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## Leadership Storytelling of Rural School Superintendents Engaged in Change and Innovation

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Dr. Justin Bathon, Director of Graduate Studies

LEADERSHIP STORYTELLING OF  
RURAL SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENTS  
ENGAGED IN CHANGE AND INNOVATION

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DISSERTATION

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the  
College of Education  
at the University of Kentucky

By

Tony Barrett

Lexington, Kentucky

Co-Directors: Dr. Lars Björk, Professor of Educational Leadership  
and Dr. Amanda U. Potterton, Assistant Professor of Educational Leadership

Lexington, Kentucky

2021

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## ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

### LEADERSHIP STORYTELLING OF RURAL SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENTS ENGAGED IN CHANGE AND INNOVATION

This dissertation examined the leadership storytelling uses and practices by rural, public school superintendents in North Georgia who are engaged in change and innovation through agreements with the state in exchange for flexibility waivers from Title 20 of the Georgia Code. This study was the result of the participation of five rural, Appalachian superintendents in semi-structured interviews. Two of the districts were Strategic Waivers School Systems (SWSS) and three of them were Charter Systems. The context of this study was framed by Georgia's broad flexibility waivers which encourage school districts to promote and pursue innovative approaches in K-12 education. The geographic boundaries of this study were limited to school districts that were part of counties identified as "Appalachian" by the ARC (Appalachian Regional Commission). In addition, school districts in this study were also identified as rural by the NCES (National Center for Education Statistics) and the US Census Bureau. As a result of this study, there were four overarching storytelling patterns identified in common use among rural superintendents.

**KEYWORDS:** Educational Leadership, Education Reform, Leadership Storytelling, Rural Public School Districts, Change and Innovation, Superintendents

Tony Barrett

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*(Name of Student)*

February 18, 2021

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Date

LEADERSHIP STORYTELLING OF RURAL SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENTS  
ENGAGED IN CHANGE AND INNOVATION

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## DEDICATION

*I would like to dedicate this dissertation to those that supported me in my career. Those individuals include my great-grandparents, grandparents, parents, colleagues and friends. I would not be at this point were it not for their continued love and support. Special dedication is to two individuals who – during the time that I was in school – passed away into eternity. I'd like to dedicate this dissertation to the eternal memory of my father, Bobby Barrett and to the eternal memory of Betty Payne. Many individuals have supported me on this journey and I am forever grateful for their love and support.*

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## CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Since the release of the *A Nation at Risk* report (1983), there have been multiple calls for significant school reform in the nation's public education system. Several waves of education reform have focused on increased standardization, federal and state oversight, professional development, and high stakes accountability at the state and federal levels of government (Bjork, Kowalski & Young, 2005; Bjork, Kowalski & Browne-Ferrigno, 2014; Murphy, 1998). Implementing education reforms have heightened demands on superintendents to communicate complex information to a wide array of stakeholders in a way that generates support for these initiatives. Education reform in Georgia was initiated with passage of the Quality Basic Education Act (QBE) in 1985 under the governorship of Joe Frank Harris. Georgia was the first state to pass legislation on education reform after the release of *A Nation at Risk* (Weller & Hartley, 1994). The QBE Act institutionalized kindergarten, in-school suspension, and Georgia history curriculum in middle school. Included in the QBE were curriculum standards known as the Quality Core Curriculum (QCC). For the next two decades, the QCC guided educational reform efforts in Georgia. In the 1990s, Georgia focused on curriculum and instruction and school choice. As a result, Georgia enacted charter school legislation in 1993 with the passage of the Georgia Charter School Act (GCSA), allowing charter schools and subsequently allowing outside organizations and individuals to apply to found charter schools in 1998.

In 2002, Georgia implemented a system called the College and Career Readiness Performance Index (CCRPI). The school accountability measurement system included

performance measures for a wide array of categories including ethnicity, economic disadvantage, English learners, and students with disabilities, core subject as well as school climate and financial efficiency. In 2015, Georgia required each school district to choose to become a charter district, a Strategic Waiver School System (SWSS), or a Title 20/No Waivers system. As of 2020, there were 46 charter school systems and 132 strategic waiver systems in the state of Georgia. The Governor's Office of Student Achievement (GOSA) monitors progress toward meeting the goals laid out in each school system's contract with the state. In retrospect, the educational reforms launched in Georgia (1983 to 2020) focused on high stakes accountability as well as allowing flexibility for school districts to launch and sustain education innovations.

Implementing these changes is challenging for school district superintendents. Public school superintendents are responsible for managing and leading school districts in a wide range of contexts, including urban, suburban, and rural school systems. Effective leadership hinges on the superintendent's ability to effectively administer the affairs of school districts and nurturing stakeholder support for its educational mission. In other words, superintendents have to manage organizational processes and influence a wide array of individuals within the school districts' organization such as principals, teachers, staff, and parents as well as community citizens to ensure their continuing support for implementation of state and federal educational reform mandates. In sum, the success of the superintendent may hinge on the way in which they work with and through others. In rural contexts, superintendents may have a propensity to engage and communicate with district and community stakeholders using anecdotes and stories to help clarify meaning and link their shared past with their collective future. This proposed

exploratory study focused on superintendents' use of stories in leading rural, Appalachian school districts in North Georgia.

### **1.1 Statement of the Problem**

Scholars suggest that since publication of *A Nation at Risk* (1983), persistent calls for educational reform have heightened demands on superintendents. Several policy succession waves of education reform increased accountability including the standardization of curriculum and testing, federal and state oversight, teacher preparation and professional development. These school reforms challenged superintendents and require strong, persuasive leadership. Understanding their use of stories in leading educational reform may provide important insights into leading school districts.

The purpose of this exploratory research was to understand how superintendents in the rural Appalachian region of North Georgia used storytelling as a leadership strategy to gain community support to implement state mandates for educational change and innovation. Superintendents' use of stories may facilitate explaining change initiatives to community members and articulate how they align with the school district's vision and mission.

### **1.2 Purpose and Significance of the Study**

Storytelling has always been active in Appalachia (Tull, 2014). Moreover, Zimmerman et al (1990) note that stories are valuable in connecting and defining organizational beliefs and values to symbolic and metaphoric speech in rural Appalachian religious congregations. The paucity of scholarly literature on rural public school superintendents' use of storytelling as a way to generate local community support for educational change initiatives presents a unique opportunity to add to the knowledge base



in our field. Consequently, the exploratory study focused on how superintendents in rural, North Georgia school districts use storytelling to implement change and innovation. These insights may also contribute to a promising line of inquiry into the characteristics of aspiring and current public school superintendents.

### **1.3 Research Questions**

This exploratory study was guided by two overarching research questions. The primary focus was on understanding how rural public school superintendents use storytelling to gain support within their respective organizations and communities for launching and sustaining educational change and innovation. These questions include the following:

1. How do rural public school district superintendents use storytelling practices to lead change and innovation in their school districts?
2. Are there similarities in how rural school district superintendents use stories in leading change and innovation?

### **1.4 Research Design**

The methodological design for this exploratory study was a multi-site case study. A distinct advantage of the multi-site case study is that evidence obtained through cross-case analysis may provide a more complete and compelling understanding of the phenomenon (Yin, 1994). Yin (1994) explained that conducting a multi-site case study is comparable to the world of quantitative scientific inquiry where researchers conduct multiple experiments. In this regard, the use of the multi-site case study is beneficial and appropriate for this study.

Through multiple, semi-structured interviews the researcher was able to capture insights into how superintendents use stories as a strategy in leading rural school districts. All semi-structured interviews took place on the researcher's University of Kentucky Zoom account with five school superintendents who lead schools within the Southern Appalachian subregion in North Georgia. This methodology allowed the researcher to compare a greater number of in-depth stories across the entire North Georgia region. Strategically, this approach provided the researcher the opportunity to use triangulation to generalize to a demographically and culturally homogeneous population in the Appalachian region of North Georgia.

The participant pool was identified as the superintendents of Georgia school systems (Appendix A) that fit within the parameters of the NCES' definition of rural and are in the region designated as Appalachian by the ARC. The researcher used a technique called "snowball sampling" (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981; Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955; Coleman, 1958; Merton, 1949). This method typically works well with populations that are difficult to penetrate as an outsider; superintendents are a small population of executive school leaders and are not easily accessible at all times to the general public. Biernacki and Waldorf (1981) characterized snowball sampling as "a study sample through referrals made among people who share or know of others who possess some characteristics that are of research interest." (p. 141).

The researcher began the study by asking state-level contacts to pass along a participant recruitment flyer and interested participants that met the selection criteria contacted the researcher by e-mail to schedule a date and time for the interviews via Zoom. Included in this participant selection were all current superintendents leading rural

public school districts in the Appalachian region of North Georgia. No retired superintendents participated in the study. After interviewing the initial superintendents, the researcher asked each superintendent to pass along the participant recruitment flyer to superintendents within the region that bordered on each superintendent's county school district. The researcher continued this process until five semi-structured interviews were obtained.

Scholars suggest that semi-structured interviews provide a format that allows for both open-ended questions and questions based on theory (Denning, 2011; Bolman & Deal, 2013; Clark, 1992). For example, Galletta (2012) observed that "semi-structured interviews incorporate both open-ended and more theoretically driven questions, eliciting data grounded in the experience of the participant as well as data guided by existing constructs in the particular discipline within which one is conducting research" (p. 45).

The researcher used a two-tiered data analysis approach, which included an inductive open-coding paired with a deductive *a posteriori* framework (Saldaña, 2016). Subsequently In the first tier, the inductive open-coding scheme meant that the researcher had to extract categories of stories during the initial data analysis without an initial framework. After the initial analysis, the second tier of analysis made use of two frameworks: 1. Denning's (2013) eight narrative patterns and 2. Bolman and Deal's (2017) symbolic frame. This combined, two-tiered inductive and deductive approach also may have reduced researcher bias to allow data to be explained more thoroughly. This methodology was a combination of using conceptual frameworks in the second-tier analysis and the constant comparative method of inductive coding in the first-tier analysis to categorize and describe the resulting findings (Charmaz, 2007). This analysis strategy

was useful for identifying previously uncategorized storytelling patterns and categorizing the findings via Bolman and Deal's (2017) symbolic frame and Denning's (2013) eight narrative patterns of leadership storytelling. This approach allowed for a cross-case analysis that explained how rural superintendents use stories to lead their schools in the context of mandated implementation of educational change and innovation.

### **1.5 Study Limitations**

This exploratory study was unique in time, place, and scope. It focused on storytelling as an inherent dimension of leadership employed by rural school district superintendents implementing change and innovation. Expanding understanding of this leadership practice is highly dependent on peer identification of potential study participants as well as eliciting storytelling events and practices from their lived experience. Collecting and interpreting these data have several limitations. For example, the researcher neither selected participants as expert storytellers nor allowed participants to self-select as practitioners who use storytelling as part of their leadership. Although the snowballing technique may be an effective way to identify potential study participants, the terms used by the researcher to describe storytelling practices may have influenced perceptions of their peers. Consequently, the researcher did not identify all highly skilled practitioners. Furthermore, the population and sample size of this study were limited to those school districts that are bound by their rural characteristics and geography. In this regard, the researcher did not interview all superintendents who may be skilled in using storytelling as a leadership technique who currently work in rural, Appalachian school districts. Finally, another potential limitation of this study is the lack of triangulation with

other data sources or the perception of community citizens with regard to their superintendent's use of stories.

## 1.6 Definitions of Key Terms

The key terms used in this study are listed in Table 1 with concise definitions.

These terms are research-based and are key for understanding the content and direction of this study throughout the subsequent chapters in greater detail.

**Table 1.1**

*Definitions of Key Terms*

Term	Definition
Appalachia	The mountainous North American region that extends from the southernmost counties in the state of New York southward and westward, stretching into northeastern Mississippi (Appalachian Regional Commission, 2019).
Change	Lindquist (1978) defined change in organizations as “the modification of, deletion of, or addition to attitudes and behaviors in a person, group, organization or larger system” (Lindquist, p. 1).
Innovation	Barnett (1953) defined innovation as “any thought, behavior, or thing that is new because it is qualitatively different from existing forms” (Barnett, p. 181). Havelock (1982) defined innovation as “any change which represents something new to the people” (Havelock, p. 4). Emo (2015) defined innovation as “those initiatives which are new to those who introduce them” (Emo, p. 172).
Leadership	Rost (1991) defined leadership as “an influence relationship among leaders and followers who intend real changes that reflect their mutual purposes” (p. 102). Educational leaders use influence to effect lasting change in school organizations.
Management	Fayol (1916) defined management as “efforts to forecast and to plan, to organize, to command, to coordinate and to control” (Amaratunga & Baldry, 2002). Koontz and Wehrich (2010) described management as “the process of designing and maintaining an environment in which individuals, working together in groups, efficiently accomplish selected aims” (p. 3).

**Table 1.1 (continued)**

Rural	The definition of “rural” given by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) assigned a school district a category under four different urban-centric locale codes using US Census data composed of the following: city, suburb, town, and rural. The rural category has three separate categories: rural fringe, rural distant and rural remote (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019).
Stories and storytelling	Storytelling is sharing meaningful recollections or memories for multiple purposes among individuals (Lelic, 2001; Wilson & Kopp, 2012). Managers and leaders use stories to convey meaning and interpret and understand events, enabling them to change individuals’ behaviors and alter the direction of organizations (Bolman & Deal, 2013; Campbell, 1988). Stories affirm commonly held beliefs and values in an organization and frame the nature and direction of change (Schein, 1996).
Leadership storytelling	Denning (2013) identified eight narrative patterns including sparking action, building trust, building your brand, transmitting values, getting others to work together, sharing knowledge, taming the grapevine and leading others into the future.
Superintendent	The role of the public school superintendent in the United States includes responsibility for carrying out state education rules, regulations, policies, and local school board directives. The superintendent’s roles include teacher-scholar, business manager, democratic leader, applied social scientist, and effective communicator (Kowalski & Björk, 2005).
Symbols and symbolism	Radcliffe-Brown (1952) defined symbol as “whatever has meaning is a symbol, and the meaning is whatever is expressed by the symbol (p. 143). Peterson and Deal (2011) stated that “by paying fervent attention to the symbolic side of their schools, leaders can help develop the foundation for change and success” (p. 52).
Culture	Deal and Kennedy (1982) defined culture as “the way we do things around here” (p. 4). Schein (1985) defined culture as “a pattern of shared basic assumptions that the group learned as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems.” (p. 12)

**Table 1.1 (continued)**

College and Career Readiness	The first set of college readiness standards called “Standards for Success” was created in 2003 by the Association of American Universities (AAU) (Conley & McGaughy, 2012). College and career readiness is a measure of how schools are preparing students for careers and college entrance out of high school.
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**1.7 Summary**

This chapter provided an overview of this empirical, exploratory study of leadership storytelling practices among rural, Appalachian public school district superintendents in North Georgia who are implementing state-mandated change and innovation initiatives. This study contributed to the knowledge base on rural superintendents and their use of stories in leading, engaging, and persuading community stakeholders to support their school district’s innovative initiatives. Chapter 2 will present an overview of the scholarly literature relevant to the superintendency, superintendent leadership and management, symbols, leadership storytelling, and school reform in the United States of America and the State of Georgia since the publication of *A Nation at Risk* (1983). Chapter 3 will present a discussion of research methodology, research setting, sample size, data collection and data analysis procedures as well as the role of the researcher. Chapter 4 will present the findings of the study, and Chapter 5 will discuss and summarize the findings, present study limitations, and provide recommendations for further research.

## **CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

The literature review includes a discussion of the notions of leadership and management, an overview of Bolman and Deal's (2017) four leadership frames, with particular attention to the symbolic frame and related literature to enhance the understanding of storytelling. The chapter also provides a background of the characteristics of public school superintendents, and education reform in the United States and Georgia. It concludes with an overview of flexibility waivers used in Georgia as a way to stimulate innovation in public education.

### **2.1 Leadership and Management**

Throughout the 20th century, the notions of leadership and management were treated as synonymous terms in business administration literature. Towards the end of the century, Rost (1991) defined management as “an authority relationship between at least one manager and one subordinate who coordinate their activities to produce and sell particular goods or services” (p. 145). On the other hand, he characterized leadership as “an influence relationship among leaders and followers who intend real changes that reflect their mutual purposes” (p. 102). In both instances, Rost (1991) described leadership and management in terms of how they are enacted in organizations. His particular view of leadership is viewed through the lens of an “influence relationship,” working with and through others rather than being highly directive, as may be the case in large organizations.

A number of scholars noted that leadership may be exercised organically by anyone in an organization without relying on formal hierarchies or official titles (Bolman & Deal, 2017; Rost, 1991; Selznick, 1957). In this regard, Rost (1991) suggested that



leadership is not defined by position or title within an organization but rather through social relationships. Many scholars attempted to make a firm distinction between leadership and management. For example, Selznick (1957) posited that “leadership is not equivalent to office-holding or high prestige or authority or decision making” (p. 24). He does not equate leadership with management, but he does attempt to distinguish between the two concepts.

Several decades later, Zalesnik (1977) suggested that leaders and managers differ in their personality types and bases his views on paradigm on those of psychologist Zalesnik (1977) notes that psychologist William James classified individuals as fitting into two camps: “once-born” and “twice-born” (p. 78). According to James’ paradigm, individuals that are “once-born” are biologically predisposed to happiness and a general comfort level with the reality of the world as it is. Unlike the “once-born,” the “twice-born” are biologically predisposed to see problems in the world and are generally more anxious and see the world in need of repair and revision. Using James’ psychological framework, Zalesnik (1977) suggested that there are inherent personality differences between managers and leaders, including attitudes toward goals, conceptions of work, relations with others, and senses of self. He observes that managers are “once-born” and that leaders are “twice-born.” Managers tend to be more impersonal in their dealings with people and leaders tend to employ a more empathetic approach towards others. Concerning goals, Zalesnik (1977) noted that managers tend to adopt more indifferent attitudes toward goals, whereas leaders tend to have a more personal attitude toward them.

Although these perspectives may generally provide a measure of insight into the notions of management and leadership, they do not reflect all of the possible ways they may be described. For example, Bennis and Nanus (1985) examined the dichotomy of leadership and management and stated that “managers are people who do things right and leaders are people who do the right thing” (p. 21). Although these differences may appear simplistic, they frame how one may view both leadership and management. Furthermore, Schön (1984) stated:

Leadership and management are not synonymous terms, one can be a leader without being a manager. Conversely, one can manage without leading. Nevertheless, we generally expect managers to lead, and criticize them if they fail to do so. (p. 36)

Consequently, he treated management and leadership as though they were part of an interconnected continuum. Schön’s (1984) point is well-taken, and although there may be some differences between management and leadership, in the practical realm, these distinctions may be less consequential. For example, on a day-to-day basis, practitioners must handle the realities of both managing and leading an organization. In this regard, leadership and management may not be mutually exclusive; thus they may be viewed as complementary tools essential to get the job done and to make things work within their respective organizations.

