseling and friendship, career-related functions encompass sponsorship, exposure and visibility, coaching, protection, and challenging assignments" (p. 298). While all of these areas were not specifically identified by the long-serving superintendents, several were mentioned, and the

participants alluded to others. A number of superintendents shared their experiences with one-on-one or single mentors while others discussed group interactions with peers.

The long-serving superintendents in the study stressed the lack of training and preparation that they experienced prior to assuming the role of district chief. Each also emphasized the complexity of the superintendent's role in leading a school district. Both of these factors were discussed by the participants as the reasons they viewed peer mentoring as so important in helping them make decisions regarding district challenges. To a person, they agreed that they had gained significant knowledge and support from talking to different superintendents. Tom stated, "Spending more time with colleagues . . . helped me understand the in's and out's better . . . I think I learned more from my peers." The value and importance of peer support will be discussed in more detail in answering the next question.

Summary of response to Research Sub-question 2. Superintendents who take the time to understand and listen to stakeholders, to engage those stakeholders in a district planning process, to select the most appropriate way to communicate, and are visible both inside and outside the district and seek council from their peers are more likely to effectively meet the challenges that they face as a district leader. Long-serving superintendents have found that using these specific behaviors to guide their actions is a beneficial and effective path toward meeting district challenges.

Research Sub-question 3

What training and support do long-serving superintendents report as effective in increasing their leadership capacities?

My answer to this question is based upon the related theme that emerged from the participants' data: *Long-serving superintendents express concerns about superintendent training and support approaches and services.* I begin my response to this question by discussing both in-service and preservice support and training for superintendents. I follow this discussion with the views of the long-serving superintendents regarding the support and training that they experienced both before their superintendency and during their service. This section concludes with a summary of my answer.

In-service mentoring support. Active superintendents who seek out and connect with their peers to solicit advice, council, and feedback gain valuable information and a deeper understanding of possible solutions for specific challenges. Superintendents who choose to use their peers as mentors or reflective consultants can do so either individually or in a group. Novice superintendents can build a deeper leadership capacity by using their peers to understand the reality of the superintendency, observe different leadership styles, obtain new information, and reflect on their own practices. Superintendents who mentor and support one another use their shared challenges to validate or influence leadership decisions. Alsbury and Hackman (2006) warn that mentoring programs for superintendents should be broad in scope and not limit the focus and narrow the opportunity or desire for professional growth. They wrote,

Administrative mentoring programs should address novices' professional development needs, in addition to their needs to become integrated into the profession. If the goal of mentoring program is too narrowly defined as promoting role socialization, then at this initial stage . . . novice administrators may not fully develop a personal commitment to continuous professional growth. (p. 183)

Alsbury and Hackman (2006) found that mentoring programs that are not well planned sometimes result in mentee's overreliance on mentors. This can lead to an inflexible approach to problem solving and a stifling of professional development. Conversely, carefully planned mentoring programs can allow novice superintendents to display more self-confidence in their own decision-making, improved communication skills, and becoming more aware of the important but hard to discern nuances of the superintendency (Alsbury & Hackman, 2006).

Each of long-serving superintendents in this study explained that using peers was a significant behavior that they had either experienced as a mentor or a mentee. The participants said that using other superintendents as mentors, reflective counselors, and debriefers is an effective way for practicing superintendents to find support in an area that has a minimal number of peers with similar experiences. Harold explained, "I learned the most about being a superintendent from observing the superintendents that I worked for. I learned what to do and what not to do." Tom shared that he was not prepared for the superintendency and gained most insight for facing challenges from peers. He continued, "We probably gain more knowledge and support and learn more from talking to different superintendents. I think I learned more from my peers." Harmon echoed these comments in his view of peer collaboration. He stated, "There are things we do that you just can't talk about with anybody other than another superintendent and to be able to bounce ideas off each other."

Pre-service training. Individuals who aspire to the superintendency should be prudently selective when determining the particular university preparation program in

which to enroll. Individuals who desire to become a superintendent should seek out pre-service university programs that can provide not only theoretical concepts of district leadership, but also supply authentic, task-specific work that reflects the responsibilities of a district leader. Programs that connect to the real-life responsibilities of the superintendency may use internships, authentic learning problems and simulations, action research, and problem solving. University programs that have ties to school districts and collaborate with the districts in their superintendent preparation courses will supply a realistic perspective and illustrate the complexity of the position to aspiring district leaders (Grogan & Andrews, 2002; Kowalski, 2013; Wells, 2010).