Although management and leadership may be complementary in practice, these distinctions are essential for the study of organizational leadership. Leaders lacking the ability to manage may not be effective, and managers who lack skills in working with others may have difficulty leading organizations. In well-run organizations, leaders and managers are able to draw upon both management and leadership skills in directing people to a desired goal, objective, or mission. Kotter (2001) explained that “the real

challenge is to combine strong leadership and strong management and use each to balance the other” (p. 103). Kotter (2001) explained that management was more concerned with short-term planning, long-term planning, controlling, and problem-solving and sees leadership as providing direction in leading changes, innovations, and initiatives. He noted that “management is about coping with complexity. Leadership, by contrast, is about coping with change” (Kotter, 2001, p. 104). The point is that management and leadership are not opposed to one another but rather complement each other dynamically as organizational needs arise. He also suggested that “leadership and management are two distinctive and complementary systems of action, and each has its function and characteristic activities” (Kotter, 2001, p. 103). In sum, scholars made distinctions in the leadership-management dichotomy on a theoretical and philosophical level, particularly the dichotomy between influence versus process articulated by Rost (1991). Although leadership and management are distinctive on a theoretical level, in practice, they are integrated.

## **2.2 Leadership: Framing and Reframing**

Bolman and Deal’s (2017) notion of framing and reframing helps leaders make sense of organizations, organizational decisions, and organizational leadership behavior. They proposed a four-frame model for viewing situations and phenomena within organizations that includes the structural frame, the human resources frame, the political frame, and the symbolic frame. The notion of framing and reframing enables a leader to visualize different facets of a problem or situation (Bolman & Deal, 2017). Consequently, reframing is a tool that may be used by leaders for gaining clarity and a better understanding of organizational problems, challenges, and situations. In the following

sections, Bolman and Deal's (2017) four-frame model will be discussed. However, the symbolic frame, being a foundation for this study, will be discussed at greater length.

### **2.2.1 The Structural Frame**

The ideas and concepts of the structural frame include six foundational assumptions about organizations (Bolman & Deal, 2017). The first assumption is that organizations are rational and they exist primarily to achieve organizational goals and objectives. Second, organizations may increase their efficiency via specialization and division of labor and there are rules and formal hierarchical structures to control and manage work done in support of the organizational mission. Third, forms of control and coordination ensure that the many efforts of multiple individuals blend and harmonize together for the benefit of all organizational goals and objectives. The fourth assumption is that organizations operate on rational principles but can have interference from personal agendas. Fifth, supporting structures that exist within an organization must align with the access to resources as well as the milieu in which they find themselves. The sixth assumption is that structural problems will and do arise, but there are solutions through analysis, structuring, and restructuring.

The strength of the structural frame entails the ability to assess organizational effectiveness. Effective leadership within the structural frame is essential to the functioning of an organization because it reduces friction and conflict among workers. The idea of leadership in the structural frame emphasizes impersonality rather than being subjective due to opinion-based factors such as an individual's personality, charisma or likeability. A focus on rationality, efficiency and predictability are of paramount importance in the structural frame. In addition, workers and their "good fit" for the job is

a central tenet of organizational output. Consequently, managers underscore the importance of having the right personnel in an organization. Bolman and Deal (2017) emphasize the importance of differentiation and integration in structural design. Differentiation is concerned with the allocation of labor and integration handles the coordination of labor.

Rules and regulations, which have a high value from the structural frame perspective, are created for large and small organizations to accomplish their missions and are particularly useful because rules and regulations help organizations maintain order and stability. Assuming a stated purpose of achieving organizational goals, a significant strength of the structural frame is the organizational chart and the vertical and lateral communication that occurs within and throughout the organization. The organizational chart is viewed as a useful tool because it provides a visual representation of an organization's management structure and depicts the function of each unit and sub-unit of an organization. It also enables managers to assign roles and responsibilities within the organization. In sum, the structural frame allows managers and leaders to develop and sustain effective structural management to maintain order and stability in an organization.

### **2.2.2 The Human Resource Frame**

The first of several assumptions in Bolman and Deal's (2017) human resource frame is the idea that an organization exists to serve human needs. In this regard, organizations can neither attain nor sustain high levels of success without engaging people in a wide array of activities to meet their needs. Secondly, the human resource frame assumes that both organizations and people need each other to thrive. In other

words, there is a symbiotic relationship between an organization and the workers. In this regard, organizations draw upon the talent of the people to make the organizations function well and workers, in turn, have employment opportunities that enable them to afford a decent standard of living. The third assumption is the idea of a “fit” between people and organizations. Both organizations and people benefit when the fit is strong and both suffer when the fit is poor. When individuals are satisfied, organizations benefit from human talent and ingenuity.

Workers need to be motivated and we see this most clearly in Maslow’s (1954) hierarchy of human needs. It is not insignificant that Maslow’s (1954) hierarchy of human needs is one of the most used frameworks in human resources. He categorizes the needs in three primary categories: the physical, social and self. Physical needs come first, then social needs and lastly the needs of the self. McGregor (1960) expanded on Maslow’s hierarchy by positing that assumptions made by management can become self-fulfilling prophecies. He called this Theory X and Theory Y. In general, Theory X managers tend to assume the negative of their employees in that they are inherently lazy and need a lot of command and control structure to do their jobs. Conversely, Theory Y managers assume the positive of their employees and are cognizant of human needs and will try to align meaningful work to get the most out of their employees.

Maintaining a synergistic and symbiotic relationship between management and workers requires an investment of time and resources in people as well as building and cultivating relationships. Employee satisfaction contributes significantly to a positive organizational culture that may contribute to both organizational efficiency and the well-

being of workers. A strength of the human resource frame is its focus on the importance of people in the organization to accomplish its goals and objectives.

### **2.2.3 The Political Frame**

The assumptions of the political frame are central to understanding conflict and how leaders work in complex organizations (Bolman & Deal, 2017). The first major assumption through the political frame views organizations as a conglomeration of coalitions, which consists of individuals and interest groups. Second, there are permanent and lasting differences among individuals and groups concerning their values, preferences, beliefs, information, and perceptions of reality that change slowly. Third, most of the decisions revolve around Lasswell's (1936) definition of politics of "who gets what, when, and how" (p. 264). Because of the scarcity of resources and ideological differences, conflict is inherent to organizations. Power becomes the essential resource. The fourth assumption of the political frame is that goals and decisions are a result of bargaining on the part of coalitions. Gamson (1968) discussed two significant sources of initiatives in which the authorities exert a "top-down" approach to asserting their agendas, and partisans typically use their coalition power to exert pressure on the authorities from the "bottom-up."

The political frame underscores the importance of conflict and that the struggle for power is inevitable. Since this is not avoidable, leaders are compelled not only to understand its nature but also mitigate the influence and impact on an organization. Kotter's (1985) work in the mid-1980's enhances the understanding of managing political conflict. He advocates leaders identify who needs to be led, who might resist cooperation, develop amicable working relationships to reduce resistance, and lastly, the judicious use

of force (i.e., power) to achieve compliance. In most cases, commitment is more effective than compliance, but if only one or the other is possible, then compliance is better than non-compliance or non-commitment.

Pfeffer (1992) defined power as “the potential ability to influence behavior, to change the course of events, to overcome resistance, and to get people to do things they would not otherwise do” (p. 30). The types of power that one may exercise include referent, expert, legitimate, reward, and coercive power (French & Raven, 1959). Referent power refers to the ability to attract followers based on a leader’s charismatic personality that attracts others. Expert power derives itself from a leader’s expertise and *savoir-faire*. Legitimate power refers directly to the power derived from one’s formal job title within a hierarchical organizational structure such as on an organizational chart or in the military. Reward power is a power where rewards are used as an incentive for getting the job done. Lastly, coercive power refers to the ability to enforce rules and control subordinates through reprimands and threats and other measures.

Interest groups are key to understanding organizational politics. They are viewed as an association of individuals that are sometimes formally organized that attempt to influence policies and policymaking (Thomas & Hrebenar, 1999). Interest groups can be as simple as two or three people working in conjunction and collaboration to get their agenda to the forefront of the discussion to obtain a favorable decision. Interest groups typically have a single focus but may be short or long-term in scope and duration. Coalitions may be composed of several interest groups and form as a political force to influence decisions at the policymaking and decision-making level. The effectiveness of both may be described using the adage that there is strength in numbers. The political



frame views conflict as inherent and normal aspect of organizational life. Moreover, the political frame views organizations as they are, not as strict hierarchies but as a collection of coalitions and interest groups vying for power and influence. Lasswell's (1936) description of politics, "who gets what, when and how" (p. 264) is as apt as it is insightful for understanding the political frame.

### **2.3 The Symbolic Frame**

The symbolic frame assumes that what is most important about an event is not what happens but what it means through an interpretive lens. In this regard, activities and meanings are loosely coupled and multiple interpretations of events may depend on a wide array of individual experiences. The use of symbols as well as myths, stories, rituals and ceremonies help to resolve confusion and help people find purpose and meaning. Symbolism is an inherent aspect of organizations and provides insight into its culture. Culture is defined by Schein (1985) as a pattern of shared underlying assumptions that a group learns as it solves its problem of external adaptation and integration (Bolman & Deal, 2017). Deal and Kennedy (1982) defined this succinctly as "the way we do things around here" (p. 4). Over a period of time, organizations develop a culture composed of norms, values, and beliefs that may be reflected in its use of symbols and symbolism.

The greatest strength of the symbolic frame is the ability to tap into the human potential of dreams, visions, and hopes. Understanding events through the symbolic frame underscores the need for a better understanding of how leaders use stories and myths to portray events and provide meaning to those in the organization and society. Symbolic representations are uncommonly effective because through them, they create and sustain purpose and meaning. Moreover, leaders may enhance their effectiveness

especially through the use of stories as they are a traditional form of human communication and they communicate culturally relevant values and beliefs as well as future directions of an organization. Culture is an integral part of any organization and leaders who understand the importance of culture and the use of symbols may be more adept at influencing an organization. Bolman and Deal (2017) asserted that historically, cultures have relied on ritual and ceremony to create order, clarity, and predictability, particularly around difficult issues or dilemmas.

Rituals serve many functions including socialization, stabilization, reassurance, as well as convey messages to external constituencies (Bolman & Deal, 2017). Typically, rituals are short-term and provide clarity, meaning, and direction to the regularities of work. On the other hand, ceremonies are conducted with less frequency than rituals, tend to be more elaborate, ornate, and significant than rituals. Leaders may make use of both rituals and ceremonies to convey meaningful experiences to those in the organization, the community, and society. Schools and churches must look at how people expect them to look in order for schools and churches to obtain community support. If schools and churches looked different than expected, they would not have as much support.

### **2.3.1 Symbols and Symbolism**

Radcliffe-Brown (1952) defined symbol as “whatever has meaning is a symbol, and the meaning is whatever is expressed by the symbol” (p. 143). Therefore, a symbol is any image, logo, story, or anything else that represents an idea. The symbol is reflective of reality and consequently, perception becomes a reality. Based on studies of symbols and symbolism in the ancient world, Parmentier (2016) wrote, “the English word *symbol* is based on the classical Greek word *symbolon*, which means “thrown

together” (p. 37) The ancient Greeks initially used the term to describe two things, once part of a unity, broken apart, and then reassembled to constitute a unity again” (p. 3). A symbol, in this sense, is a part of the overarching reality and not necessarily separate from the reality that the symbol represents. Parmentier (2015) notes further that “the sense of symbol as a figurative, nonliteral, hidden, or mystical meaning is a later, derived, or secondary meaning” (p. 37). Therefore, symbols representationally mirror the reality to which they correspond.

### **2.3.2 Myths and Heroes**

Leaders have been telling stories, myths, and fairy tales for a long time. The myth of the hero is uplifting and inspires hope and stories are a powerful form of communication, and perhaps the most ancient. Leaders are aware of the effectiveness of a story to galvanize their subordinate support. Many stories are popular myths within an organization and other tall tales. Myths are stories that explain the unconscious wishes of the mind and offer narratives that connect and anchor the present to the past (Cohen, 1969). Myths offer positive and negative narratives, and in both of these perspectives, they help organizations shape their unique cultures. Campbell (1988) said that “myths are public dreams, dreams are private myths” (p. 48). It would be remiss to say that organizations require a myth to believe in, a myth to sell, and a myth that people can wholeheartedly espouse. Effective leaders can take advantage of the influence of organizational myths because every organization needs a story in which participants may believe, a myth that connects it back to the past as well as enables them to envision forging forward into a future that extols the accomplishments of its heroes.

Heroes and heroines as part of the myth give human examples of great fortitude, exemplary character and perfect guides that, according to and depending on the myth, should be emulated and looked upon favorably because a hero has gone where the organization wants to go, and a hero is portrayed as being larger than life. Leaders may tap into the notion of myths to create a sense of connectedness to the past as well as to a future destination. In his seminal work, *The Power of Myth*, Campbell (1988) posited that “a hero is someone that has given his or her life to something bigger than oneself” (p. 151). The hero provides that mythic human example of what is possible. Human myths are stories that explain the unconscious wishes of the mind and offer narratives that connect and anchor the present to the past (Cohen, 1969). In addition, myths offer positive and negative narratives, and in both of these perspectives, they help organizations shape their unique cultures. Campbell (1988) explained that “a myth is a society’s dream. Myths are public dreams, dreams are private myths” (p. 40).

With storytelling, leaders that can tap into the deep mythical core of a human organization may achieve a level of commitment that will help the leadership accomplish its mission and keep worker morale very high. Stories and myths do not necessarily have to be long, but they may occur within simple personal anecdotes that a leader may share. Anecdotes may serve the same purpose of a story and are quite synonymous with stories, albeit a little shorter in length.

Stories stick in the minds of people. They tap deep into the emotions, fears, hopes, and desires of individuals. There is something very human about stories that no matter how technologically advanced our society becomes, people love to hear a story, and when a good storyteller tells the story or fairy tale, the message usually sticks. Denning

(2013) categorized business storytelling into eight narrative patterns. They include sparking action, communicating whom you are, communicating whom the company is, transmitting values, fostering collaboration, taming the grapevine, sharing knowledge, and leading people into the future. Effective organizations may take advantage of the power of a story to harness the power of belief and support among their leaders and subordinates. Although there is a paucity of research on the use of stories by educational leaders, they may enhance their leadership using storytelling as a way to communicate important ideas to those in their organizations as well as in the community served by public schools.

### **2.3.3 Trust-Building Through Storytelling**

Managers and leaders may also be able to build trust among their subordinates through the use of stories. After conducting interviews in an study with 13 Finnish managers, Auvinen, Aaltio and Blomqvist (2013) explained that “storytelling can be a valuable source of trust by creating a shared context and sense of meaning among leaders and their followers (p. 497). They found that the managers valued the use of stories to help them build trust among peers and subordinates in their respective organizations and they argued that “stories are both an interpersonal and an impersonal means to build trust” (p. 508).

## **2.4 Theoretical Framework**

Culture determines how organizations operate and what ideas, innovations, and stories are acceptable to an organization’s culture. Deal and Kennedy (1982) defined culture as “the way we do things around here” (p. 4). However, Schein (1985) offered a more robust definition of culture as:

a pattern of shared basic assumptions that the group learned as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems. (p. 12)

Both of these definitions capture the practical and scholarly concepts of organizational culture. Culture determines how organizations operate and what ideas, innovations, and stories are acceptable to an organization's culture. Stories are a powerful form of communication and perhaps one of the oldest forms of human communication and instruction. Through Bolman and Deal's (2017) symbolic frame, we can make sense of organizations in the form of stories, myths, metaphors, sagas, icons, and logos. All of these symbols serve many different organizational purposes. Stories maintain traditions and provide examples to direct everyday behavior (Bolman & Deal, 2017). Stories in the symbolic frame help us understand reality and how perception can be even more important than reality itself. In sum, organizations are judged as much on appearance as on outcomes.

Denning (2013) categorized stories in business and organizational storytelling as "sparkling action, communicating who you are, communicating who the company is, transmitting values, fostering collaboration, taming the grapevine, sharing knowledge, and leading people into the future" (p. 33-34). A large number of business and organizational stories will fall into these categories. Clark's (1992) work on organizational values in higher education provides a framework to understand an organization's story. His notion of the "organizational saga" provides insights into what makes institutions successful and what makes their culture unique and bonding for its members and participants. He wrote, "the most important characteristic and consequence of an organizational saga is the capturing of allegiance, the committing of staff to the

institution” (p. 235). Later, Clark (1992) outlined three main conditions necessary for institutional innovation: “a new organization, a crisis in an established institution, and evolutionary openness in an established institution” (p. 237). Organizational culture, symbols, stories, and sagas provide a basis for understanding how leaders may launch and sustain educational change initiatives.

## **2.5 Role Characteristics of Public School District Superintendents**

A public school district superintendent is responsible for several facets of public school management and leadership. Kowalski and Björk (2005) delineated five role characteristics of public school superintendents based on a review of scholarly literature from the 19th and 20th centuries. These role characteristics include: teacher-scholar, organizational manager, democratic leader, applied social scientist, and communicator. The first four role characterizations draw on the work of Callahan (1966), however the role of communicator was identified by Kowalski that added an important dimension to understanding their work. Although superintendents may enact multiple roles in addressing multi-faceted complex issues facing school districts given changing circumstances, some may be more important while others may appear to be less so. None however, are irrelevant.

### **2.5.1 Superintendent as Teacher-Scholar**

The teacher-scholar role characterization is historically grounded and reflects the nature of work during the mid to late 1800s that focused on supervising teachers and implementing state curricula (Kowalski & Björk, 2005). Callahan (1962) observed that most of the early superintendents began their careers as master teachers. In the late 1990s, a group of California superintendents described four leadership attributes of the

superintendent as an instructional leader, and they include the articulation of an instructional vision, the creation of an organizational structure that supports that vision, the assessment and evaluation of personnel and instructional programs and organizational adaptation (Petersen, 1999). This shift is significant because it places more emphasis on the teacher-scholar role of the school superintendent. Although this role characterization has fluctuated since the early 1900s, it never became obsolete. In response to protracted educational reform initiatives during recent decades, it has increased in importance.

Consequently, superintendents' interest and expertise focused on curricula and the implementation of state mandates as well as the supervision of teachers. According to the two most recent nationwide studies of school superintendents, researchers found that 40% of superintendents reported that their school board's most important performance expectation was for them to serve as an educational leader (Kowalski & Björk, 2005; 2011). In addition, the studies also found that three of the five most significant challenges that were self-identified by superintendents revolved around the teacher-scholar role including testing, improvements in curriculum and instruction, and curriculum changes.

Research findings confirmed that superintendents who are involved instructionally in their school districts have an impact on the failure or success of public schools (Björk, 1993; Bridges, 1982; Cuban, 1984). Peterson, Murphy and Hallinger (1985) reported that "districts with excellent student achievement have superintendents who are personally involved" in curriculum and instruction programs in their school districts (p. 79). Scholars project that as educational reform initiatives increase emphasis on learning and enacting curriculum changes, public school superintendents' role as teacher-scholar will increase in importance.



### **2.5.2 Superintendent as Organizational Manager**

As school districts, especially in urban areas, increased in population and size during the 1850s-1890s, the role of the superintendent as district manager became more prominent (Kowalski & Björk, 2005). Superintendents were expected to manage districts and handle an increasingly wide array of issues including budgets, personnel, operations, and facilities management. Their role as district manager remains an important dimension of superintendents' work today. The AASA study of superintendents (Glass et al., 2000) reported that about 36% of superintendents considered their role as district manager as their primary role. More recently, Kowalski et al. (2011) reported that for the first time in recent history it was second only to their responsibilities of supervising instruction.

### **2.5.3 Superintendent as Democratic Leader**

Superintendents are highly visible public figures and are influenced by politics. Consequently, they have must an acuity for interest group politics, coalitions, and other types of influence on school district educational policymaking affairs and processes (Kowalski & Björk, 2005; Tracey, 1987). The political realities surrounding public education suggest the need for superintendents to have political acumen as they navigate the political landscape in order to secure adequate funding for their school districts (Keedy & Björk, 2002; Kowalski & Björk, 2005). The latest AASA study of the superintendency (Glass et al., 2000) found that 57% percent of all superintendents and 90% of superintendents in very large school districts reported that they faces opposition with interest groups' influence on school board decisions (Kowalski & Björk, 2005). These data suggest that superintendents must be cognizant of local and state politics to survive and advance the interests of children in their school districts.

#### **2.5.4 Superintendent as Applied Social Scientist**

The notion of superintendents as the applied social scientist emerged concurrently with the advancement in social science research during the 1940s and 1950s that focused on the condition of education, the well-being of children in society and learning.

Superintendents used this new knowledge to improve public education (Kowalski & Björk, 2005). This shift in the role of the school district superintendent introduced a new awareness as well as an unprecedented way of working that included academic research methods and data analysis to those working in the field (Cooper & Boyd, 1987).

Kowalski & Björk (2005) note that as a result, superintendents used research findings from sociology, psychology, and education administration to address complex issues related to social justice, demographic trends, the culture of poverty and other societal changes. In sum, findings from research enhanced their capacity to address a wide array of problems facing school districts.

#### **2.5.5 Superintendent as Communicator**

During the 20th century, society shifted from a manufacturing-based economy to information-based. The role of the superintendent as communicator is related to this economic transition (Kowalski & Björk, 2005). As communication patterns in society changed, it had a profound influence on how superintendents did their work. It impacted how they communicated with and lead district staffs and interacted with students, parents and the community as well as with school board members and policymakers. In addition, this era was also characterized as an age of institutional collaboration, which compelled superintendents to seek ways to build partnerships with local businesses, agencies and organizations that had a vested interest in the next generation of workers and advocated

that students learn practical, real-world skills that would advance their careers. In sum, changes in society altered the nature and direction of superintendents' work in the 21st century and underscored the importance of their role as communicator.

## **2.6 Education Reform in the United States of America: 1983-2020**

From the early 1980s to today, the US educational system has seen several policy waves of education reform directed at increased standardization, oversight, professional development and testing. Over the past few decades, many of the significant events in American school reform have their roots in the publication of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983 and the subsequent call for significant school reform focused on enhancing the nation's efforts to remain globally competitive.

The most recent education reform movement may be traced to reports published by national commissions during the 1980s-era political environment that heightened public awareness of the condition of American education and the need to prepare students to compete in a global economy. The release of *A Nation at Risk* (1983) by the National Commission of Excellence in Education attempted to identify problems in the US educational system and offered solutions to improve American schools. The report stated that "the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and as a people" (p. 5). This document spearheaded a nationwide effort to correct a perceived level of low academic achievement by American public-school students. The report stated:

Many 17-year olds do not possess the higher order intellectual skills we should expect of them. Nearly 40 percent cannot draw inferences from written material; only one-fifth can write a persuasive essay; only one-third can solve a mathematics problem requiring several steps (p. 9).

The strident language of the report helped to galvanize efforts by policymakers at the national and state levels of government to promulgate legislation focused on launching and sustaining an increased focus on standards-based instruction and increasing teacher preparation requirements. Although the 1980s-era was a time characterized by the proliferation of school reform efforts, policies, and legislation, many of these efforts did not serve the function that they intended to serve, and they were quite short-lived and failed to accomplish their intended goals (Weller & Hartley, 1994).

Following the release of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983, many states quickly followed suit in enacting school reform legislation in an attempt to increase student performance as well as hold district superintendents, school principals and classroom teachers accountable for student outcomes. Three years later, another school reform committee in the *Educational Commission of the States* (1986) posited a linkage between US public education the economy in reporting that “the possibility that other nations may out-stage us in inventiveness and productivity is suddenly troubling Americans” (p. 13). Public education was criticized for a wide range of the ills of the American economy. Therefore, school reformers sought to make changes aligned with enabling the nation to compete in the global economy. Consequently, much of the onus of improving public K-12 education was placed on educators, particularly on public school superintendents who oversee the implementation of educational change.

Other forces during this time period also contributed to educational reform initiatives, including reducing poverty and high rates of unemployment as a result of a slowing economy. These circumstances, in turn, contributed to the urgency of the political debate surrounding the school reforms. The loss of public confidence in public

schools also signaled a loss of trust in political institutions and the status quo (Murphy, 1998). Scholars described the educational reform movement in the United States in two ways. For example, Murphy (1998) characterized the period between 1980-2000 as the Excellence Era of school reform. Moreover, another more recent way to conceptualize school reform is through succession policy waves (Björk, Browne-Ferrigno, & Potterton, 2017; Björk, Kowalski, & Browne-Ferrigno, 2014; Björk, Kowalski, & Young, 2005).

### **2.6.1 Excellence Era of Education Reform 1980-2000**

Murphy (1998) delineated the Excellence Era of school reform between 1980-2000 into separate chronological subcategories, which include the Intensification Era (1980-1987), the Restructuring Era (1986-1995) and the Reformation Era (1992-present) (Murphy, 1998). The first era, the Intensification Era (1980-1987) focused on stricter regulations and more rigorous curriculum requirements and were characterized by stricter supervision, evaluation of public school teachers, and an emphasis on structural, top-down reforms emanating from federal and state governments.

From 1986-1995, the Restructuring Era focused on reforms associated with decentralization, professional empowerment, site-based management, and school choice (Murphy, 1998). The Restructuring Era was characterized by a total rejection of the status quo, and reformers heavily emphasized reconfiguring the K-12 system. The most critical change during this era of school reform was to focus on improving teaching and learning in individual schools and classrooms (Green, 1987). Backlash against the traditional public K-12 system during this era increased support for market-style reforms including charter schools and school choice which forced public schools to embrace new ways of

thinking about school improvement, particularly with regard to stakeholder needs and interests (Murphy, 1998).

The Reformation Era (1992-present) centered on student academic performance, curriculum standards, accountability, teacher evaluation, and privatization issues. This subcategory of the excellence era encompassed all four reform mechanisms of school reform, including government, profession, citizen, and market (Murphy, 1998).

Governmental reform focused heavily on standards developments in three principal groupings, which include: content standards, performance standards, and opportunity-to-learn standards. However, education reform remained a challenge during this period as there were, nor are there today any easy remedies to perceived problems and shortcomings of public education systems.

### **2.6.2 Major Policy Waves of Education Reform**

Another way to conceptualize educational reform in the nation is chronologically. Murphy (1990) described educational reform as occurring in three major policy waves. Initially, he categorized the school reforms of the 1980s into three distinct policy waves. He described the first wave (1982-1985) of school reform as a broken system in need of repair. He suggested that this period is characterized by a top-down bureaucratic change model that included increased curriculum requirements, longer school years, and an array of new programs directed at instituting an overhaul of the nation's educational framework. More recent scholarship situated the first wave reports between 1983-1986 and suggested that the first wave reports culminated in shifting policymaking from the districts to the state, expanded bureaucracies and increased workloads for school personnel (Björk, Kowalski & Young, 2005; Björk, Browne-Ferrigno, Kowalski, 2014).

Murphy (1990) suggested that the second wave (1986-1989) focused on improving the structure of schooling and fostering a sense of professionalism within education. School reform efforts in the second wave were characterized by a push for higher educator entry requirements, more robust curriculum frameworks and increased professional development. Björk et al. (2014) chronologically delineated the second wave of reforms between 1985-1989 and suggested that this period was characterized principally by a national debate on public education and a stronger emphasis on curriculum standards and an increased focus on standardized assessments. (Björk, Kowalski, & Browne-Ferrigno, 2014). Murphy (1990) suggested that the push for the third wave of reforms began in 1988 and were characterized by forming schools as comprehensive systems aimed at restructuring schooling models and connecting children and families through school services and were critical of previous waves of reform.

More recent scholarship characterizes the third wave of school reforms (1989-2003) by an increased focus on children and their needs which lead to a greater emphasis on the school as a community hub of integrated services (Björk, Kowalski & Browne-Ferrigno, 2014). Most recently, Björk, Browne-Ferrigno, and Potterton (2017) added a fourth wave of school reforms (2003-present), defined as an increased emphasis on the nation's changing demographics, social science research and the effects of poverty on at-risk students. This current wave of school reform included the most important education reforms in the last twenty years, the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act (2001) and the Every Student Succeeds (ESSA) Act (2015).

### **2.6.3 National Education Reform Legislation (1983-2020)**

While the Excellence Era was pivotal in launching large-scale school reform efforts in the nation, it failed to accomplish all the goals of school reformers (Murphy, 1990). It is evident that school reform is a long-term effort that requires a complex array of interwoven social, political, individual and structural changes to move school reform in a forward-facing direction. Murphy (2012) suggested that the simplest, most straightforward equation for school improvement is “school improvement = academic press + supportive community” (p. 257). This simple equation represents the majority of educational reform work launched during the last three decades. However, school reforms and significant changes do not lead to rapid results but occur over an extended period of time. Several congressional acts articulate the nature and scope of educational reform as well as capture its inherent complexity.

### **2.6.4 *No Child Left Behind* Era (2000-2015)**

In the early 2000s, top-down management and regulatory approaches to education reform were taken by the US Congress in promulgating the NCLB into law in 2002, which was signed by George W. Bush (Peterson, 2016). This controversial law was a major policy initiative that implemented measures including Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) and is the most significant and essential revision of federal education policy in decades (McDonnell, 2005).

Schools and districts that received federal dollars had to meet AYP performance standards or face being financially sanctioned (Hess & McShane, 2019). Another rule requirement of NCLB is that teachers must meet the definition of “highly-qualified,” which means that all teachers must have, at minimum, a bachelor’s degree, state-level



certifications, and subject-matter expertise (Hess & McShane, 2019). President Obama continued the same national education policy and the NCLB did not change until the adoption of the Race to the Top (2009), which included an investment of \$4.35 billion into the education system and encouraged alternative ways to close achievement gaps. The existence of these achievement gaps led to a focus on school turnaround efforts in low-performing schools. During this era of school reform, school turnaround became an integral part of the national discussion on school reform. No Child Left Behind (NCLB) required low-performing schools to meet the same AYP as high-performing schools, which disregarded the disparity in school contexts in terms of affluence, poverty and unemployment.

The NCLB mandate compared all schools regardless of context, which contributed to school improvement burnout and failure and states implemented provisions of the NCLB law through respective state education agencies (SEA) in all 50 states (VanGronigen & Myers, 2017). Recent reports estimated that nearly 2.5 million public school students attend low-performing schools, characterized as “priority schools” within any given school year (VanGronigen & Myers, 2017). Despite the wide disparity in school contexts, they were being asked to perform at the same level as affluent schools whose students are not challenged by the effects of poverty and unemployment.

Rowan (2002) suggested that the emphasis on getting children who attend lower-performing schools to perform at high academic levels helped to create a “school improvement industry” (p. 283) that developed strategies to help teachers improve student learning and principals improve school performance. This school improvement industry provides leadership support and teacher professional development to help

educators reach students in the most impoverished schools. Most state education agencies chose to focus on standardized testing as a measure of student success in their school turnaround efforts. While this is certainly laudable, there are also non-cognitive factors that do not fit neatly within the mathematical logarithms of standardized tests (VanGronigen & Myers, 2017). In 2009, the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) enacted during the Obama administration granted competitive funding to the states as part of the Race to the Top (2009) initiative for funding innovative strategies to achieve academic goals in lower-performing schools. VanGronigen and Myers (2017) suggested that both the NCLB and the ARRA put a lot of pressure on both state education agencies (SEAs) as well as local education agencies (LEAs) to work to improve student achievement, particularly in low-performing or “priority schools.”

The primary measure of student success during this accountability era of school reform was academic performance on standardized-test results rather than comprehensive grades earned over the course of a school year. Toward the latter part of the 2000s, there was a backlash against standardized testing, which was viewed by many as an end of itself rather than as one measure of achieve the NCLB reforms. In this regard, provisions of NCLB were viewed as being more harmful than beneficial, especially when applied to students attending high-poverty or “priority schools” (Van Gronigen & Myers, 2017).

### **2.6.5 *Every Student Succeeds Act (2015) Era***

This time period is characterized by federal deregulation and increased local authority. In 2015, President Obama ushered in a new era of school reform with the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 also known as the ESSA of 2015. This act transferred authority for school reforms, planning

and implementation to the respective state departments of education with the provision that they have a plan approved by the US Department of Education that outlines how they would proceed to implement the provisions of the ESSA (2015). This decision reversed the decades-long policy of stringent, federal oversight over K-12 education. In 2015, President Obama remarked at the signing of the legislation:

This bill makes long-overdue fixes to the last education law, replacing the one-size-fits-all approach to reform with a commitment to provide every student with a well-rounded education. It creates real partnerships between the states, which will have new flexibility to tailor their improvement plans, and the federal government, which will have the oversight to make sure that the plans are sound. (White House Press Release, 2015, p. 1)

The president's remarks support that the focus of federal policy is on deregulation of school reform and providing flexibility to the states in implementing state solutions. However, the ESSA retained the requirement for standardized testing of students in elementary school, middle school, and high school. Reporting requirements including delineation by demographic subgroups remained unchanged from previous NCLB requirements (Egalite & Fusarelli, 2017). Importantly, the language of the ESSA limits the role of the federal government in public K-12 education in four ways that include: 1) affecting equity and equitable practices; 2) prohibiting the Secretary of Education from determining any requirements or standards for teacher or principal evaluations; 3) the freedom to create state accountability systems; and 4) deferring to state and local education agencies to create school supports for low-performing schools (Egalite & Fusarelli, 2017). These four ways allow the state and local education agencies flexibility in determining how to best serve students in their respective states. This shift is consistent with states' responsibility for the provision of education under the Tenth Amendment to the US Constitution, in which states have the responsibility and power to legislate school

reforms. Some believe that the state oversight of education will lead to better outcomes because they understand the local contexts and are consequently better positioned to respond to those local challenges. This idea is one of the prevailing assumptions behind the efficacy of the ESSA (2015).

Unlike the NCLB era, the federal deregulation era that followed recognizes the importance of school leadership in implementing school reform. Specifically, ESSA allows for Title II funds to be converted for use in professional development programs and also allows for those funds to be transferred over to Title I funding (Egalite & Fusarelli, 2017). With this funding allowance, schools are able to focus on the development of school leaders which recognize as their pivotal role, the success or failure of public schools. In sum, ESSA allowed for greater flexibility for states and local education agencies to experiment with more innovative approaches within education.

## **2.7 Education Reform in Georgia: 1985-2020**

Education reform in Georgia may be representative of other states following the release of *A Nation at Risk* (1983). Two years later after its release, Georgia was the first state to pass major legislation in the aftermath of the report (Weller & Hartley, 1994). For example, it passed the Quality Basic Education (QBE) Act of 1985 under the leadership of Governor Joe Frank Harris. In 1983, Georgia governor Harris appointed the Governor's Education Review Commission that was focused on developing a model for moving Georgia forward educationally which resulted in the QBE (1985) funding formula and implementation guidelines (Harris, 1986).

With the passage of the QBE Act, the Georgia General Assembly ushered in a new education era that institutionalized programs including kindergarten, in-school

suspension, and mandated teaching Georgia history in the 8th grade. In addition, the QBE Act stimulated curriculum changes through provisions of the Quality Core Curriculum (QCC) that established basic education standards for Georgia's public schools for the next two decades. During the 1990s, education policymakers in Georgia shifted the focus of school reform towards school choice. In August of 1993, the Georgia General Assembly passed charter school legislation under the governorship of Zell Miller. This new legislation allowed for the conversion of traditional public schools into "conversion charter" schools (Georgia Charter School Act, 1993).

In 1998, five years after the passage of the Georgia Charter School Act of 1993, the Georgia legislature amended the charter school legislation with the passage of Senate Bill 70, which permitted individuals, local schools as well as outside organizations to apply to found charter schools. However, applications required approval of the State Board of Education. Subsequently, in 1998 the Georgia legislature amended the charter school law as a way to respond to *Goals 2000: The Educate America Act* requirements ("What is Goals 2000: The Educate America Act," 1994).

The educational reforms in Georgia during the 1990s in the state of Georgia focused on school choice and curriculum and instruction. These core issues would serve as the basis for future education in the state. In addition, Georgia instituted a state lottery during the 1990s to fund educational programs. Helping Outstanding Pupils Educationally, or HOPE, provided tuition for graduating high school seniors who had a 3.0 GPA or higher attending any college or university in the state of Georgia. This had a significant impact on the number of students attending post-secondary institutions.

In 2000, Governor Roy Barnes signed the A Plus Education Reform Act of 2000 into law with the passage of House Bill 1187, which subsequently changed the system of teacher accountability in the state of Georgia (Zepeda, 2007). According to this legislation, those teachers who received two unsatisfactory annual performance reviews within five years could not get a contract renewal in the state of Georgia. Subsequently, with the passage of the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001*, Georgia entered into the NCLB-era of the 2000s. Later, with the passage of the ESSA during the Obama presidency, Georgia focused heavily on curriculum standards and developed the Georgia Performance Standards (GPS) for all subjects taught in Georgia public schools. The QCC, which had served as Georgia's education standards, was replaced in 2005 by the GPS. They currently remain as the state's curriculum standards (Barbour, Evans, & Ritter, 2007). These GPS performance standards were considered a vast improvement over the QCC standards. With the implementation of the GPS, Georgia schools emphasized college and career readiness.

The first set of college readiness standards, "Standards for Success" (2003), was published by the Association of American Universities (AAU). Later, the American Diploma Project (ADP) published its career readiness standards in 2004 (Conley & McGaughy, 2012). Georgia used the career and college readiness standards to promulgate its accountability report card that is used for all of Georgia's K-12 public schools. Georgia's accountability system is called the College and Career Readiness Performance Index (CCRPI), and the categorical factors including content mastery, progress, closing gaps, readiness, and graduation rate are calculated to produce a raw score from 0-100 (GaDOE, 2019). The CCRPI accountability system compares all of these factors and

produces an annual score reported for each public school in Georgia. The CCRPI moved away from the requirements of the NCLB Act and provided a way to identify education need and progress as Georgia sought waivers to policies in exchange for flexibility.

In January of 2018, Georgia's education plan under ESSA (2015) was approved by the US Department of Education. In Georgia's plan, a significant focus is on innovative practices resulting from the flexibility granted by the US Department of Education. The plan states:

Georgia Department of Education (GaDOE) is aligning major programs/initiatives across the agency around the common framework to interact with and support LEAs and schools in a focused, cohesive way that utilizes and encourages innovative approaches to teaching, leading, and learning. (GaDOE, 2018, p. 53)

Moreover, the state of Georgia proposes to reduce the achievement gap among students by decreasing the score margin by three percent annually with the final goal of having 100% of students score at or about grade level by the year 2032 (Primas, 2017). In effect, ESSA transferred the oversight of implementing school reform to the states. As a result, Georgia placed considerable responsibility for implementing innovative reforms on school district superintendents.