Wells (2010) believes that a quality university-based program for superintendents should include several specific facets. She argues that some university programs may not be teaching the skills that superintendents will need as they lead a school district. Wells (2010) suggests the following practices be included in university-based superintendent preparation programs:

- Internships
- Authentic job-embedded assignments in leadership
- Action research
- Analyzing authentic learning problems
- Partnering with school districts
- Critical inquiry of superintendent decision-making
- Reviewing expectations for courses and comparing them with other institutions across the nation

- Creating experiences that allow students to work directly in the field solving complex problems and providing professional development activities

The long-serving superintendents supplied some pessimistic perspectives on the quality of pre-service university training programs that they experienced. But, it should be taken into account that each of the long-serving superintendents experienced their university-based preparation 10-30 years ago. Some of the long-serving superintendents said that they had experienced specific courses that helped them prepare for the position while others indicated that nothing could provide adequate preparation. Mike stated, “I don’t know that there’s any way to prepare anyone for just how big it is, how big the job is.” He added, “My classes did not prepare me for how big the job is. It’s just sad how little it prepared me.” Harmon concurred with Mike’s perspective. He explained, “No one can effectively communicate the massiveness of the position.” In addition, Sharon, who facilitates new superintendent training and has taught in university-based preparation programs, shared her observation of the pre-service courses schools offer. She stated, “I wish somewhere along the way they would teach about Board relations . . . I have taught at five different universities. I’ve never seen a graduate program for administrators where there was a board relations class taught.”

Leon was the only long-serving superintendent who shared he had a quality superintendent pre-service university course. And, his perspective is based upon the individual who taught the class and his experiences. Leon stated, “One professor who had done a remarkable job as a school superintendent walked us through several things. He

just did some things that I thought were spot on. So a lot of things that I thought were worth doing I stole from him.”

Summary of response to Research Sub-question 3. Superintendents who build significant professional relationships with other superintendents have an opportunity to collaborate, discuss, analyze, and consider the methods of their peers as they consider how to address challenges that they face. Superintendents who collaborate and share experiences can both transmit and acquire information that is situationally specific and can provide scaffolding and support as district leaders face leadership decisions. Mentoring programs and activities should be structured and address role adaptability as well as management techniques. Mentors should coach mentees and challenge them to find solutions not provide answers for district challenges.

University pre-service preparation courses that incorporate authentic experiences and draw from the realities of experienced-based personal narratives can provide relevance and problem-solving experiences for aspiring superintendents. The superintendency is a potentially volatile mix of finance, politics, instructional leadership, human resource management, and legal statutes. Prospective district leaders need to be trained in the practices of navigating this turbulent environment and learn to authentic problem-solving skills. University programs that incorporate personal narratives, case problem, district collaboration, and authentic simulations can help build the professional capacity of aspiring superintendents.

Summary and Preview

In this chapter, I answered the research questions by connecting my findings with pertinent peer-reviewed literature. These answers provide the basis for the three recommendations that I make in Chapter VI. Embedded within the three recommendations in the next chapter are eight specific behaviors that the long-serving superintendents and the literature indicate can contribute to longevity. Also included in the final chapter is a suggestion for a future study and final comments about this study and the participants.

CHAPTER VI

RECOMMENDATIONS, FUTURE STUDY, AND FINAL WORDS

Introduction

In this study, I examined the fluid and sometimes volatile communication and relationship-building behaviors of district superintendents. The purpose of my study was to look behind the curtain of superintendent leadership in an attempt to discern specific communication and relationship-building behaviors that long-serving superintendents believe contributed to their longevity. Based on my analysis of the data and review of the literature, I make three recommendations that include specific leadership behaviors. The recommendations suggest eight specific behaviors that support contextual awareness, effective communication, and focused relationship-building. In this chapter I will also suggest an area for future research that both the data in my study referenced as well as the literature, and I close with some final thoughts.

Recommendations

This study examined a number of aspects relating to superintendent longevity and effectiveness. The various facets of superintendent longevity that I analyzed from the data connect in some way to understanding the role of the superintendent and specific communication and relationship-building behaviors. My recommendations support the premise that if superintendents engage in specific behaviors they can increase the likelihood that they will have an extended tenure.

Recommendation 1

Superintendents who engage their community in a comprehensive strategic planning process increase their own contextual awareness.

Woven throughout the data in this study is the idea that it is important for district leaders to understand their community and its culture. This contextual awareness supports both effective communication practices and authentic relationship-building for superintendents. Understanding stakeholders is paramount for successful district leadership (Duke, 2010; Hoyle et al., 2005; Kowalski, 2013). I found a specific superintendent behavior in the data that increases contextual awareness.

Each of the long-serving superintendents discussed how they used the district's strategic planning process as a way to learn not only who their stakeholders were but to understand the community's perceptions of both education and the school district. They said that they used that knowledge to guide their decision making. The literature supports the idea that for superintendents to be successful they must understand their community (Cohen & Mehta, 2017) and that engaging stakeholders in the planning process allows district leaders to better know their constituents (Fullan, 2005).

Recommendation 2

Superintendents who listen, are visible and accessible, and are flexible in messaging are effective communicators.

I found consistent data in my study from each of the long-serving superintendents that singled out listening, being visible and accessible, and selecting the appropriate mode of transmitting and receiving messages as common behaviors that both improved their

effectiveness and supported their longevity. Superintendents who practice authentic listening and are visible and accessible to both staff and stakeholders are more likely to successfully communicate and enjoy a longer tenure (Byrd et al., 2006; Kowalski, 2013; Russell, 2014; Schwarz, 2011).

Superintendents who embrace flexibility in the methods and messages of their communication and adjust both to the specific individual or groups that they seek to relay information will be more effective (Cuban, 2010; Kowalski, 2013; Russell, 2014). The participants in my study discussed the various ways they chose to communicate with their stakeholders. While each long-serving superintendent agreed that face-to-face is the optimum method of communication in all cases, they all discussed the varying interests, perceptions, and methods that they considered when determining how and what to communicate. One of the participants captured the essence of communication flexibility when he stated, “It is important to have a skill set that allows you to go from the pulpit of a church to the pool room and deal with both sets of clients telling both that you have their interest at heart.”

Recommendation 3

Superintendents who build significant relationships with their board members, community influencers and their peers will gain support that will increase their capacity to successfully face challenges and lengthen their tenure.

All of the long-serving superintendents discussed the significance of building positive relationships with their boards, community influencers, and their peers. Each of the participants stressed the importance of knowing the board’s expectations of them and

using the board chair as either a liaison or sounding board when considering new ideas. They all emphasized that the relationship between the school board and the superintendent is the most important factor in determining the longevity of the district chief. Building a healthy and positive relationship with the district's chair/president is the doorway to forming a deep and sustaining relationship with the full board (Hoyle et al., 2005; Mountford, 2004; Townsend et al., 2007).

Superintendents increase their effectiveness and will survive longer as a district's leader when they build relationships with community influencers and are able to utilize those individuals as partners to advocate for the district or to minimize negative perceptions of the district (Alsbury, 2003; Black & English, 2001). Each of the superintendents in the study shared that they sought out influencers in the community. They stated that they used those influencers to help them communicate with the community and that they listened to the influencers' advice when making decisions about the district. The long-serving superintendents were adamant about the significance and power of collaborating with community influencers.

Collaboration with peers was the most significant take away from the participants' data when they discussed in-service support. The superintendents' comments emphasized the importance of peer mentorship. One shared, "We probably gain more knowledge and support and learn more from talking to different superintendents . . . There are things we do that you just can't talk about with anybody other than another superintendent."

Superintendent mentors who do not provide specific answers, but rather encourage divergent problem-solving and alternative perspectives, are the most valuable. Mentors who understand that leadership growth is the goal for mentorship, not quick answers, provide the most valuable collaborations (Alsbury & Hackman, 2006; Kalmer, 2006).

Summary of Recommendations

- Recommendation 1: Superintendents who engage their community in the district's strategic planning process increase their own contextual awareness.
- Recommendation 2: Superintendents who listen, are visible and accessible, and who are flexible in messaging are effective communicators.
- Recommendation 3: Superintendents who build significant relationships with their board members, community influencers, and their peers will gain support that will increase their capacity to successfully face challenges and lengthen their tenure.

Future Study

I found in the study's data and in the related literature that effective communication and relationship-building behaviors support successfully meeting district challenges and extending the longevity for superintendents (Alsbury, 2014; Bjork & Lindle, 2001; Byrd et al., 2006; Cuban, 1988; Petersen & Short, 2001; Russell, 2014; Shand, 2010; Schwartz, 2011; Williams & Hatch, 2012; Wilson, 2010). But, I also found in this study's data and support in related literature that superintendent tenures of 10 years and beyond might lead to complacency and even have a detrimental effect on

student achievement. The alignment of the literature and the data implies that while superintendent tenures of 5-9 years might contribute to a longer time frame to implement and sustain changes and district stability, negative outcomes may result when tenures exceed 9 years.