## **2.8 Flexibility Waivers in Georgia**

In 2015, Georgia's desire to have greater control over school choice and to bring innovation to traditional K-12 districts brought the decision to make all districts into charter systems or waiver systems. Traditional public schools received flexibility in exchange for meeting certain goals with innovative programs and approaches. School districts applied to the Georgia Department of Education (GaDOE) to use flexibility to try new approaches with innovative curricula and schedules (GaDOE, 2017). In July of 2015, House Bill 172 passed by the Georgia General Assembly required all Georgia

school districts to choose one of three flexibility models. The three options included a Strategic Waivers School System (SWSS), a Charter System or to remain a “status quo,” no-waivers school district. The latter would have no flexibility receive any waivers from state requirements outlined in Title 20 of the Georgia Education Code (GaDOE, 2015). As of 2018, out of 180 of Georgia’s school districts, 132 of them have opted to become strategic waiver school districts, 46 of them have chosen to become charter systems, and 2 districts have opted to remain status quo Title 20/no waivers school districts (GaDOE, 2018).

Both the SWSS and the Charter Systems can use their flexibility from state requirements as an opportunity for educational innovation. The SWSS is “a local district that has a performance contract with the State Board of Education granting the district freedom from specific Title 20 provisions, State Board of Education rules, and Georgia Department of Education guidelines” (GaDOE, 2017). Each of the SWSS school districts in the state has a publicly accessible performance contract that specifies the exact nature of its flexibility. A stipulation within these school districts’ performance contracts requires that they must apply for what is called the “Big Four.” This refers to waivers for class size, expenditures, certification, and salary requirements (GaDOE, 2017). This requirement is slightly different from those that apply to SWSS districts. For example, the GaDOE defines charter school districts as, “a local district that has an executed charter from the State Board of Education granting it freedom from almost all of Title 20, State Board of Education rules, and GaDOE guidelines” (GaDOE, 2017, p. 1).

The principal difference between these two options are that the SWSS systems apply for specific flexibility for waivers from certain Georgia Education Code (Title 20)



provisions whereas the Charter Systems have what is called a “broad flexibility waiver,” which waives the Charter Systems from almost all of the Georgia Education Code, with certain non-waivable portions that include state and federal statutes.

The language within the charter waiver option includes the word “innovation” and is explicitly mentioned in all charter district contracts with the Georgia Department of Education (GaDOE, 2019). However, the current practice is that both charter districts and SWSS districts may take full advantage of their flexibility that they have to adopt innovative approaches without prior approval from the state. This is an inherent part of their waivers from the Georgia’s Education Code (Title 20) requirements. This flexibility allows school districts to experiment with different approaches to help increase student academic achievement. In addition, the Georgia Charter Systems and the Strategic Waivers School Systems differ in that only the Charter Systems are required to have a school governance team (SGT). School governance teams include parents, teachers, community members, one at-large student members, and the school principal. Although the number of individuals on a SGT varies by charter contract, the principal is a non-voting member of the SGT.

Each charter system is required to have a district strategic plan, a description of current innovations and a proposal of future innovations. For example, a proposed innovation in one charter system’s performance contract with the Georgia Department of Education (GaDOE) states:

Potential innovations that are being discussed include opportunities for students to incorporate aspects of a College and Career Academy, flexibility in scheduling and requirements for remedial and accelerated Gilmer County School System courses, course offerings through internships with local business partners, a blending of curriculum with core content and technical course work offering hands on application through course combinations such as construction and

mathematics ensuring applied use of core content while receiving double credits with demonstrated competencies for both courses, telecommuting for students including service to current home school or private school students, serve by need and not by label, extended day hours for schools to offer courses, increased collaboration between post-secondary and community opportunities and increased technology integration at all grade levels (GaDOE, Gilmer County Schools Performance Contract, 2013).

In turn, one school district may use their broad flexibility waivers to engage in innovative practices tailored for them to meet their particular needs. In 2017, the Charter System Foundation along with support from the Georgia Department of Education, published a report titled “Innovation in Practice: A Review of Georgia Charter Systems” (2017). This report provides five different charter district case studies and the innovations that illustrate the use of the systems’ broad flexibility waiver to implement innovations (Greenway & Gibney-Sherman, 2017). Five school districts that had become charter systems were included in the study and they are: Calhoun City Schools, Fulton County Schools, Madison County Schools, Marietta City Schools, and Putnam County Schools. All the school district case studies mentioned in the examples of significant innovations improved the academic performance outcomes of their students and were able to substantially increase their graduation rates from 2012 to 2016. For example, Fulton County Schools was able to increase its high school graduation rate from 71% to above 85%. (Greenway & Gibney-Sherman, 2017). In addition, all school districts in the study increased their high school graduation rates.

## **2.9 Political Nature of School Reform**

Political dynamics are fundamental to school reform since the notion and myth of education as completely “apolitical” has been disproven and discarded (Wirt & Kirst, 1997). Politics as a system that answers the questions of “who gets what, when, and how”

(Lasswell, 1936) are fundamental in discussions of school reform. In addition, public schools compete with healthcare, transportation, and other public services for resources (Murphy, 1998). Because of this competition for resources, education cannot, consequently, be apolitical because it requires resources to run effectively. Without the necessary resources, school reform is next to impossible. Even with the necessary resources, school reform is multidimensional with no one-size-fits-all approach that is feasible in all places and at all times. Student performance is the most critical driver of school reform, but it is not always quick to change as a result of school reforms. Fifteen years after the first push for school reform in the 1980s, high student performance and academic achievement are lacking (Stedman, 1998; Steinberg, 1996).

## **2.10 Summary**

This chapter provided an overview of the scholarly literature of education reform in the United States and Georgia between 1983 to 2020. It also included an explanation of the distinctions between leadership and management and the role characteristics of public school district superintendents as well as detailed the notions of leadership framing and reframing through the four frames. Particular emphasis was made on the symbolic frame (Bolman & Deal, 2017) and the eight narrative patterns of leadership storytelling (Denning, 2013). It also provided a broad overview of the scholarly literature on educational reform eras in the United States and Georgia as well as the political nature of school reform.

## CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY

This chapter discussed the research design, research setting and context, underlying rationale, data collection process, analysis, and role of the researcher in the study. The literature review indicated a paucity of knowledge on storytelling as a leadership strategy for public school superintendents, particularly with regard to contexts of change and innovation. Recent scholarship on storytelling as a leadership strategy includes some survey research, but none that included in-depth, semi-structured interviews and that were conducted in rural school districts (Sciarretta & Uline, 2014; Wilson, 2019). This exploratory study filled that gap in the scholarly literature on superintendents' use of storytelling as a leadership strategy.

The overarching purpose of this study was to understand the leadership storytelling practices of rural superintendents engaged in implementing legislative reforms through mandated systemic innovations in the Appalachian region of North Georgia. Consequently, the specific research questions that guided the study included:

1. How do rural public-school district superintendents use storytelling in leading change and innovation?
2. Are there similarities in how rural school district superintendents use stories to lead change and innovation?

### **3.1 Research Design**

The overarching purpose of this research design was to learn more about how rural superintendents in the Appalachian region of North Georgia use storytelling as a leadership tool to engage community members and obtain stakeholders' acceptance of legislatively mandated provisions for educational change and innovation. School

superintendents need to be able to explain in layman's terms proposed changes and innovations as well as the district's vision for the future. School district leadership in recent reform contexts is uncommonly challenging and requires communicating complex information using culturally appropriate methods in a school district's organization and community.

### **3.1.1 Multi-site Case Study Design**

The researcher employed qualitative research methods and more particularly, a multi-site case study approach (Yin, 1994). Merriam (1998) defines case as "a thing, a single entity, a unit around which there are boundaries" (p. 27). Within defined boundaries, case studies may be descriptive, exploratory, explanatory, illustrative, or evaluative in terms of their nature and scope and may include a single site or multiple sites (Yin, 2014). The exploratory nature of this study required considerable flexibility. Consequently, this study required a methodology best suited to understanding a relatively unexplored leadership strategy used by rural school superintendents in the Southern Appalachian region of North Georgia. The multi-site case study methodology was appropriate for the research questions because case study methodology answers "how" and "why" questions in situations in which the investigator has little or no control over the phenomenon, such as the use of leadership storytelling among rural superintendents to engage communities and obtain stakeholder support. More recently, Yin (2014) suggested that the case study "is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident" (p. 13). In addition, the purpose of using the multi-case study as a research method is to elicit commonalities across distinct

but similar settings (Bishop, 2010). It is also essential to keep in mind that case studies are an all-encompassing research strategy and not merely a design feature or a data collection methodology in and of themselves (Yin, 1994). Gerring (2004) offered a more recent definition of a case study as “an intensive study of a single unit to generalize across a larger set of units” (p. 341). According to this definition of case study, the principal idea is to gain an understanding of one case in order to elucidate generalizability to other similar cases.

### **3.1.2 Stories and Generalizability in Case Study Research**

Generalizability and sampling are necessary components of the purposeful application of qualitative inquiry. Merriam (1985) suggests that there is “little consensus” on dealing with issues related to generalizability (p. 214). However, the purpose of sampling is to be able to generalize back to a larger population, and the principal question in most sampling models is external validity. Since there are an infinite number of variations of possible samples, the guiding rule of sampling is if one can validly generalize or not. Without a well-constructed sample taking into account sample size and generalizability, the sample is rendered meaningless. As a result, case studies necessitate that the sample size usually have the research principle of generalizability in mind. Although stories can’t be generalized, they may serve as a body of research through vicarious experience for other practitioners to implement to improve their own leadership practice. Stake and Trumbull (1982) suggest that this type of research used by the reader should be called “naturalistic generalization” (p. 3). In other words, the reader of research uses stories as a way to view problems and solutions vicariously through reading stories and may choose which stories are similar enough to their own experiential understanding

to integrate into their own practice. In addition, Robinson and Norris (2001) suggest that naturalistic generalizations are most suitable for qualitative case study in educational research and practice. Storytelling as a research tool is an emerging field along with the advent of digital storytelling in recent years (McCall et al., 2019).

### **3.1.3 Qualitative Inquiry**

In social science research, case studies are often referred to alternatively as “qualitative inquiry” (Creswell, 2014; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). The inherent assumptions of qualitative inquiry include the four design tests of validity and reliability which include construct validity, internal validity, external validity, and reliability (Yin, 1994). Each of these tests of validity and reliability places an assumption on the research design, which must be satisfied in order to construct a valid and reliable case study. Construct validity handles the need to construct valid, operational measurements that correspond to the reality and the milieu of the phenomena studied. Internal validity considers the causality relationships between variables that are a cause and effect relationship. External validity refers to generalizability and using the logic of replication in multiple-case studies (Yin, 1994). Moreover, the test of reliability concerns the processes, procedures, and protocols for the reliable replication of the study by another researcher that, in theory, conducting a similar study will report similar findings. This suggests that in case study methodology for empirical and comparative purposes that the multiple-site case study is more credible and more generalizable to other situations. However, this is not always true as some single case studies are held in very high esteem by researchers (Yin, 1994). A case study is essentially a blank slate to use as contexts and situations warrant. For example, Rosenberg and Yates (2010) suggest that a case study

“has a practical versatility in its agnostic approach whereby it is not assigned a fixed ontological, epistemological, or methodological position” (p. 447).

### **3.1.4 Empirical Nature of Case Study Research**

A case study is an empirical endeavor (Gerring, 2004). Because of the empirical nature of the case study methodology, there are multiple ways and frameworks through which a researcher may collect and analyze data. It is possible in case study design with temporal and spatial variation to increase the *N* size within a single unit of analysis, thereby increasing the amount of data available for triangulation. However, through multiple units, one can observe covariation between multiple units of analysis, both synchronically and diachronically (Gerring, 2004). Types of case studies are differentiated by four criteria: single unit of analysis, multiple units of analysis, single-case designs and multiple-case designs (Yin, 2014). Type I case studies are a single case with a single unit of analysis. Type II case studies are single-case designs with multiple units of analysis. Type III case studies are multiple-case designs with a single unit of analysis and Type IV case studies are multiple-case designs with multiple units of analysis (Yin, 2014). Based on this information, this proposed multi-site case study falls under a Type IV case study that allows for both temporal and spatial variation through multiple sites and multiple units of analysis as stories are anchored by time and place.

### **3.2 Research Setting**

The researcher interviewed superintendents via Zoom for this study. Initially, the researcher preferred face-to-face interviews over videoconferences but due to situational constraints on the part of the researcher and the participants during the COVID-19 pandemic and per IRB regulations, the researcher was only able conduct semi-structured



interviews via a secure, encrypted Zoom platform associated with the University of Kentucky. Due to IRB restrictions, no in-person interviews were permitted as this study was conducted during Phase 1 of the University of Kentucky's Resumption of Research Phased Plan in Fall 2020 at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic (University of Kentucky, 2020). Consequently, each of the five interviews was conducted by way of videoconference on Zoom with the superintendent participants responding either at their office or at home.

### **3.3 Research Sample and Data Sources**

In order to obtain a meaningful sample, the researcher delimited the study by three operational contexts: rural, regionally Appalachian, and school systems engaged in change and innovation. Within these parameters, the researcher conducted five interviews of rural public school superintendents. The researcher did not identify the superintendent participants but rather were a result of each participant receiving a recruitment e-mail flyer forwarded by a personally-known contact to each superintendent. Although there are multiple operational definitions of "rural," the researcher decided on the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) definition of rural schools because this is the definition most closely linked to educational politics, education policies, funding for education, and educational research. In addition, the researcher consulted the US Census Bureau's county classification lookup table for its official determination of rural counties as either completely rural or mostly rural. All school district superintendents who participated in this study led school systems in counties designated as "mostly rural" by the US Census Bureau.

As of the 2010 US Census, out of 3,143 counties and county equivalents, there were 704 counties designated as 100% rural and most counties have a small urbanized center as the county seat even if it may be a very small town (US Census Bureau, 2010). Rural counties are characterized by a lack of urban qualities such as ample farmland, forests, sparsely-populated prairies, and single-family homes that are more distant from other homes in the area. The rural context includes a lack of in-town living experience and of being closer to natural surroundings and a paucity of high-density population found in urban areas. Although there are official designations of rural, the nature of extreme rurality may be more difficult to define, but the 704 counties across the nation that are 100% designated as rural are a beneficial starting point for inquiry.

These rural factors are essential with the backdrop of the study couched in the school reform movement with an emphasis on change and innovation. Moreover, the majority of the nation's schools are classified as rural. This indicates that a large percentage of the nation's schoolchildren attend rural schools, although more recent research attention may have been directed toward urban school districts. To methodically tease out what is and is not "Appalachian," the researcher chose to use the geographically defined area by the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC, 2019). The third context that helped to determine the selection criteria was the state of Georgia's recent school reforms, reflecting a much greater emphasis on change and innovation. These selection criteria allowed for a multi-site case study that also may be validly applicable to rural school systems outside the state of Georgia. In geographic terms, the study sample was spread evenly throughout Georgia's Appalachian region from East to West and included

three charter systems and two strategic waiver school systems. This was an unintended but fortuitous sampling outcome for this study.

### **3.3.1 Rural School Districts**

According to the research question and problem statement, the participants in this multiple case study consisted of and were limited to the K-12 public school superintendents who manage and lead rural school systems as defined by the NCES (2006). The US Census Bureau considers areas with more than 2,500 residents but less than 50,000 as “urban clusters,” and as a result, there are multiple urban clusters within a rural county. A substantial number of studies in educational research use the NCES definition of “rural.” This study included school districts that fell under these three sub-categorizations of the NCES definition of “rural” (NCES, 2006) as well as school districts that were mostly rural per the US Census Bureau.

This definition is essential as the NCES definition of “rural” has important educational policy implications as opposed to other definitions of “rural.” The NCES has three key definitions of “rural,” as evidenced by the locale codes in their classification system. Those rural-defined locale codes include rural-remote, rural-distant, and rural-fringe (NCES, 2006). Public school systems that fall within the rural-remote classification are defined as “a Census-defined rural territory that is more than 25 miles from an urbanized area and is also more than 10 miles from an urban cluster” (NCES, 2006). Rural-distant school systems are closer to an urbanized area and are defined as

a Census-defined rural territory that is more than 5 miles but less than or equal to 25 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is more than 2.5 miles but less than or equal to 10 miles from an urban cluster. (NCES, 2006)

Lastly, the final NCES categorization of rural school systems is rural-fringe. The NCES defines rural-fringe as: “a Census-defined rural territory that is less than or equal to 5 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is less than or equal to 2.5 miles from an urban cluster” (NCES, 2006). With these definitions, the researcher selected all of the 38 potential sites based on the NCES’ three categorizations of rural schools in Georgia, and the researcher categorized all three categorizations as rural school systems. Charter systems not related to a county were included in this list of potential case study sites and some counties included city school districts that were classified as rural by the NCES. In addition, the researcher included school districts in counties that had a population of less than 50,000 inhabitants and were a majority rural county per the US Census Bureau.

### **3.3.2 Appalachian Regional Context of North Georgia**

In addition to the operational definition of rural, the geographic criteria are bound by the Southern Appalachian regional counties in the state of Georgia that are part of the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) defined geographic area (ARC, 2019). In total, the following North Georgia counties are within the geographic region as defined by the Appalachian Regional Commission, and they include Banks, Barrow, Bartow, Carroll, Catoosa, Chattooga, Cherokee, Dade, Dawson, Douglas, Elbert, Fannin, Floyd, Forsyth, Franklin, Gilmer, Gordon, Gwinnett, Habersham, Hall, Haralson, Hart, Heard, Jackson, Lumpkin, Madison, Murray, Paulding, Pickens, Polk, Rabun, Stephens, Towns, Union, Walker, White, and Whitfield. These counties make the multiple case study both geographically and culturally homogenous and study participants were taken from these

criteria. This study excluded the metro Atlanta counties of Cherokee, Forsyth, Gwinnett, Paulding and Hall because they did not have any NCES-defined rural school districts.

### **3.3.3 Storytelling in Appalachia**

Storytelling has long been a feature of Appalachian culture. Scholars noted that Appalachia is a region rich in storytelling heritage as an art form as well as a way of life to carry on and perpetuate the cultural values and norms of the region (Tull & Hermann, 2014). McNeil and Squibb (1988) noted that “Appalachian literature has foundations in oral tradition. Ballads and storytelling came to these mountains with the first settlers, were passed down from generation to generation, and today are more popular than ever” (p. 3).

### **3.3.4 Selection of Participants**

The school districts that the researcher defined in the site and participation selection are all distinct, yet all share quite homogeneous demographic, cultural, economic and geographic indicators (Appendix A). This selection process gave the sample a substantial degree of unit homogeneity which may allow for substantive comparability and representativeness of the generalized sample to other rural, Appalachian populations in other states (Gerring, 2004). The researcher used the snowball sampling method (Coleman, 1958; Katz & Lazarsfield, 1955; Merton, 1949) to obtain a sample size of five participants. In order to obtain the initial sample, the researcher relied on multiple contacts at the state-level and at area school districts to facilitate the dissemination of the participant recruitment e-mail flyer in order to obtain the semi-structured interviews. The state-level professional contacts were made by the researcher by attending the Georgia Association of Educational Leaders (GAEL) summer

conference in Jekyll Island, Georgia in 2019. Some of these contacts were retired superintendents as well as some contacts that now work for the Georgia School Superintendents' Association (GSSA), Technical College System of Georgia (TCSG) and the Charter System Foundation of Georgia. These individuals were gracious and willing to forward a participant recruitment e-mail flyer to superintendents in North Georgia.

After conducting each interview, the researcher asked the participants to pass along the participant recruitment flyer to other superintendents, whom the initial participating superintendent knew or was familiar with throughout the defined geographical and demographical constraints within the Appalachian counties of North Georgia. None of the subsequent participant interviews came as a result of other participants forwarding the e-mail flyer due to inherent difficulties. The researcher then retrofitted the snowball sampling process as no interviews came as a result of initial participants forwarding the recruitment flyer. This was accomplished by waiting 5 or 7 days for a new participant to contact the researcher if the researcher's last email fell on a weekend, including Fridays. After no response was received, the researcher began a new line of snowball sampling by resending the flyer to another state or district contact. However, the five superintendents who did participate in the study were willing and enthusiastic about storytelling and sharing their stories about storytelling in their leadership practice.