While Chingos et al. (2014) contended that superintendent turnover has little or no meaningful impact on student achievement, Duke (2010) went further when he suggested that an extremely long tenure might inhibit innovation and change if the longevity has created an environment of comfort and the superintendent advocates for the status quo. Alsbury (2008) agreed with Duke's assessment in the findings from his study on small, rural districts. He found that tenures of 10 years or more in smaller districts was even linked to declining test scores. "Superintendents managing to maintain long tenure in [these] school districts frequently accomplished longevity by avoiding change and reform in an effort to curry peace, diminish conflict and keep their list of enemies as short as possible" (Alsbury, 2008, p. 253).

In my study, Harold shared his self-reflection on his 10-plus year tenure:

One of the things that I realized after I left (a long-term superintendency) . . . I probably was not as sharp in years ten, eleven and twelve as I was earlier. As I got to know the people and they became my people and I became comfortable with them, I was not quite as strategic and sharp . . . The other thing I realized was that . . . board members were starting to get on my nerves . . . even great board members.

I believe that there is significant evidence that warrants a study of superintendents who are or have served 10 years or more in a school district. A study focused on "extreme longevity" might reveal some interesting findings. While the premise that 10-

plus years is less than optimal might be refuted, it also might suggest that there is a “sweet spot” for superintendent effectiveness that lies somewhere between 5 and 9 years. Additional studies that compare segments of time and effectiveness may contribute to a better understanding of how we can advance public education and more effectively face challenges.

A Final Word

Each of the long-serving superintendents in the study seemed to exude a resilient self-confidence while at the same time, a weariness that was the result of years of battles, conflicts, and a lack of adequate preparation. Yet, each long-serving superintendent also appeared to embody a defiant confidence that was sparked by their passion and dedication. Mike’s self-reflection characterized the group’s perception of the superintendency and the unavoidable baggage that comes with it. He said,

Just be fair and honest, that’s tattoo material, man. Treat everyone the same, and build a relationship . . . 90% to 95% of the people will tell you that I am the best thing since sliced bread and 5% will tell you I am Satan’s spawn.

Each of the participants expressed the feeling that the superintendency is a precarious job that is difficult at best to navigate, much less survive. “No one can explain or teach you how to lead a district, you have to jump in and experience it, if you don’t have the experience to navigate the waters of politics, you don’t survive,” said Harmon.

I believe this study points to very specific communication and relationship-building behaviors that superintendents can use to both increase their effectiveness in meeting challenges and support their longevity. I do not represent the behaviors that I

listed in my recommendations as “magic bullets.” The behaviors do not represent a care-free or easy path for a superintendent. Rather these behaviors represent “best practices” for superintendents based upon the findings from seven long-serving superintendents and the related literature. But, as pointed out by all the participants in the study and throughout the literature, to be a long-serving superintendent one must not only embrace sound behavioral practices; he or she should also embrace the spirit of the motto: “*Illegitimi Non Carborundum.*”

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APPENDIX A
SUPERINTENDENT DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

Superintendent Name: _____

Total Years as Superintendent: _____

Years with Current (Final) District: _____

Highest Degree: _____

District Enrollment: _____

Number of Board Members in Current (Final) District: _____

In Your 5th Year, Number of Board Members Remaining From Your Initial (Hiring)

Year: _____

Board: Elected ___ Appointed ___

District: Urban ___ Rural ___ Suburban ___

Did you work in the district prior to being named superintendent? Yes ___ No ___

APPENDIX B
(CURRENT LONG-SERVING SUPERINTENDENTS)
INTERVIEW GUIDE—ROUND 1

Personal Background

1. Describe your professional journey to your current superintendency.
2. (If applicable) Did any of your previous superintendencies last five or more years?
3. What motivated you to become a superintendent?
4. Can you describe your professional core values and your leadership philosophy?
5. What do you like best about being a superintendent?
6. What do you like least about being a superintendent?
7. How and why did you choose to come to your current district as superintendent?
8. Do you feel you were prepared for your first superintendency?
9. What could have prepared you better for your first superintendency?
10. What are three strategies or behaviors that you believe are essential to being a successful superintendent?
11. How long do you plan to stay in your current position?