### **3.3.5 Limiting Researcher Bias**

In order to reduce researcher bias, the interviews were conducted with a series of open-ended questions designed to elicit stories and leadership storytelling practices with the purpose of allowing the participants the freedom and flexibility to speak openly to the

researcher in order to capture authentic first, second and third-hand stories retold by the participant. In addition, the researcher abided by the proper protocols as set forth by the University of Kentucky's IRB approval of the study and the methodologies and human-subjects research rules and regulations were closely monitored and followed to ensure proper quality assurance for this qualitative study. The interview data were stored in a secure and safe location on a hard drive, which assured data safety and quality control.

### **3.4 Instruments and Procedures**

Each semi-structured interview had the same initial open-ended questions (Appendix C) and varied by participant depending on how much the superintendent participant wished to share with the researcher on leadership storytelling. In addition, it included various concrete examples of stories that they have told in the past and other stories related to community engagement that they wished to share with the researcher. The semi-structured interview is designed for open sharing of stories. The researcher protected the privacy of the individuals by assigning an pseudonym to each participant and district and informed the participants that they may stop the interview at any time. One day prior to each interview, each participant received a copy of the informed consent document and the researcher went over the document and explained each section before obtaining verbal consent prior to each interview.

### **3.5 Data Collection Procedures**

The researcher used a snowball sampling methodology (Coleman, 1958; Katz & Lazarsfield, 1955; Merton, 1949) to obtain an initial convenience sample to begin the snowball sampling process. The process entailed asking one superintendent for a referral to another superintendent at the conclusion of each semi-structured interview. Using the

snowball sampling technique, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews that ranged from 28 minutes to 55 minutes in duration. The researcher responded to each participant who responded to the flyer by thanking them and then setting up a calendar invite that included the researcher's Zoom account link. When the agreed upon time came, the researcher double verified that the participant could hear the researcher clearly. Once this was confirmed and the informed consent document was read, the participants consented to the interview and the researcher began the interviews by introducing himself and telling the superintendents about his career in education in order to get the conversation started.

After initial introductions, the researcher started asking questions in order on the interview protocol. As the participants spoke, the researcher asked follow-up questions regarding their responses on storytelling, specifically with the question: "can you tell me more about that?". The researcher listened attentively and made notes as necessary for key points made by the participants. All participants were superintendents of a school system that met the selection criteria of the study. The audio interviews were recorded and saved on a hard drive. In addition, the video recording was discarded after each interview on Zoom and the participant was informed that the videos would be deleted immediately following the interview. The reason for this is that Zoom produces both an audio and video file and the researcher kept only the audio file.

The resulting qualitative data for this study consisted of the recordings and verbatim transcriptions of semi-structured interviews via the encrypted Zoom videoconference platform. The researcher stored recorded interviews on a secure hard drive to ensure their capture for transcribing and analysis as well as to ensure anonymity,



safekeeping and quality control. The audio files were uploaded to Trint, which is a transcription software. After transcriptions were completed on Trint, the researcher listened to and checked each transcription for accuracy. Transcribing the interviews was quite an arduous process of correcting the errors made by the software, particularly with regard to linguistic regionalisms and discourse markers such as “you know” and “I mean” which were especially salient in some interviews. Some interviews were quite easy to transcribe as the participants spoke clearly and concisely but it was a very time-consuming process with each interview taking approximately two hours to check and correct any small errors. One of the interviews contained many informal discourse markers and regionalisms and took longer than four hours to completely listen to and correct to produce an accurate transcription document. Each participant was asked the same questions and their answers varied depending on how much the participant wished to share with the researcher on his or her practice of leadership storytelling, as well as concrete examples of stories that they have either heard, used successfully, or plan to use. The researcher corresponded with participants after they had shown interest and the researcher organized interview times and dates and set up the Zoom conference calls.

Due to the constraints and challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, the researcher encountered difficulties in using the snowball sampling technique; none of the initial superintendents recruited by the participant recruitment e-mail flyer generated additional interviews. Working with these limitations, the researcher relied on additional individuals sending out the e-mail flyer to generate participant recruitment. The researcher waited five days to receive a response before generating a new line of snowball sampling and seven days if the researcher’s last contact with a superintendent

participant fell on a weekend. In turn, the researcher generated five independent lines of snowball sampling. In sum, participants were recruited via individuals involved in educational leadership in Georgia, technical college presidents, as well as the Georgia School Superintendents Association (GSSA), the Georgia Leadership Institute for School Improvement (GLISI) and the Charter System Foundation of Georgia, who graciously forwarded the participant recruitment e-mail flyer to superintendents in North Georgia. Three of the five participating superintendents were from charter school systems and two of them were from strategic-waivers school systems.

### **3.6.1 Data Analysis**

Merriam (1998) suggested that data analysis is “the process of making sense out of the data which involves consolidating, reducing, and interpreting what people have said and what the researcher has seen and read” (p. 178). In order to produce meaningful qualitative data analysis and to reduce researcher bias, the researcher used a two-tiered approach. First, an initial inductive coding approach (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1997) and subsequently a second-level approach with specific *a priori* frameworks for analysis was used. These frameworks include Clark’s (1970) organizational saga, Denning’s (2013) eight narrative patterns of leadership storytelling and Bowman and Deal’s (2017) symbolic frame. These selected frameworks explained how rural superintendents use stories to lead their school districts in the context of legislated change and innovation. Included in this design was an open, inductive coding scheme specifically embedded within the first cycle which allowed the data to drive itself (Charmaz, 2006; Saldaña, 2016; Strauss & Corbin, 1997).

The researcher used Dedoose (Version 8.3.35), an analysis software, to identify and categorize interview transcriptions with an initial, open-coding process (Saldaña, 2016). Subsequently, the researcher examined the interviews a second time using only Denning's Eight Narrative Patterns (2013) as codes. After both levels of analysis were completed, the codes were collapsed into ten resulting themes (Figure 4.1) that will be presented and discussed along with the findings in Chapter 4. The first tier produced twenty-six codes that were later condensed into ten resulting themes. The researcher used holistic first-tier (first-cycle) coding to apply tentative labels to researcher-selected units of interview transcriptions in Dedoose as a part of an inductive, macro-level coding process (Saldaña, 2016). The inductive, holistic method of applying tentative codes was used first purposefully to avoid confirmation bias using theoretical frameworks deductively in the second-cycle of analysis. During the first-cycle holistic coding process, the initial, tentative code names were not kept but rather were collapsed into the overarching resulting themes which comprise a summary of the first-cycle coding and analysis based on the overwhelming preponderance of the data through an iterative coding process (Saldaña, 2016).

The iterative process consisted of the researcher applying tentative codes in each case and then moving on to the other cases individually. After this was completed, the researcher returned and analyzed all five cases based on the emerging themes across all cases as part of a bigger picture. The researcher then compared and merged codes into broader, more encompassing themes based on several readings and re-readings of the interview transcriptions.

For the second cycle of analysis, the researcher employed Denning's (2013) eight narrative patterns. Consequently, this two-tiered design permitted data analysis of interview transcriptions which captured some unexpected data that did not fit neatly within any of the second-tier analysis frameworks and categories. For example, the first-level inductive coding modification allowed for a more significant and broader data analysis to capture and analyze data that did not have easy categorizations. Two unexpected themes emerged from this two-tiered analysis and they include: third-hand retelling and trust-building. The theme of trust-building emerged in the first-cycle and became more clear in the second-cycle of analysis using Denning's (2013) eight narrative patterns and Bolman & Deal's (2017) symbolic frame. Unexpected findings were one of the primary reasons behind the exploratory scope of this study as it was unknown what phenomena existed until the researcher reviewed the data using an iterative and constant-comparative approach.

This process allowed the researcher to identify codes that emerged organically from the interview data, which allowed for more fully representing participants' voices in the research. In addition, this process benefitted from using constant-comparative analysis across multiple case study sites (Strauss & Corbin, 1997). A compelling reason for the using of holistic, open coding (Saldaña, 2016) was that it enabled the researcher to capture nuances of the language of individuals living in the Appalachian region of North Georgia. In addition, using the open coding techniques, the researcher was able identify and categorize unique storytelling leadership strategies, beliefs, values and challenges of rural superintendents in the Southern Appalachian region of North Georgia. Although it was possible to only categorize the stories that the researcher captured through the lens of

Denning's Eight Narrative Patterns (2013) and Bolman and Deal's Symbolic Frame (2017), it was vital to allow the data to drive itself to avoid confirmation bias toward these frameworks, which was the purpose of the two-tiered design with the holistic, open-coding coming first followed by predetermined frameworks in the second-cycle. At the conclusion of the case summaries and findings in Chapter 4, the researcher asked all study participants to review his or her case summary to affirm their accuracy. Three of the superintendent participants were able to review and affirm that the contents of the summary were correct. Two of the superintendents could not be reached to obtain their review of the case summaries. The superintendent case study reviews are listed in this study in Appendix J.

### **3.7 Role of the Researcher**

The researcher planned this study throughout the doctoral coursework in the College of Education. Leadership storytelling is a phenomenon that exists outside of the individual and manifests itself in multiple places bound by similar circumstances. Consequently, of particular interest to the researcher are the outcomes of the stories in implementing school reforms in the context of change and innovation. During this study, the researcher made every effort to remain objective within and throughout all phases of this study by using the constant-comparative approach of data analysis (Charmaz, 2006). The researcher bore in mind that the data analysis phase was an iterative process that spanned two tiers of analysis, which allows both inductive and deductive understanding of the data.

### **3.8 Summary**

The purpose of this study was to examine the practice of leadership storytelling among public school superintendents engaged in change and innovation in general and, more particularly, in rural, Appalachian contexts in North Georgia. Due to the paucity of scholarly literature on leadership storytelling in general and, more specifically, in executive educational leadership, the case study method was appropriate (Yin, 1994; Merriam, 1998). As it was exploratory in nature, it required considerable flexibility in working through technology to conduct the interviews. Data were collected and analyzed through inductive open-coding through the constant comparative method (Charmaz, 2006; Saldaña, 2016; Strauss & Corbin, 1997) and then deductively through previously determined frameworks to understand stories and storytelling (Bolman & Deal, 2017; Denning, 2013). The researcher made every effort to guard against threats to internal and external validity by actively listening and remaining steadfast in asking questions to answer the research questions. The following chapter presents the case study findings from the data collection and analysis phases of this multi-site case study. The resulting themes from this study and the subsequent analysis provide answers to the research questions.

## **CHAPTER 4. FINDINGS**

This exploratory, multi-case study asked how rural, Appalachian public school district superintendents lead using storytelling in contexts of change and innovation in North Georgia. The researcher conducted five in-depth, semi-structured interviews with current rural public school district superintendents across the Appalachian region of North Georgia. All superintendents' districts met the study parameters of "rural" defined by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) or were designated as "mostly rural" by the US Census Bureau (2010) and were part of counties designated as Appalachian by the Appalachian Regional Commission. Pseudonyms chosen by the researcher for these school districts were Mountain Pines, Mountain Oaks, Laurel Brook, Magnolia Meadows, and Dogwood Ridge. The researcher also used a pseudonym for each school district superintendent as well as other individuals mentioned in their stories. This study was guided by two overarching questions:

1. How do rural public-school district superintendents use storytelling in leading change and innovation?
2. Are there similarities in how rural school district superintendents use stories to lead change and innovation?

### **4.1 Overview of Preliminary Analysis**

Findings from these five interviews were catalogued in a way that captured the richness of their respective stories. This was facilitated by conducting a preliminary analysis because the resulting narrative data were complex, multi-faceted and in many cases interwoven. A preliminary analysis was needed in order to effectively organize the findings according to theme and case. The data that emerged were organized and reported

both thematically and by case. After conducting the semi-structured interviews and transcribing the five recordings, the researcher uploaded them into Dedoose, which is a software program commonly-used in qualitative data analysis and through the process of inductive, open-coding. This program enabled the researcher to condense rich, textual data into eight overarching themes throughout all five interviews that include: (a) change management, (b) collaborative leadership, (c) digital storytelling, (d) driving the narrative, (e) preparing for success, (f) rural values, (g) third-hand retelling, and (h) trust-building. After the first-level analysis was completed, the researcher then coded the interview data using a second-level framework using Denning's 8 Narrative Patterns (2013), a deductive, *a posteriori* approach. The second-level codes and themes included: (a) sparking action, (b) communicating identity, (c) transmitting values, (d) communicating the brand, (e) fostering collaboration, (f) taming the grapevine, (g) sharing knowledge, and (h) leading people into the future.

On account of the overlapping similarities between the themes and patterns, the researcher collapsed the themes into one overarching set of themes with priority given to Denning's (2013) framework for understanding leadership storytelling. Similar first-level themes were collapsed into his framework for final analysis. Themes that were not a result of the first-level analysis were sharing knowledge and taming the grapevine. This is because these two themes are from Denning's work and the first-tier analysis did not yield them conceptually using the same terminology. Analogously, themes identified outside of Denning's (2013) framework were third-hand retelling and trust-building. This is illustrated below in Table 4.1, where each first-level theme was collapsed into the second-level theme where the themes overlapped, and an "X" is marked where the



themes did not overlap through the first and second-level analysis. Both the first and second-level analyses were counted in the resulting themes.

**Table 4.1**

*Results of First and Second-Level Coding Into Resulting Themes*

<u>First-Level Codes</u>	<u>Second-Level Codes</u>	<u>Resulting Themes</u>
<u>Open Inductive</u>	<u>(Denning, 2013)</u>	<u>Collapsed and combined</u>
Change Management	Leading People into the Future	Leading People into the Future
Collaborative Leadership	Fostering Collaboration	Fostering Collaboration
Digital Storytelling	Communicating the Brand	Communicating the Brand
Driving the Narrative	Communicating Identity	Communicating Identity
Preparing for Success	Sparking Action	Sparking Action
Rural Values	Transmitting Values	Transmitting Values
X	Sharing Knowledge	Sharing Knowledge
X	Taming the Grapevine	Taming the Grapevine
Third-Hand Retelling	X	Third-Hand Retelling
Trust-Building	X	Trust-Building

Except for rural community values and third-hand retelling, all themes were ubiquitous throughout all of the interview transcriptions, and each theme consists of several other subthemes that arose during the initial open-coding process. Three of the school district cases were charter systems and two of them were Strategic Waivers School Systems (SWSS). The preponderance of the data suggests that the charter system superintendents had an inclination towards innovative practices because of a clear focus on innovative programs outlined in their contracts with the Georgia Department of Education.

Throughout this chapter, the researcher will present case study findings chronologically, beginning with the first interview conducted and concluding with the last interview conducted throughout the data collection phase. For each school district case, the researcher presented, organized and then reported data that are aligned with a brief summary of the resulting themes that emerged from the transcription data. Subthemes are grouped under one of the ten resulting themes. At the beginning of each school district case under each heading, the researcher prepared a district description as the first subheading to provide relevant geographic and demographic context. The subsequent subheadings are organized by theme. Not all ten resulting themes were present in each school district case but the majority of themes were present in all five superintendent interviews.

#### **4.1.1 Thematic Code Cloud**

In Figure 4.2, the major themes are shown qualitatively with a word cloud based on their prevalence and frequency. The code cloud depicts the frequency of each theme throughout all of the interview data. The more prevalent themes are illustrated larger on the cloud and the less prevalent themes are smaller, based on the number of occurrences of the themes throughout this study. McNaught and Lam (2010) suggest that word clouds may be useful in educational research as a way to depict overarching themes from the analysis of interview transcriptions or written texts. Word clouds also provide a tool to visually interpret and validate study findings by summarizing the frequency of words. In this study, the word cloud was generated with Dedoose, a software program used in qualitative research as well as in mixed methods research.

**Figure 4.1.1**



*Thematic code cloud of major themes*

## **4.2 Mountain Pines Schools**

### **4.2.1 District Description**

Mountain Pines Schools is categorized as a rural fringe school district by the NCES (2019), covers over 200 square miles of geographic land area in North Georgia, and serves roughly 5,000 students. The county that Mountain Pines Schools serves is located in the Blue Ridge Mountains and has approximately 30,000 residents within its boundaries and has a rich history dating back to before the Civil War, with much of that history steeped in the Cherokee tribes who inhabited the area before the arrival of Caucasian settlers in the early 1800s. Currently, less than 15% of the county population lives below the poverty line, and the population density is slightly less than 130 persons per square mile (US Census Bureau, 2019). However, almost half of the school population is considered economically disadvantaged per the state CCRPI indicators. In

2015, Mountain Pines Schools chose to be a strategic-waivers school system (SWSS), and there is a clear focus on college and career readiness.

Upon review of Mountain Pines Schools' flexibility contract with Georgia Department of Education (GaDOE), the researcher learned that they applied for flexibility on graduation requirements for students to take equivalent or higher-level courses and awarded those units of credit for equivalent or higher-level courses. Approximately 58% of the 2017 graduating class enrolled in postsecondary education or training, with roughly about 10% of those opting for technical postsecondary education. Some themes were more prevalent than others for Superintendent Russell, but the most salient themes were leading people into the future with stories of success and fostering collaboration during times of change to foster a collective commitment to get the job done.

#### **4.2.2 Leading People Into The Future**

Change management and leading others into the future were important in Superintendent Russell's leadership experience as a rural superintendent. He recounted in the interview that it was important for superintendents to realize that they are there to support the teachers who are educating students. Referring to this, he said, "You have to give them [teachers] the tools to be successful." However, he emphasized that one must be mindful of the stresses placed on teachers and the importance of flexibility and focusing on what works, especially in change and innovation contexts. In talking about applying for flexibility from the state to move around money to use as needed in his schools, he said, "It is probably more paperwork on the central office, which is better to take away from teachers anyway, and we decided to do that...that gives us... more

flexibility to move money around.” This option was not something that was done before Superintendent Russell arrived, and he decided to push for change because it was better for the school district in the end, even though it may have created more paperwork.

Another example of Superintendent Russell’s focus on change management is during the current COVID-19 pandemic affecting the county and reflecting on whether or not school would be in-person or virtual. He related:

And then when we went virtual, for part of our instruction this year, twenty-five percent of our population started off in virtual school. And that’s because of the times.... what was needed. It wasn’t thought of doing it that way, but it’s like, you have that kind of mandate, you do it and you move on...and so you do at times look at what’s been successful or sometimes you have to revamp things or...so it really depends on what’s going on and kind of what you’re looking at or what you’re diving into and knowing the culture and I didn’t want to come in and upset the apple cart and make tons of changes right off the bat.

Many families in Georgia were given the choice of attending online or in-person classes during the COVID-19 pandemic and in Mountain Pines Schools, twenty-five percent of students’ families opted for the online option. It was clear that Superintendent Russell valued incremental change in place of abrupt change in running a school system. He had just been hired to lead Mountain Pines Schools not long before the time of the interview. Later in the interview, he related a past story that he told about school improvement and managing change at the building-level. Earlier in his career as a principal at another rural district in North Georgia, he led teachers at his school in revamping the curriculum maps to get the school off the needs-improvement list. He explained:

I got my first principal’s job before I went there and they even heard some stories when I went. But I came from another county and my first year there...they were on the school needs improvement list. And, so I went in there and I was just...I was in my doctorate program and I thought I felt like I had a pretty good grasp on school improvement. Learned a lot at where I was at, and I just really understood, you know, my eyes understood the process. And one of the things that I learned real quick was you rely on teachers to help you out.