Characteristics of the Community

12. Can you tell me about the community where your district is located?
 - a. demographics
 - b. value of education
 - c. expectations of the school system
13. What past areas or accomplishments of the district or in the schools are sources of pride for the community stakeholders?

14. What areas of the district or schools are considered less than positive by the community and stakeholders?
15. Describe your relationship with the community.
16. How does your philosophy of education coincide or differ from the community's?
17. What individuals or groups hold power in the community?
18. How do you determine the powerbrokers in the community?
19. Can you describe some examples of individuals or groups in the community who tried to influence members of your board of education?

Current Board of Education

20. What are the characteristics of your board as a governing body and noteworthy perceptions of individual board members regarding their role on the board?
21. Describe your relationship with the board chair and the full board.
22. Does your philosophy of public education coincide or differ from the board's?
23. Do you believe you were hired by the board to be a change agent or to maintain the existing quality in the school district? Why do you believe this?
24. Have members of your board of education been influenced by groups or individuals from the community?

Closure

25. Is there anything else you would like to add?
26. In the second interview I would like to discuss three challenges you faced as a superintendent and how you attempted to address those challenges. I would like

to know what major reforms or changes you attempted to enact to address these challenges.

APPENDIX C
(FORMER LONG-SERVING SUPERINTENDENTS)
INTERVIEW GUIDE—ROUND 1

Personal Background

1. Describe your professional journey.
2. How many and which of your superintendencies lasted five or more years?
3. What was it that motivated you to want to seek a superintendency?
4. In the role of superintendent, what were your core values and your leadership philosophy?
5. What did you like best about being a superintendent?
7. What did you like least about being a superintendent?
8. What motivated you to choose the specific district(s) to serve as superintendent?
9. In your first superintendency, did you feel prepared?
10. Upon reflection, what could have prepared you better for your first superintendency?
11. What are three specific professional strategies or behaviors that you believe contributed to your longevity as a superintendent?
12. Why did you separate from the district in your last superintendency?

Characteristics of the Last Community

13. Tell me about the communities where you served at least 5 years as superintendent.

- a. demographics b. value of education c. expectations of the school system
14. Prior to your arrival, what areas or accomplishments of the district(s) or in the schools were a source of pride for the community stakeholders?
 15. What areas of the district(s) or schools were considered less than positive by the community and stakeholders?
 16. Describe your relationship with all your former communities where you served.
 17. Did your philosophy of public education coincide or differ from the community's?
 18. What individuals or groups held the power in the communities?
 19. In all your superintendencies, how did you determine the powerbrokers in the community?
 20. Can you describe examples of individuals or groups in the community who tried to influence members of your board of education?

Former Boards of Education

21. What were the characteristics of your board(s) as a governing body and noteworthy perceptions of individual board members regarding their role on the board?
22. Describe your relationship with all board chairs and your full boards.
23. Did your philosophy of public education coincide or differ from the board's?
24. Do you believe you were hired by each board to be a change agent or to maintain the existing quality in the school district? Why do you believe this?

25. How were board members influenced by community groups or individuals?

Closure

26. Is there anything else you would like to add?

27. In the second interview I would like to discuss two challenges you faced as a superintendent and how you attempted to address those challenges. I would like to know what major reforms or changes you attempted to address these challenges.

APPENDIX D
(ALL CURRENT AND FORMER LONG-SERVING SUPERINTENDENTS)
INTERVIEW GUIDE—ROUND 2

Addressing District Challenges

1. When you were hired, what were the two biggest challenges that faced the school system, in your opinion?
2. Does one or both of these challenges rise to the level of a reform effort?
3. What year of your superintendency did addressing each of the two challenges begin?
4. Who initiated the efforts to address the challenges: you, the board or the community?
5. Did any group oppose or challenge the change efforts? Why? How?
6. What role did administration, the board, and the community play in each change effort?
7. Were any change efforts only attainable because of your extended tenure? Why?
8. During your tenure, did any of your change efforts affect your longevity? How?

Communication

9. When considering your efforts to bring about change in the reformation area/areas, what factors determined how you communicated information about the implementation to each group of stakeholders?

10. For communication purposes, did you prioritize any of the various groups of stakeholders? Why or Why not?
11. When preparing to lead each reform effort did you use a written plan of action for **communication**? If so, what elements were included and why?
12. What have you found to be the most effective communication strategies when leading change with your (a) board, (b) parents, (c) staff, (d) students, and (e) community?
13. Have you ever altered or omitted a planned communication strategy during implementation of a reform effort? If so, why?
14. Throughout your tenure have you altered the methods you use for communicating while leading change efforts? If so how have they changed?
15. How do you utilize electronic and social media in your communication efforts?
16. What ways do you solicit feedback from your stakeholders? How effective are each of these solicitation methods? Are there criticisms?
17. If you had to choose one method of communicating change as the most effective what would you choose? Why?
18. Do you believe that effective communication contributed to your longevity? Why?

Relationship Building

19. Overall, how important is relationship building when leading change/reform efforts?

20. Did you formalize a strategic plan for relationship building prior to initiating one or both of the reform efforts? Why or Why not?
21. Were any group of particular stakeholders prioritized for creating a positive relationship prior to initiating one or both reforms?
22. How do you determine with whom you need to build a positive relationship?
23. What specific relationship-building strategies did you use before or during leading these reform efforts with (a) board members, (b) parents, (c) staff, (d) students, and (e) community?
24. Have your relationship building strategies evolved or changed since your first year as a superintendent? How and Why?
25. What is the single most effective strategy you use to build relationships?
26. Do you believe that your efforts to build relationships with key stakeholders contributed to your longevity?

Situational Awareness

27. How does/did situational awareness affect both your relationship building and communication strategies?

Professional Development

28. Describe any professional development or training you had in communication and/or relationship building prior to assuming your first superintendency.

29. Describe any professional development or training you had in communication and/or relationship building once you began your first superintendency.
30. How effective has your formal professional development been in communication and relationship building?
31. What would you recommend to new superintendents about focusing on and seeking training in communication and relationship building?
32. After a long tenure as a superintendent, do you feel secure in your ability to communicate effectively and build relationships with key stakeholders? Why do you feel this way?
33. Are there any thoughts you have about communication and relationship building that new superintendents should know?

*** Why have or did you outlast the majority of your peers in the superintendency?*

APPENDIX E
EMERGENT CODES AND CATEGORIES

Coding Process

INITIAL CYCLE: ECLECTIC CODE COMBINING BOTH IN VIVO AND VALUES CODES (open)	SECOND CYCLE: PATTERN CODE (compressed)	CORRESPONDING CATEGORIES
<i>CHARACTERISTICS & STRATEGIES</i>	<i>BEHAVIORS</i>	1. Behaviors
Listen a lot	Listen a lot	
Honesty (2)	Honesty (2)	2. Beliefs
Good community relations	Good community relations	
Improvement	Improvement	3. Board & Chair
Strategic Plan (2)	Strategic Plan (2)	
Set culture (2)	Set culture (2)	4. Community
Set tone	Marketing	
Open door	Visibility (3)	5. Training
Understand stakeholders	Consistency (2)	
Join civic clubs	Kid focus	6. Communication
Talk in churches	Proactive	
Kid focus	Transparency	7. Relationship-building
Consistency (2)	Compromise	
Visibility (3)	<i>BELIEFS</i>	8. Longevity
Proactive	School grades unfair	
Transparency	Care about people	9. Challenges
Marketing	Integrity (4)	
Push out of comfort zone	Theory of change	
Read people	Work Ethic	
Compromise	Motivated by a bad experience (3)	
Respect others	We can	
We can	Predictability	
School grades unfair	Trust	
Care about people	Do good work	
Integrity (4)	<i>BOARD & CHAIR</i>	
Theory of change	Chair handles board	
Do good work	Communicate equally except chair (4)	
Motivated by bad experience (3)	Each member unique	
Predictability	Out of lane	
Trust	Philosophically aligned	
Work Ethic	Corporate oversight (3)	
Open (2)	Close with chair (2)	
Churches	Coach board members	
Civic clubs	No surprises	
Listening and learning tour	Visionary (2)	
External conversations	Outlier	
Formal communications plan (2)	Weekly contact (3)	
Call outs	Individual perspectives	
Mail outs	Study sessions (2)	
Email	<i>COMMUNITY</i>	
Social media	Dirty politics	
Television	Divided	
Video	High expectations	
Press conferences	Athletics a priority (2)	
Statistically valid polls	Informal power groups	
Informal surveys	Movers and shakers (3)	
Expand message	Far right group	