It was clear that he valued teachers' collaborative efforts towards a common goal, in this case, getting off the school needs improvement list during the NCLB-era, which was a very critical change to manage at the building-level. On working together collaboratively to face a shared challenge, he also related:

I learned that early as an admin...rely on your staff to kind of help lead the way...you may have to guide them at times or lead them, but if you can pick their brains and get them engaged, get them excited, get engaged, good things will happen.

Superintendent Russell's change management process heavily involves the enlistment of teachers' creativity to drive change in a school needing significant improvements. Under his principalship, his school was able to get off the school needs improvement list. For example, math scores improved drastically after he got together with the math teachers to figure out the gaps that they had in their curriculum and how they could map out their curriculum to improve student learning outcomes. After working with the math teachers, Superintendent Russell commented:

So, we fell in place as a school and....gosh, our scores rocketed, skyrocketed. After everyone in the district saw the upward swing in test scores, he recalled, "I looked like a hero and the greatest thing since sliced bread my first year being a principal and it was really my teachers, and I told everybody... I said, guys...it wasn't me, it was my teachers.

Superintendent Russell placed a high value on educators' working collaboratively to achieve better teaching and better student academic performance. However, achieving success in leading others into the future was not without cost for Russell in that he lost several teachers during that change process. He related, "We had a few people leave because they didn't like the accountability piece... so I lost a few teachers in my first year...they didn't like the new way it was going and that was okay." Sometimes change

and leading others into the future requires letting some individuals choose to go in a different direction so that the school or organization can achieve its short-term and long-term goals throughout the change process. In turn, working with and through others may be an essential theme in leading people into the future and in telling stories about change management and school improvement.

#### **4.2.3 Fostering Collaboration**

Collaboration was a key theme in contexts of change and innovation during the interview. Superintendent Russell believed that a superintendent is like anyone else at the central office and perform support roles. During the interview, he relayed:

If you're a superintendent, it's like anybody else at the central office. You're there to support others and that's your job. You're not on the front lines as a teacher so your job is to do what you can to support them and help lead them in the right direction.

Russell strongly emphasized that being a superintendent means that one is present at the office to support others, and this was a recurring theme throughout the interview. He talked about how using a process in collaborative leadership is essential, and when recounting his story about how he led a school to get off the needs improvement list, he explained:

I just kind of helped them in the process of learning how to go through that process. And once I showed them the process, they worked as a team and soared and they didn't look back. They did well every year after that.

This statement underscored that Russell believed that collaboration is not just working together but doing so with a purpose, a spirit of collaboration, and a process in mind. Russell's beliefs and values on collaborative leadership come from some hard-learned experiences earlier in his career that he mentioned in talking about school improvement and the collaborative piece that it requires to be successful. After talking about his

experiences when he was a teacher, he contrasted two different principal leadership styles that have led to his current beliefs about collaborative leadership. He told the researcher a quick story about two principals and contrasted their different styles. He recounted:

You just have to kind of had to be mindful sometimes of how much you put on teachers because you can't overload them too much. If you do...nobody wins, the kid doesn't win, the teacher doesn't win, and the system won't win. You have that fine balance of high expectations but yet without being unreasonable in that process. And I think I've seen leaders go down that road of, kind of like I was teaching and as like, you know, I learn from one principal how to be a good leader within the school and build that collaboration...and I learned from another one that she didn't do the best job at collaborating. She got some results but didn't get them the right way I thought at times and had a lot of collateral damage. And so as a leader, I'm like...I don't think I'll try to go for that collateral damage like she did. It's not a win at all cost.

For Russell, a mutually beneficial scenario was the ideal rather than having collateral damage of losing teachers or not getting the support of all stakeholders involved. He saw that the job is done by collaboration in a culturally responsive way that fits well with the community and school system that one serves, particularly in a rural context. Being aware of local norms, beliefs and values was key for Russell, especially as a superintendent new to the district. In terms of his commitment to serving the community, he mentioned in the interview that "you have to get to know your community, find out what the community needs are.... what are the needs... you know, what do we need to do to get our kids to the next level?" Russell's interview shows that working through others to lead others is a central theme, and he has many stories about this and relates these to talk about the importance of collaboration.

#### **4.2.4 Communicating the Brand**

The idea of digital storytelling was prominent in this interview. Superintendent Russell acknowledged that there was some work to be done in using social media as



branding or to get good stories out to the public. In his school district, they do many newsletters and spotlighting successes in the schools at the board meetings. Russell recounted, “It’s a combination, probably do a better job of getting that out there via social media. We do that with Facebook or Twitter, of course, the website.” Social media use in his school district is lower than in some other places, but Russell values it as a leadership tool to communicate with the public. He commented, “It’s always good to get the good news out to the community and we think that’s important.” Russell did not think that social media and digital storytelling were the only way to lead a school district and cautioned against using social media to lead a school district. Towards the end of the interview, he noted, “You can’t run a school or school system through social media or through Facebook. If you do, you’re never going to make it.” They also have other mechanisms, like newsletters, to get the word out in his school district.

#### **4.2.5 Communicating Identity**

One of Russell’s critical things in driving the narrative on communicating identity is highlighting student success whenever possible. Russell said, “We do spotlight students at the board meetings...it shines some attention on the students and or the teachers and then gets the word out. It’s always good to get the good news out.” Nevertheless, driving the narrative also carries the idea of managing the narrative, and sometimes, leaders cannot feed into every little thing that goes on or is said. Leaders who focus on driving the identity narrative avoid small distractions. Russell explained this by making an analogy about how teachers should not respond to all the small distractions that may occur in the classroom and compared this to superintendents not responding to everything said about the district. Communicating by getting the good news out to the

community is crucial in establishing success as a school system. When asked about other ways that Mountain Pines Schools get the word out on communicating an identity of success as a school system, Russell explicated those other ways the schools get the good news out individually apart from the school system as a whole.

#### **4.2.6 Sparking Action**

Russell valued relating success stories and the stories of others of how they succeeded in school, gave back to the community, and collaborated to achieve a common goal to drive the narrative about what his school district is doing and how to manage that narrative. One of the stories he told was about a young man who decided to get his degree in aviation and returned for a while but then left because he wanted to travel. For Superintendent Russell, the idea of preparing for success and sharing the personal success stories of others was the most overarching theme throughout this interview. He made it clear that he considers college and career readiness a central concern of his superintendency. He said:

It's all about college and career readiness. And, you know, I believe postsecondary is important. It just takes a lot of forms and shapes postsecondary, whether it's a certificate for welding, whether it's a two-year degree to be an aircraft mechanic, whether it's a four-year degree to be a teacher or an engineer, whether it's a doctorate degree to be a physical therapist or a doctor or something like that.

Russell believed that both college and career preparation is vital for his school district. Encouraging students to think about what they enjoy and what they think they would be good at was mentioned a few times in the interview and a story that he liked to tell about a student following his passion and what could happen if one got engaged in school. Following one's passion and finding one's success in a chosen path is a mission for Superintendent Russell as he seeks out ways to promote both college and career readiness

in Mountain Pines Schools. He was straightforward in that superintendents need to keep in mind that being a superintendent is all about the students. He said about the story that he shares about why he became a superintendent, “I just kind of talked about it, supported it to...kind of walk the talk and it’s got to be you’re in it for the kids...if you don’t like kids, you shouldn’t be in the business.” Using these success stories helps spark action among stakeholders and subordinates within a school system or organization. Driving the narrative and sparking action is centered on sharing success stories, which spur others and encourage them to take action. The stories illustrated what may be possible if one takes action towards a goal or objective.

#### **4.2.7 Taming the Grapevine**

When asked about how Superintendent Russell deals with rumors in the school district, he made an analogy to a teacher in the classroom by saying, “If you reacted to every little thing that happened in the classroom... you’ll never get anything done.” For Superintendent Russell, an efficient way to deal with rumors in the organization is by not reacting to any and every negative comment or rumor within or about the school district. He continued by talking about finding out whether the rumor is real or not, and he mentioned that was the first step. Then he continued by saying, “If there’s some false rumors out there....you, of course, downplay those at times, but you have to do it the right way, so you’re not engaging...so you just get in a back and forth and it just looks ugly.” According to Russell, not engaging in rumors is the most effective way to deal with those once they have been determined to be false. When dealing with rumors that may be true, Superintendent Russell commented:

You know, if it's a rumor about a teacher hitting a kid, you take that pretty seriously and investigate... whether it's come to you directly or not...and kind of look at it...could this possibly be true? If it's a rumor about....it really depends what it is, how you respond to it. And most of the times, you address it straight on or you leave it alone.

When dealing with rumor in general, Russell tends to go in two directions. Once it is determined whether the rumors are genuine, he either addresses the rumor mill head-on or downplays it to avoid getting into a back-and-forth situation.

#### **4.2.8 Third-Hand Retelling**

This theme was not overly salient in the interview with Superintendent Russell, but it was important enough to surface once during the interview. He talked about moving from one school district to another and the new district hearing about some things he had done in his previous school district. About the new district recognizing what he had done in his former school in another county, he recalled, "...and they even heard some stories when I went there." Even though this was a minor detail in this interview, it is vital that it emerged because we can see through this interview that third-hand retelling and reputation are intertwined, both knowingly and unknowingly.

#### **4.2.9 Trust-building**

In his own school turnaround situation, Russell believed that trust-building may be very important in getting things done, even when teachers may decide to leave because of changing leadership. Although not everyone was on board with the new changes under his leadership, he made it clear that he still supported the teachers and explained that the situation called for new measures needed and said:

But, you know, most of them felt like I still supported them and understood that it wasn't a gotcha. I wasn't going after you. But we just have to prioritize and understand the importance of it, especially important to getting off that needs improvement list.

Trust-building during the change process is rarely easy, but Superintendent Russell values collaboration very much, and it was evident that for him that challenging situations requires trust-building and, also, that teachers should understand that he was not out to get them and that he needed their help, expertise, and commitment to accomplish a collective goal to serve the common good.

## **4.3 Mountain Oaks Schools**

### **4.3.1 District Description**

Superintendent Lonnie Smith leads a school district whose boundaries encompass over 300 square miles in the mountains of North Georgia. He leads Mountain Oaks Schools, which has an enrollment of approximately 7,000 students. Four out of the 11 schools in Mountain Oaks are categorized as rural fringe schools by the NCES (2019). In addition, the county is classified as mostly rural per the US Census Bureau with over 70% of the population considered as rural (US Census Bureau, 2010). The county that Mountain Oaks Schools serves has a rich Cherokee history who inhabited the area before the arrival of Caucasian settlers in the early to mid-1800s. The county is also steeped in Civil War history with several skirmishes occurring between 1864-1865. To illustrate the rural demographics of Mountain Oaks, approximately 15% of the county population lives below the poverty line, and the population density is a little less than 120 persons per square mile (US Census Bureau, 2019). In addition, roughly over 80% of the school population is considered economically disadvantaged per the state CCRPI indicators. Not only is Mountain Oaks rural, a high level of poverty exists. In 2015, Mountain Oaks Schools chose to be a strategic waivers school system (SWSS) and based on a reading of its flexibility contract with GaDOE, there is a clear focus on student achievement,

particularly with regards to waivers involving matters of curriculum and instruction, online learning and credits for graduation requirements. Approximately 43% of its 2017 graduating class enrolled in postsecondary education or training, with roughly about 8% of those opting for technical postsecondary education.

#### **4.3.2 Leading people into the future**

Superintendent Smith spoke about change, particularly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, but also in other areas of leading Mountain Oaks Schools. One of the first things that he talked about was how he got into the superintendency and the challenge of the teaching of literacy. He commented:

We had a lot of people who were not reading on grade level, you know, we were struggling and the people, you know, in the county and in general, I think it's probably that way across the state of Georgia, a lot of people struggle to read. I think it's not uncommon and without reading, as you well know, I mean, it does not matter how well you can do on your phone whatever you can text or whatever, but if you can't read and understand what you read and comprehend what you read and turn and apply that, you're in trouble no matter what you do.

He also spoke about handling rumors and opinions regarding what is happening during the pandemic and he mentioned, "Anybody can trade on yesterday's market, so let's don't worry about what happened yesterday, where we can't do anything about it. Let's focus on where we are today and go forwards."

One of the challenges that Smith spoke at length about was finding the right balance between managing face-to-face with digital learning. Regarding finding that correct balance, he said:

I guess we'll put in the foremost of our mind is trying to come up with the right balance here, you know, we're trying to run a digital school online, plus face-to-face. We're doing both trying to figure out how to manage that. We were certainly new to the game. And we had online courses where people use them for credit recovery in high schools...but not in kindergarten through fifth grade and it's new. We learned a lot. We've still got a lot to learn.

Smith expressed a desire to continue to do the best that they can with the situation. The two overarching issues Smith brought up with facing this challenge is being able to monitor students in the online environment and dealing with absenteeism that they are seeing as a result of the current pandemic. Smith commented:

And I think we'll be better trying to manage the digital footprint, trying to keep how to monitor the progress of students. What do you do when they're behind and you don't ever see them? That's an issue we struggle with. How are we going to do that? So, we're still learning.

It is not easy during the pandemic to manage and lead both online and face-to-face settings, particularly when students have not been trained on how online learning works and struggle with time management skills. Superintendent Smith talked about it being a work in progress and that they are still learning how to best manage this new learning situation that the pandemic has brought on. Another relevant issue is tracking down students that have been habitually absent:

This our first semester here, even having a digital school, per se, offsite learning. And so initially we were just trying to keep it from people, one not even coming at all. You know what we've been through. Who would have thought of that this time last year? First of October, we said, hey we got kids that just don't come to school. You think, well, that's crazy, that doesn't happen. I mean, you know, they're going to be out, lay out and those kind of things. But just to not show up, you know, and I mean, that is the reality that we're facing. And we have some that we think we should have more students that we can't find. We don't know where they are. You know, the contact information that we had is bad. They're not there anymore. Phones are bad, they're not at their address...they didn't withdraw. Where did they go? You know, we don't know. So we've got some of the homes were still searching for. So we were just trying to do everything we can to getting them enrolled in something. So we bent over backwards, probably more than we should've getting people enrolled. We just wanted them to get back into doing something structured. And we'll learn, you know, as I'm sure of, you know, what other school districts will. And I think a lot of other school districts probably did that as well. They were probably way too liberal on...do they let them go here or there? But everybody just wanted to get them in something because they hadn't been in nothing for, you know, six months.

After six months into the COVID-19 pandemic, Smith mentioned that the students need more structure to keep them connected to school. Smith then told me a story about when he was a young man. He referenced a farm animal that him and his friend, as a young man, had hooked up to a small cart to because they thought it would be a fun ride and a series of events unfolded and they were unable to control the farm animal's speed or direction and they were stuck on the cart with no manageable way to stop the animal from running. Smith recounted:

And as we're going down the road in the little old two-wheel cart goes over in the ditch and my buddy jumped out on me...he bailed out and I had the reins and I looked down and all those reins, we had so much they wrapped around my leg and I couldn't get out. I was tied in. So I was tied in and I couldn't get out. So I could do nothing but hold on. That's all I could do is ride it out. And we went in the ditch, across the ditch, across the road, hit two cars that were parked...bent one of them up pretty bad, so it finally just ran up in the barn and stopped because it couldn't have anywhere else to go. And so what I want to tell everyone and when I do is, you know, we're where we are...we don't have a choice. And we can, we would love to be, you know...I don't know how many times I've heard people say, oh, I wish we were here or I wish this hadn't happened, or I wish we could go back to the way it used to be. And I'll, you know, I'll say that, you know, I wished I could've jumped out of that cart, but I couldn't. I was tangled up. So all I could do was ride it out and make the best of the situation than I could. And that's where we are with this, you know, the digital world, the coronavirus, the contact tracing, all this kind of stuff. People having to quarantine, in and out of quarantine, all those things we can't control. We are where we are. You know, we can't do anything about it. But what we can do is do the best we can each day to do the things that we can control.

This story that Smith told me is a good visual for managing and leading uncontrollable change while focusing on what is under our control. Smith mentioned that he encouraged his faculty and staff to face pandemic challenges head on because their jobs are so important. He said:

You know, this year's going to be unique and you are gonna... I can promise you right now you're going to be inconvenienced at some point. You're going to have to do something that you don't want to do. It's going to be irritating and whatever. But I said, just remember that there's a child out there that you're gonna have an



opportunity to make an impact on them and they'll remember it 20 years from now, whether you did a good job or not. And nobody else will have the opportunity that you did, that you can impact this child's life way on down the road in a way that you may never know. But it will impact that, make that child, a better student, make him a bit more productive citizen and it'll be because of the choices that you make as an individual today.

Through his meaningful and personal anecdotes and stories, Smith is committed to making the most of school improvement and managing and leading change throughout the pandemic and this was a recurring theme throughout the interview.

### **4.3.3 Fostering Collaboration**

Collaboration within a given culture or subculture is a must for well-run organizations and Superintendent Smith told some stories about working together in a collaborative way that was responsive to the rural culture in Mountain Oaks Schools. As we were talking about getting people to work together and the researcher asked if he had used any stories to obtain collective commitment to a common goal, he said:

One just came to mind that I did tell...I've told a lot of them, but we had an issue where we had a lot of people, everybody kind of, you know, everybody has their own agenda. You know, what is important to some may not be important to others. And everybody gets more concerned with what we're doing, whatever policy or procedure, how it affects me, how it affects me, and always woe is me... I'm the only one in this whole group that's working hard. I'm the one that's doing anything... everyone else is a bunch of no count, good-for-nothing and I've talked to them not too long after we had a high school basketball coach who passed away a couple of years ago.

Smith recalled telling the story about his high-school basketball coach and a coach that was very well-loved and respected in the Mountain Oaks School community:

And I said, you know, coach instilled in me one thing about integrity, about working together. And that was what was always important to him was a team. And if you was going to accomplish anything, you had to forget about yourself and your first goal had to be about the team and if we're going to be successful, we've got to work together.

Smith vividly recalled a situation with his coach and a story that he had retold about getting individuals to collaborate to work towards a common goal. Smith is an avid sports fan and appreciates the teamwork aspect of sports and enjoys sharing those stories to make points about getting individuals to work together by using a community figure that is well-loved and respected. Smith then recounted the story about his coach as he related a story from his youth:

I said, you know, coach told me one time...he told us when we were going through a period in the season where we had about two or three games in a row where somebody got a technical foul and he said, I can remember him saying boys, you can't...that's giving away points. Not only are we giving them two free throws, that can be two points. Then we turn around and give him the ball. That could be four points. He said we can't give up. We just can't give that away and he said, to impress upon you that how important that is... the next person, the next game that somebody gets a technical foul called on him, you're gonna run five hundred laps after practice, you're gonna run five hundred laps because we have got to quit doing that... I mean, he was emphatic. Well, everybody, you know, stood up when he said five hundred laps. That gets a teenager's attention. So we all, you know, the next game we went through the game, it was a tight game. And lo and behold, the referee called a technical foul...on him. He got the next one. And, you know, of course, you know that, you know, the events of the game transpired. I can't even remember now if we won or lost. But the next practice is what I remember. You know, we practiced just like normal and after practice, he never said anything. And I was watching as I began to leave the gym and nobody else was, everybody was leaving. Nobody was there but everybody's leaving but him. I looked, and he started running around that gym all by his self, nobody would've said nothing but he ran those laps because he abided by his own rule. He wasn't exempt and that made an impression upon me right there. If the head coach... it's more important about the team than even him, and he's gonna abide by that. That stuck with me.

Smith vividly recalled those details in that story about collaboration and it was clear that it was an effective story because of who the coach was, because he was so well-known in the community as a legendary coach. In talking about another personal story that he likes to tell about his childhood teacher and what she did for him, he commented on his own mistakes in elementary school and his experience with a caring teacher:

I relate that in the fact that how, you know, you just never know what impact you would be making a child's life on a daily basis. And it's something that you've got to work at every day in some way. But there may not be anybody that ever comes along and tells you that you have done a fine job, that if you will watch that child's life and the true test is not when they graduate and they walk across the stage at high school and they've got fifteen cords wrapped across their neck and they're an honor graduate and all that, that's not the true test of how well, how good of a job we've done as the school system. The true test is how good of a job we've done the school system, is twenty years down the road from when they graduate from high school. What did they do with the education we gave them? How well did they apply it...that's the true test. It's not how many honor graduates we've got because I'm sure we are like numerous school systems. We've got honor graduates that go to college and have to enroll in remedial work. Well, are they really an honor graduate? We didn't do a good job somewhere. So, I relay those stories a lot to people.

Smith is able to tell a lot of stories from his childhood. He relates to the community in a culturally responsive way that people can easily understand his down-to-earth demeanor and traditional rural values and during the interview.

#### **4.3.4 Communicating the Brand**

As far as social media is concerned, Superintendent Smith values getting out and talking to people because it's more personal. In talking about Mountain Oaks Schools' social media use as a tool of digital storytelling, he said:

We began, of course, like you said, all the community events. I'm going to survive. Let me come speak. I'd go as long as I didn't have a conflict with something else. I would go, of course, I'm sure, as you're well aware, that there hadn't been many of those events since March 13<sup>th</sup>, but we have switched and we are, we have begun using YouTube during all of the summer. We would put out videos on our website. And each school would turn around and push that out on their apps to all their schools. So we put out videos, you know, weekly there for a while. We haven't done one in a few weeks now. But prior to starting school and maybe about the week of that we did school, we did several videos putting them out. And I would do, you know, communicating to the parents about our options, what was going on in various different things. So that was where we switched over from me being in person, talking to people is now we're using, you know, YouTube. And any, you know, we'll do Facebook. We'll put what we will do, you know, we can record a video, you know, put it on a website, put it on YouTube, do it now, put the same thing out in multiple different formats. So we utilize all of them.

Smith valued the digital storytelling aspect of using social media to get the word out in Mountain Oaks Schools, particularly during a pandemic when community events are canceled. He also talked about rumors and how to deal with rumors in organizations, and asked if he had ever told a story to mitigate and respond to rumors:

You know, of course, I have. If someone told me, I guess I have. You know, it's harder and harder every year. Yeah, I've said rumors are a lot like what they are. And, I've said that, you know, everything must be true, especially if you read it on Facebook. So it's got to be the next to the gospel.

Superintendent Smith used sarcasm in this story about comparing the truthfulness of Facebook to the gospel, in reference to the truth claims of the Christian religion. This story underscores the importance of faith and religion in rural community life. The story underscores the culturally responsive leadership in using themes that people can easily relate to and understand in rural Appalachia by relating the truthfulness of something to the Christian gospel. Smith commented further on this by sharing what he tells people about the truth claims of rumors on social media:

And I tell everyone, you know, don't get too upset with what you read out there on Facebook. Don't try to rock the world out there on Facebook, because a lot of those people that are out there, they need a hobby because I can't imagine anybody having that much time to sit there.

Smith does not think that reading too much into rumors on social media should be given too much importance because he went on to share a story about the "telephone game" when he was in school and how the story ended up being totally different than what was initially said. He offered that Facebook does not have all the answers and that it is best to find the source of the most reliable information and he counsels people to find good information rather than relying on what they heard on social media. He prefers to talk to those in the community to get a pulse on what's going on:

I don't want to get my opinion tainted by someone that's upset or whatever that doesn't have any earthly idea what's going on, that can be a Monday morning quarterback out there on Facebook that has all the answers. I'm just not going to get into that.

#### **4.3.5 Communicating Identity**

Overall, it was evident that communicating personal identity as well as the school and community identity was more effective in person for Smith. Superintendent Smith mentioned that he has given many talks at events such as for retired teachers, Kiwanis Club, prayer for the schools, back to school meetings and so on and prefers these because they offer a more personal touch to help drive the narrative about community, his values and the things going on in Mountain Oaks Schools. Regarding the preference for in-person community events:

Absolutely. It's just more personal, and you know, you can't reach as many people but probably what we need to learn from it is a combination of when we're able to go out and, you know, in being in the community, have more those face-to-face things, which I hope is sooner rather than later. But it has forced us to do a lot of things in an electronic format, so we probably can create a good balance. And doing both is what we will learn from this, me personally.

Smith valued personal face-to-face events and meetings, but acknowledged that the electronic format also has some value and that doing both in combination may be more effective in driving the narrative and communicating the identity of the school district to stakeholders. Smith related a story about just being assigned to a new committee in the community and running late for the first meeting:

I started and, you know, it's in the King James English, a lot of heretos, wherefores and all those kind of things and I read it, and I got through it and I said I was a little nervous, you know, here I am, the school superintendent and when I start reading within the first three sentences, I realized that this isn't easy reading stuff. And so I better be sure that I pronounce it right or they're gonna think, you know that poor old superintendent...he can't even read, how is he gonna lead the school system. So I said, I'm sitting there, I go through that, I read it and I jokingly said at the end of it, I didn't know if I'd getting married, borrowing

money, being a personal guarantor, or what it was I was agreeing to but it seemed like the thing to do.

The story itself was communicated with his down-to-earth relatable personality.

Towards the end of the interview Smith talked about the importance of making an impact on a child's life and the identity of Mountain Oaks Schools in imparting education to children. Smith said, "The true test is how good of a job we've done the school system, is twenty years down the road from when they graduate from high school. What did they do with the education we gave them?" It was apparent that Smith wants to communicate the identity of Mountain Oaks Schools as a place that works hard and does a good job at educating their students and preparing them for postsecondary education and life.

#### **4.3.6 Sparking Action**

Smith told a quick story about having to read a difficult oath of allegiance in order to become a member of a public board and used that story to build support for certain initiatives going on in Mountain Oaks Schools. Smith mentioned this in reference to the story in the previous section on communicating identity, "...but I related that to the fact that...how important it is to read." Smith went on to comment further on how he got support for those initiatives, "and they all kinda bought into that and then, the next thing you know, we've got the COVID, so here we are." Smith is a particularly good storyteller and he knows what stories to tell to get people to rally behind an initiative and makes the stories relevant and relatable to his school stakeholders. Smith values the everyday little things that matter a great deal in the long run. During the interview, Smith reflected back on a childhood story on the playground when he got in trouble for not following directions and going somewhere he was not supposed to on the very first day of school in first grade:

I got in trouble the very first day of school and that's how that I'm sure she would wonder...how in the world, I'm sure when she looked at me, she thought, there's no way this boy is ever gonna amount to very much, you'll never make a school superintendent, of course but I relate that in the fact that how, you know, you just never know what impact you would be making a child's life on a daily basis. And it's something that you've got to work at every day in some way.

Later in the interview, Smith referenced the focus on college and career readiness and did not shy away from encouraging technical education as an option to students as a viable postsecondary option for students in Mountain Oaks:

We've got a CTAE [Career, Technical and Agricultural Education] director who's working closely with them and we've got several of our CTAE pathways that are industry-certified. And we do we do our best to get people. And that's what we talk about. We have someone to come and talk to those classes, you know.

We talked about how important it is for students to hear from those working in those fields and what the possibilities were for students that weren't interested in a four-year college pathway for their postsecondary education. For Smith, the importance of Career, Technical and Agricultural Education (CTAE) is as important as a traditional four-year postsecondary education. He recalled that they had many individuals from different fields and from the local technical college come in and talk to the students to get them motivated to think about different career fields. Smith said:

I mean for electricians, for plumbers, for truck drivers. Goodness knows we can't get those. So we do our best, you know, to try to get them and a lot of them will tell them if you can come complete our program, we can guarantee you a job and you'll make X amount while some of those, like, you know, you can start if you're a welder, you start out, you know, fifty, fifty-five thousand dollars if you're good enough welder right out of the gate and we can't get welders. And that's more than a lot of people is going to make with a four-year degree.

Smith highlighted the importance of getting students interested in these high-paying career options as a viable and encouraged option in addition to their focus on preparing students for the four-year traditional college route.

### **4.3.7 Transmitting Values**

Superintendent Smith enjoys telling stories to transmit values that he learned in his rural community growing up and tries to share those values through the stories that he shares and the talks that he gives to the public. Smith said:

I mean, I've given several talks and speeches and things to various community events from the from, you know, the Kiwanis Club to the numerous retired teachers, we've had several events at the beginning of the year, not this year, of course, but at local churches, you know, back to school, you know, prayer for the schools and things, spoke at all those.

Smith understands the values of his local community and later on in the interview shared that he had shared stories about the value of educating every child and trying to make a difference in their lives. He related stories about teachers that he had and that people in the community he also knew:

But with all the, you know, I do it with some of those organizations that I would mention and I would talk, you know, a lot...I'd go back to some of the teachers that I had, you know, I'd talk about, you know, Ms. Smith, who was my third grade teacher.

We talked about the importance of others telling our stories and sharing values. When asked whether others in the community knew about these teachers, Smith said:

Absolutely. A lot of them did and, you know, in some of them may have had them, I mean, one of the ladies who is my first grade....was my first-grade teacher. Her family donated some money and they give away a scholarship in her name, you know, each year.

### **4.3.8 Sharing Knowledge**

Smith enjoys sharing stories and knowledge with others. He is a very giving person and is always willing to lend a helping hand and share what he knows with others. When asked if he had ever told stories or personal anecdotes to support change initiatives, Smith affirmed, "Oh, yes. Yes, there's several. You know, I guess you just



kind of give you a little history. My vocation, when I set out, I did not set out to be a school superintendent.” And Smith went into telling me all about how he became the school superintendent and how his career led him into his current role with leading Mountain Oaks Schools and he shared some interesting facts about his career. Later in the interview when asked about a curriculum decision and how he talked with the staff at all the schools and referring to a large back-to-school meeting, Smith said, “I told it to all the teachers. That was a first. Yeah, it was like nine hundred and something people, you know, we had a convocation up there on the stage.” Smith was telling the researcher about how he relayed some important upcoming curriculum changes to the staff and recalled:

And I didn't put the data up on the screen in a PowerPoint. I mean, I could have but everybody got lost in that. Everybody knew where we were. You know, I mean, there was no... it was no secret.

Smith has a way of sharing knowledge in a relatable way. Smith was looking forward to the new changes, but due the pandemic, he said, “we got some really good results and it looked like we were really going to do well and have a big improvement in ELA but we know what happened, the COVID came along and we don't know.”

#### **4.3.9 Taming the Grapevine**

When asked about how he deals with rumors in the schools and in the school district, Superintendent Smith gave his thoughts on what rumors are. Smith then talked about how social media can be detrimental in terms of rumors because it is difficult to ascertain the truth from falsehood when dealing with rumors. For example, Smith told the researcher a story about the children's “telephone game” that they used to play in his elementary school and the impression that it made on him when rumors go around

unchecked and things become something that they were not in the beginning. Smith recounted:

If you really want to know something, you know, ask someone who has some information but don't repeat something just because you think you heard or don't add up two and two and think that equals eight because you don't know always, you know, try to get the facts cause, you know, that's an age-old battle and we'll never win that one. But I don't try to, yeah, I don't get caught up in rumors.

Smith valued getting the facts and not giving any credence to rumors without looking for the facts of the matter. He explained that he prefers to go to the primary sources in his community when dealing with rumors and not getting caught up in rumors, particularly those on social media. Smith said:

And then in talking to people in the community and so forth, I don't want to get my opinion tainted by someone that's upset or whatever that doesn't have any earthly idea what's going on, that can be a Monday morning quarterback out there on Facebook that has all the answers. I'm just not going to get into that.

#### **4.3.9 Third-hand Retelling**

Superintendent Smith valued and believed in the communication taking place among trusted community members and is aware that sometimes, stories are shared and retold, including stories being retold that he himself had told. Smith said:

I think I've heard third-hand basically, if I've told somebody something and somebody that wasn't there, you know, has come back and say, hey, I wasn't there, but so-and-so said you said this and, you know, so it does come back around, so I think that it is a very important thing.

Smith has a preference for communicating and telling stories about the happenings in the community, values of the community and so on, but realizes that there is a phenomenon of the third-hand retelling of those stories and opines that it is a "very important thing" because it helps to drive the district's narrative out in the community.

#### **4.3.10 Trust-Building**

There were not any specific references to building trust in the interview with Superintendent Smith. However, it is clear that personal relatability is a crucial component of Smith's leadership as he prefers to be in the community talking with stakeholders as he did prior to the COVID-19 pandemic shut down. Smith takes every opportunity to share stories and enjoys sharing them and through his very personal, relatable stories, he has built the trust of those in his community.

### **4.4 Laurel Brook Schools**

#### **4.4.1 District Description**

Superintendent Owen Dixon offered a lot of very practical wisdom and insights on leadership storytelling at it relates to the work of the superintendency, specifically in rural contexts. He spoke at length on leading and managing change and the role of storytelling in the change process. He leads Laurel Brook Schools whose boundaries cover close to 300 square miles in the North Georgia Mountains and has an enrollment of approximately 4,000 students (NCES, 2019). Laurel Brook Schools is categorized as a rural fringe school district. In addition, the county is classified as mostly rural per the US Census Bureau (2010). The county that Laurel Brook Schools serves has a history of Mississippian mound builders and Cherokee tribes who inhabited the area before the arrival of European settlers. As of 2019, approximately a little over 15% of the county population lives below the poverty line, and the population density is a little less than 150 persons per square mile (US Census Bureau, 2019). Roughly a little over 85% of the school population is considered economically disadvantaged per the state CCRPI indicators.

In 2013, Laurel Brook Schools chose to be a charter school system, and based on a reading of its flexibility contract with GaDOE, there is a clear focus on raising the graduation rate which includes flexibility to offer credits for learning experiences, starting with the possibility to earn some high school credits in middle school as well as alternate approaches for serving their students. Approximately 64% of its 2017 graduating class have enrolled in postsecondary education or training, with roughly about one quarter of those opting for technical postsecondary education.

#### **4.4.2 Leading People into the Future**

When asked about the importance of connecting the past to the present in managing change in a school district, Superintendent Dixon referred to the past as the “glory days.” Regarding the past and the stories of the school district, Dixon commented, “a lot of people hearken back to those, quote-unquote, glory days and so there are a lot of stories from there.” It was evident that he was familiar with the history of the district and communicated that it was necessary to know the stories in order to manage change in a school district, connecting the past to the present and leading into the future. Dixon reflected:

So there were a lot of stories from those times that you have to know and be aware of. So if you’re trying to bring about some change that may take you to a new golden age or a new glory days, it’s hard to present something that people can’t relate to.

Awareness of the past was important to Dixon regarding how a leader communicates, leads and manages change. Dixon mentioned that relating the past to the present was crucial to lead into the future and saw this as a positive leadership skill:

It’s very hard to go in a very different direction. It’s good to plug into the past...so the past history of this community, I have heard a lot of, so not just one specific story, but many stories around the glory days, and then, you know, what happened since then and how do we get back to it.

He discussed the current and future challenges of dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic affecting the school district and ways to properly serve the needs of the community during a difficult period. Dixon said:

During this COVID situation, I would say there are no such thing as the right answers. They're just answers, you know, and you're going to have people who like what you do and dislike what you do. And it's the same answer. So you have to, you know, you have to listen as much as you talk, you have to be willing to cull in that information and try to stay within the general consensus, which gets harder and harder every year.

Dixon was aware that in dealing with this type of crisis and leading into the future, it is not possible to make everyone happy, but values staying within the general consensus of the community and that listening is just as important in communication. The right answers change and one must be willing to listen to their constituents and stakeholders. The subject of managing change and leading into the future had a lot of good discussion points, such as:

So, any time that you're working toward change or trying to work toward school improvement, you have to keep people thinking, well, this is great. Now what can we do better? How does this benefit me? And the other thing I'll say is.... Good for the goose, good for the gander. That doesn't work anymore.

It was evident that doing things right requires flexibility and treating every situation exactly the same is not possible because one must consider all the factors when managing change. Dixon values the listening component of leadership communication, particularly as it relates to leading and managing change in a school district. In communicating with those in the school community:

You can't assume that just because you've got great ideas that people are going to automatically go to them. Because the three words that every leader, every good leader hates...is a few words: Why do we do this? Well, because that's what we've always done. Well, that's never a good answer.

Dixon discussed how in managing change, the common answer of “that’s what we’ve always done” is not a very effective answer in leadership into the future. Dixon went on to offer some very practical information for leading into the future and overcoming the challenges that deal with change:

You may get at the end of looking at something and find out that what we’re doing is the best scenario. It is the best protocol. It is the best procedure. But the answer shouldn’t be because we’ve always done it that way. It should be because this tells me it is best for kids.

He shared that what is best for kids is the best practice in managing change and leading into the future with all of its’ myriad challenges. Dixon discussed how change is difficult for many people and that they will cling to what is comfortable, even if the change is better. Regarding communicating what is best for the schools, Dixon mentioned:

So if you want to go from isn’t the best to the best, but if what isn’t the best has been what they’ve always done, you have to try even harder to communicate and show why that’s not the right way to go, because people will default. People are inherently oppositional to change, even if the change is good for them. You know, so communicating that to the community is extremely important.

#### **4.4.3 Fostering Collaboration**

Getting people to work with and through others was an important theme of conversation during the interview with Superintendent Dixon. He told a story about a superintendent that learned an important lesson in getting people to work together for a common vision and had shared this story with Dixon. He commented, “it’s not about just being good at what you do, it’s about being able to relate to people and them seeing your vision and why you do things.” Dixon referred to having the ability to do a great job even though not everyone agreed. However, he also said that “just because you have good answers and good outcomes doesn’t mean you’re going to be successful as a leader.”

Dixon told a story he heard from one of his mentors with the theme that it does not matter how well you do, if you do not have everyone's commitment to your vision. Referencing the story, he said "he got fired actually because he did some things really right. But he didn't have everybody in the boat with him." As he concluded sharing this story, Dixon commented, "so that was an interesting story that he told me that helped me to see building relationships and telling your story is just as important as having all the right answers." It was evident that Dixon values the collaborative component of leadership and sees it as paramount to getting everyone committed to a collective vision or goal.

Regarding the importance of obtaining collective commitment, Dixon offered a story that he likes to tell:

Oh, I tell people that it's paramount. I mean, you know, one of the things that I've learned in my own personal career, and it's a story that I tell and it's a biblical one, but I tell it because most people know it.

Dixon went on to tell a biblical story of a figure who failed as a leader because he failed to see what others were doing. He talked about the crucial nature of getting others to commit to a vision or goal or a leader will not survive in their role because they are not able to lead by themselves, but rather must work with and through others. Dixon commented, "You don't want to fall prey to fighting the good fight but unfortunately, fighting it alone. You always want to work together to make sure that you're fighting what the community will support, what your leadership team will support." Dixon made it clear that in order to be successful as a leader, it is vital to assess if everyone will collectively commit to a leader's vision. Dixon stated, "You're only as strong as your weakest link, and so you have to have buy-in from your group to get anything done. So,

working together is the only way to get anything done and get it done long-term and effectively.” In turn, for Superintendent Dixon, fostering collaboration and getting others to work together is the only way to lead effectively.