INITIAL CYCLE: ECLECTIC CODE COMBINING BOTH IN VIVO AND VALUES CODES (open)	SECOND CYCLE: PATTERN CODE (compressed)	CORRESPONDING CATEGORIES
Communications director (2) Two-person communications office Organization problems Public updates quarterly (2) Dissertation on school communications In time, on line newsletter blasts Listening more important than talking Face-to-face most effective Evangelist for the school system Importance of stories not statistics Social media platform depends on audience Timely Pulpit to the pool room Perceptions are reality Evidence of listening Honesty is critical Share student stories (2) Counteract outside influences Audience determines communication method Can't be fake or redundant Timing Transparent De-escalates Go to stakeholders Be present (2) Leadership is a relationship Job is establishing positive relationships Trust Personable Transparent Allow others to have a win Don't be unfair Connected to communications Coached principals Most effective is listening Understood the culture Open door Community/staff relationships key to longevity (3) Board unanimity Communication critical (2) Ongoing board communications Knowing strengths and limitations Empowering others (3) Personal relationships (2) Positive Relationships to teachers Passion for children Compassion Effective communication Fair and honest Credible communications Give away credit Own blame Empower others Build trust STAKEHOLDERS Respond to all	Forward thinking Pride in schools Different power bases Don't understand good schools Diverse Community input SUPERINTENDENCY Situational awareness Keeper of the vision Personnel Character Hired to maintain Change agent (3) Never check out Plow the ground Budget (2) Good fit No one understands Legacy (2) Develop adults more than children Community cheerleader TRAINING (PD) GUIDANCE No effective preparation (4) Peer Guidance (4) Mentors (2) National School Public Relations Association (2) State provided programs and PD (2) Read COMMUNICATION Open (2) Formal communications plan (2) Communications director (2) Quarterly Updates (2) Sharing student stories (2) Call outs Mail outs Email Social media Statistically valid polls Informal surveys Face-to-face Timely Perceptions Audience RELATIONSHIP-BUILDING De-escalate Be Present (2) Leadership Stakeholders Personable Trust Transparent Don't be unfair Listening LONGEVITY Empowering others (3) Community and staff relations (3) Personal relationships (2)	

INITIAL CYCLE: ECLECTIC CODE COMBINING BOTH IN VIVO AND VALUES CODES (open)	SECOND CYCLE: PATTERN CODE (compressed)	CORRESPONDING CATEGORIES
Each member unique Chair handles board Board out of lane Leadership academy Talk with teachers Reorganize the Central Office Anonymous surveys Being visible Culture of openness Philosophically aligned with Supt. Corporate oversight (3) Day to day involvement Close with chair (2) Treated equally/except chair (4) Repair relationships Coach board members Individual perspectives Facebook Weekly contact (3) Visionary (2) Professional Technology helps No surprises Study sessions (2) Not feeling relevant Meetings stressful Outlier Cohesive Unanimity Board-superintendent separation Strategic plan Surprises only at Christmas Dirty politics Bond referendum Divided High expectations Haves and have nots Athletics a priority (2) Republican Men's Federation Business leaders Far right group Forward thinking Community pride Movers and shakers (3) Pride in schools Student behavior Different power bases Don't understand good schools Diverse Sophisticated expectations Unnerving Value education Community forums Parent advisory committee Not meta issues; individual issues Input from all segments	Knowing strengths and limitations Open door Passion for children Give away credit Own blame Build Trust Relationships with teachers Fair and honest CHALLENGES Nich reforms Proactive Strategic Planning Planting seeds Goals Board Cohesiveness	
ROLE & TRAINING Situational awareness Keeper of the vision		

INITIAL CYCLE: ECLECTIC CODE COMBINING BOTH IN VIVO AND VALUES CODES (open)	SECOND CYCLE: PATTERN CODE (compressed)	CORRESPONDING CATEGORIES
Character Competence Personnel Hired to maintain Change agent (3) Bring stability Never check out Plow the ground Good fit No one understands Impacts entire climate Budget (2) Multiple paths in Encouraged by supervisors Legacy (2) Develop adults more than children Mature person's job A lot of tedious hours Small district supt.- face is on all Make a decision Community cheerleader No effective preparation (4) No board-relations classes Peer guidance (4) Mentored (2) National School Public Relations Association (2) Grant funded university PD Strength finding assessments Class taught by a superintendent State supt. association program State provided coach Communication classes Read a lot on corporate and school cultures University courses		