#### **4.4.4 Communicating the Brand**

Superintendent Dixon had a few things to say about the use of social media by the school district as well as other ways of communicating the brand in the Laurel Brook School district. When asked about the different media that Laurel Brook uses, Dixon offered that they used Facebook, Twitter and the school website. Dixon went on to describe briefly how Laurel Brook utilizes social media to promote the brand of the school district. Regarding how he communicates the brand in a rural context, Dixon continued,

We could probably get better at it... in our community, being rural, it’s a lot of word of mouth. It’s a lot of going to the games, it’s a lot of handshaking, it’s very old-fashioned in a lot of ways, at the same time, you can’t look at those things and say, well, because this community likes the word of mouth, so don’t do the social media stuff.

Dixon tends to value the other pathways of communicating the brand in his rural community other than using social media to promote the brand and what’s going on the school district. Regarding the other pathways of communicating the brand through his leadership other than social media, Dixon commented,

But in Laurel Brook, you know, my rural community here, my experience here, you get a lot longer or a lot better impact by, you know, shaking hands and just talking to people and relating to people being in the community and talking, and being able to relate face-to-face is still, I would say the number one.

However, Dixon still does value the use of social media to communicate the brand and ended this part of the interview by commenting that social media is still useful in his rural community. Dixon said:



I can't also say that I've not gotten that phone call that says, well, I didn't see it on the website or I didn't see it on this. I didn't see on that, so it's better to cover all your bases because there is no one perfect tool to get your story out.

Overall, in Laurel Brook, personal, face-to-face interaction has more of a lasting influence in the community in communicating the brand of the school district.

#### **4.4.5 Communicating Identity**

Driving the narrative was a very important topic of discussion in the interview. When asked about using storytelling to communicate who one is and what one is trying to accomplish in leading school districts, Dixon said, "Storytelling is invaluable in trying to convince your constituents to go along with any kind of change or even to continue a current practice, so absolutely, I have done that frequently." Dixon talked about how this skill is not something typically taught in graduate courses or in doctoral programs for school leaders and that they need to be able to communicate who they are and what they are trying to accomplish to persuade people of their character and intentions. Dixon offered, "It is a vital tool of any leadership, whether it's a principal or district leadership or superintendent, to be able to tell stories that may or may not seem to relate to what you're going toward." Dixon also mentioned that using data is not enough and that being able to combine data with a story has the most lasting impact. He said, "You can have all the data in the world, but if you can't tell your story, the data is almost useless." In turn, leaders need to be able to tell the story that goes along with the data.

Dixon spoke at great length during the interview about managing the message and making sure that the message remains consistent with the brand identity. He said:

The consistency in message is extremely important. And I think what you have to do is you have to make sure that those who are telling your story, your team is on the same page. You can't assume that they're saying the same thing that you're saying or saying in the same fashion that you would say it. So, redundancy in

message is very important and I was just in a conference, and one of the things that they stress in communicating is you have to say something seven times before someone starts to listen to it. So, just putting out that one e-mail or just putting out that one tweet or just putting out that one post isn't enough. It checks the box of communication, but that doesn't mean the story is going to be told. So, it's important to be consistent with what you say because the more people that hear it, they're going to vet it. They're going to cross-reference it. So, you have to be good at being consistent with your message as a leader, but you also have to have a good leadership team that has that same message, because anytime there's a variation, it's going to stick out like a sore thumb.

Driving the direction of the narrative was also very important to Dixon:

You can, again, say all the right things and you can do all the right things. But if it's perceived that you're doing the opposite, it doesn't matter that you're saying and doing the right things, perception drives the narrative.

For Dixon, it was evident that controlling the organizational narrative is vital in communicating one's identity, particularly with regard to perception versus reality. Dixon finished his point by saying that:

Things don't stay neutral. They're either working for you or they're working against you, and they rarely work for you without you being involved. So you've got to make sure that you're always engaged, you're always pushing forward your narrative because if not, someone else is going to push your narrative in a different direction.

In sum, Dixon emphasizes message consistency, driving the narrative and being consciously engaged in the right direction of the leadership narrative in communicating one's identity.

#### **4.4.6 Transmitting Values**

Using stories to transmit values was not the most frequent theme in the Dixon interview, but does use stories to transmit values. When asked if he had ever used any stories or anecdotes to communicate his values, Dixon said, "Yes, you know, there's always a fine line with talking about your faith and things like that, but there are ways to share your personal values." Dixon was clear to maintain that in addition to talking about

one's faith, that it was vital to be very relatable in the sense of being a genuine, transparent person. Dixon commented, "You know, the kind of person you are, the kind of leader you want to be, and the more relational and personal you can be, the more people will want to follow you."

#### **4.4.7 Sharing Knowledge**

When asked about using stories to share knowledge to get support for change initiatives, Dixon reflected on the nature of education and the amount of jargon used in education. Regarding being able to converse about education, current trends and challenges, Dixon explained:

You're dealing with a large swath of the population. You're dealing with folks that are highly educated. You're dealing with some folks that maybe didn't have a very good educational experience and may have dropped out of school, all of which are your parents or your constituents.

Dixon valued sharing knowledge as a theme of storytelling. He discussed some of the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic and leading Laurel Brook schools through it:

I just tell them that, you know, in this time we need to remain flexible and open to ideas and that we want to be a place that listens to the needs that arise, whether they're pandemic needs, and have to be flexible and work with that, or whether they're just systematic needs and an approaching school as normal and the things that we face day to day that it can't be a rigid process.

He shared and communicated the knowledge that he has with his community both in and out of a pandemic or crisis. Dixon added that a leader must be able to keep in mind that great ideas and knowledge are great, but that the community may not support those ideas. Dixon cautioned that "in communicating out with your community, you can't assume that just because you've got great ideas that people are going to automatically go to them."

#### 4.4.8 Taming the Grapevine

When asked about dealing with rumors, Superintendent Dixon acknowledged both the positive and negative aspects of the use of social media by the school district:

With the whole COVID thing that we're doing...Facebook is, again, both good and bad, and one of the bad things was somebody posted: my kid got tested at school without my consent, which is obviously not true because no one's testing at school like that. Of course, we are not testing like that.

Acknowledging the difficulty that rumors sometimes present in managing and leading a school district, Dixon said, "Rumors are tough. They are tough to deal with because, one, you typically don't know where they're coming from, and so they're hard to address." He continued:

Sometimes you become prey to trying to put out rumors and you create others, you know, so sometimes you have to let rumors lie, and sometimes you have to let somebody else tell your story, so it quells the rumor without you having to get down into the mud, because sometimes you don't win those battles.

Dixon holds in high esteem the trust of others to tell the district's story so that the superintendent doesn't have to address them head-on, particularly the rumors whose source is unknown. Dixon made a distinction between rumors of dubious origin in comparison to rumors whose origins is known:

You know, the difference in attacking those is if it's a rumor that someone is willing to put their name to, I tend to take those very seriously, but those can be dealt with head-on because someone has put their name to it. When I get one, that's just, hey, I heard this from somebody that you should do something about it. I usually just say, well, I'll take that in advisement. I appreciate you. I'll look into it but there's not a whole lot of follow-up to it other than continued listening to see if somebody else corroborates it because those anonymous ones, you just can't give those credence.

It seems that the unknown source of rumors wants the leadership to engage in quelling the rumors because it ends up giving those rumors credence, and as Dixon explained, those anonymous rumors are not worthy of lending credence.

#### **4.4.9 Third-Hand Retelling**

Although not a major theme in the Dixon interview, the theme of third-hand retelling did emerge in a few excerpts. For example, he explained that a superintendent mentor told him a story about a superintendent who did a great job, but ended up losing the job. He said:

He told me a story of a close friend of his that was the superintendent that went to a district that was hired for a specific purpose. And in the end, he did everything that the board wanted and was able to make some great changes. So his outcomes, his data was spot on. And in the end, that friend of his lost his job.

When Dixon was asked about connecting the past to the present, Dixon explained a little about Laurel Brook Schools:

So the surrounding counties, you know, those families would come here to eat and do and so the community as a whole, which also helped the district as a whole, was different than, say, it is now. But a lot of people hearken back to those, quote-unquote, glory days. And so there are a lot of stories from there.

Dixon hears a lot of stories being retold in his rural community about different topics, but all third-hand stories and third-hand retelling of those stories. In reference to stories about local sports success against the competition, Dixon recalled, “So, I’ve heard those two stories over and over, anytime I say that I worked in my previous school district.”

#### **4.4.10 Trust-building**

Dixon offered a lot of wisdom and leadership experience with trust-building.

When we discussed using stories in leading change and dealing with the challenges of the future, Dixon said:

You know, people don’t trust that the school is going to do exactly what you need them to do for the community. It’s more of an old Reagan “ask, trust but verify.” You have to build trust and you’ve got to build people’s buy-in. And just because you got doctor in front of your name or you’ve had years of experience doesn’t mean people are gonna just follow you blindly. They’re more likely to question you.

Dixon values the buy-in of the community and knows that working with and through others is the only way to get things done. Therefore, he makes an effort to gain the trust and acceptance of the community he serves. He commented, “Building relationships and telling your story is just as important as having all the right answers.” Perhaps Dixon’s most direct comment regarding using stories as trust-building was when he talked about the importance of leadership storytelling when the interview started. Dixon commented,

You know, you need to be able to tell your story, so people relate to you and buy into what you think is right. Just because you have good answers and good outcomes doesn’t mean you’re going to be successful as a leader.

Dixon also acknowledged that the use of leadership storytelling is an acquired skill and not something being necessarily taught in graduate leadership programs.

## **4.5 Magnolia Meadows Schools**

### **4.5.1 District Description**

Superintendent Helen Autry leads Magnolia Meadows Schools and spoke about current and past challenges in the district. Magnolia Meadows Schools boundaries cover under 240 square miles in North Georgia and has an enrollment of approximately 2,800 students. Magnolia Meadows Schools is categorized as a rural fringe school district by the NCES (2019). In addition, the county is classified as mostly rural per the US Census Bureau (2010).

The county that Magnolia Meadows Schools encompasses was inhabited by Cherokee tribes before the arrival of settlers in the early 1800s. A little under 15% of the county population lives below the poverty line, and the population density is a little less than 80 persons per square mile (US Census Bureau, 2019). Roughly a little over 60% of the school population is considered economically disadvantaged per the state CCRPI

(College and Career Readiness Performance Index) reports. In 2012, Magnolia Meadows Schools chose to be a charter school system, and based on a reading of its flexibility contract with GaDOE, there is a clear focus on raising the graduation rate, which includes flexibility to offer credits for learning experiences, with a particular focus on dual enrollment and credit recovery at the high school level. The largest focus areas are remediation of student learning and acceleration for students to take higher-level coursework in high school. Just below 45% of its 2017 graduating class enrolled in postsecondary education or training, with less than 10% of those opting for technical postsecondary education.

#### **4.5.2 Leading Others into the Future**

Superintendent Autry prides herself on transparency in her leadership. When asked about how she gets her community to believe in the school district's educational product, Autry spoke about how she is very open and transparent with the board and community members; she is an "open book." One aspect of leading into the future is the COVID-19 pandemic and how to keep socially-distanced, Autry said:

During COVID, that was sometimes difficult with e-mail, we did Zooms for the staff and that kind of thing, but that became kind of hard. It is hard to convey your message through email and in that format. But we did and we survived and hopefully we'll keep surviving.

In future years, she highlighted that there will be stories about how they made it through the pandemic, but maintained a positive outlook in her storytelling. Autry said:

You know, you look at people like that and you think, well, this you know, this is not that challenging. I can do anything if they can do it. So, you know, I think that group of friends that you have as educators help pull you through it and help you see the light. You know, that we'll make it.

Autry also referenced the broad flexibility waiver granted by the state of Georgia as a result of the charter system contract. She stated:

We had the innovative features we have used, you know, we've done a lot with virtual learning and dual enrollment. We've done a lot with seat time. We've done a lot with the calendar, changing some of those type things. We have implemented foreign language K-12 and the Ag program K-12 because of that.

Autry indicated that she saw that the innovative features allowed as a result of the broad flexibility waiver in the charter system contract had been very beneficial and raised student achievement. But she also added that they are limited to new innovations and programs because of the pandemic:

If we weren't in the middle of COVID or a pandemic, we might start to rely on some of the test data that we see at the end of this year to see where we were and how we're doing with that implementation and what we're seeing. But, you know, as it is, we won't have. We're trying to allow some benchmark data and local assessment data, but it might not be the same. We'll just have to see where we are. We might still be in survival mode.

Superintendent Autry was focused on getting through any situation and moving her school district into the future.

#### **4.5.3 Fostering Collaboration**

Getting others to work together and working with and through others was a salient theme for Superintendent Autry. She emphasized personal relatability in her rural community and valued getting people to work together towards common goals for the benefit of the community of Magnolia Meadows. She praised how well people work together in her district, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic:

One of the biggest things that that we have going for us is, you know, we're very rural, but lower socioeconomic, that our facilities are really great. And through passing ELOST [Educational Local Option Sales Tax], you know, we've been able to build top-notch facilities as well as have one-to-one, one student to one device. And for us, you know, we were in good shape when COVID hit with the devices, but we were not in good shape with internet access.



ELOST (Educational Local Option Sales Tax) is an acronym used in Georgia that refers to a local tax to assist a school district's initiatives that require extra capital. It was clear throughout the interview that ELOST was extremely beneficial for Magnolia Meadows. Autry spoke about the challenges in some parts of the county not having reliable internet, and still praised their district:

That's been a very positive thing where we've worked together to get all of that going. Lots of help there. And working together through COVID has also been. We fed every student and every family during the COVID crisis and continue to do so. And so that has been, you know, a place that our community has really worked together to get a lot done and take care of its people. But honestly, every day in Magnolia Meadows is working together. You know, it really is. It's known for that.

Autry also spoke about the community coming together and purchasing cars for those programs and said that and the passing the ELOST were the best things for the community. Autry spoke about the willingness of her community to come together for a common cause.

#### **4.5.4 Communicating the Brand**

Although not one of the more salient themes throughout the interview, Superintendent Autry does value the social media aspect of communicating the brand. However, she mostly focused on other avenues of communicating the brand of the school district. Autry explained:

We do rely on some social media and Facebook probably is a greater presence for us and Instagram. Twitter is not nearly as popular in our rural area, but a lot of the communication takes place at the events hosted at the high school football games.

Autry also pointed out that much of brand-building occurs at community events such as high school football and basketball games. While speaking about events becoming impromptu opportunities to build the school district brand, Autry commented, "All those

events that I'm at, you know, and in even the recreation department events for my children become places for communication, even when you don't want them to, you know." In turn, even when Autry is not planning to speak, she can build the narrative and the brand. She said:

...we're so small and, you know, easily recognize that it's an opportunity to always or you know, I don't know if you want to call it an opportunity, but you're always on guard sometimes. And one day in Dollar General, a woman let me have it, you know, that because we're so small in such a rural area, there's a lot of interaction, personal face-to-face interaction at the events and things like that. And in all honesty, the school is the center of our community.

Because of the small, rural nature of her school district, Autry must be somewhat prepared to speak at any time when out in the community. The community of Magnolia Meadows revolves around the school district and the events going on are important for the stakeholders, even individuals that no longer have children attending school. Autry said, "The school system is the center of the community and that becomes, you know, the face-to-face interaction on a regular basis. This is where a lot of the narrative is built." For Autry, face-to-face interaction is an important part of branding and driving the narrative.

#### **4.5.5 Communicating Identity**

Autry emphasized personability and relatability when communicating her identity to the community that she serves in Magnolia Meadows. When asked about how she communicates who she is to the stakeholders and community that she serves, Autry responded:

So, you know, every daily encounter I had was somewhat of a personal narrative that, you know, I use my cell phone number, my personal cell phone number on the line of my signature for every email that I have. So I feel like that everything I do is, you know, my professional and personal life kind of bleed together.

Autry communicates who she is at all times at all school district events and makes herself available on her personal cell phone number that goes out in every single e-mail. Autry is dedicated to transparency in her leadership and practices a consistency of message in communicating herself and the district's identity. When talking about how she communicates her district's identity:

I try to tell our narrative. I'm very transparent. I do my very best. I tell people all the time... the only thing I can't discuss with you is personnel and the rest of it, but I do my best to be... tell the same person, you know, and everybody the same story.

#### **4.5.6 Sparking Action**

Sparking action was not an overly salient theme in the interview. In regards to future changes, Autry explained that they were going through a transitional time with business and people moving into the county:

We have always been very focused on career and trade in Banks County and so that's not...and then we've seen an explosion with our student population in the college readiness rate as well. So we feel like, you know, we communicate that regularly.

Autry elaborated on this increase in the graduation rate with the focus on getting students prepared for college and careers. Autry mentioned, "I think that goes back to that shift in the culture of things in Magnolia Meadows... our graduation rate has increased. But not only that, our, you know, going to college and career awareness rate has increased."

#### **4.5.7 Transmitting Values**

Autry embodies the rural, traditional values of the Magnolia Meadows school district as she strives to be personal and relatable with the communities that she serves as school superintendent. Transmitting values was a particularly salient theme for the Autry interview. When asked about speaking at different community events such as high-school

football games and events associated with the local churches, Autry said that churches are big influences in transmitting values and the connection between the churches and the school district is significant. Autry said:

My home church is in a neighboring county, very small. I mean, that's where I attend church with my family and children. But, you know, that's where I'm a member of... in the old-fashioned way but, you know, because of my relationship with the community and because of my children and there's so many more kids their age, we go to a church in our community and so, yes, that's an opportunity as well because they're, you know...everybody, there is part of the school system and either they teach or their children go there.

In Magnolia Meadows school events are important, particular sports events that draw in community members that do not have students that attend the school but are still very supportive. Autry explained that they were trying to figure out the best ways to accommodate those individuals and how they were even going to do sports events in Magnolia Meadows amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. The community values those sports events and they are somewhat intertwined with the faith tradition of the local community. Autry explained, "We used to joke and say that if Jesus announces he's coming on Tuesday night, Magnolia Meadows is going to ask him to come on Wednesday, cause Tuesday night are the basketball games." Faith and community are clearly longstanding traditions in Magnolia Meadows and contribute to its traditional values and culture.

When asked if there were any hero figures in Magnolia Meadows, Autry explained that there was indeed an individual who embodied the values of the community and that is very well-loved. We'll call him Mr. Steve Jones. When talking about Mr. Jones, Autry explained:

You know, I think he helped to change the culture of Magnolia Meadows....we're not only rural, but we're very much so an agricultural area. And I think he supported a large shift in valuing education for our community. And I think that has been really important.

Additionally, when the researcher asked a follow-up question about whether or not she felt that the stories of the past links with her current leadership:

It completely unites us. And I feel like I know a lot of people through Steve's stories that I may not have known...he's the kind of person that he can always tell you that, you know, that so and so's cousin and it's their uncle and it's this, that or the other so, you know, he can make that connection and it does link us.

Superintendent Autry explained that Magnolia Meadows also has other individuals that are out and about in the community that are well-known and embody those traditional rural values but that Mr. Jones was the most prominent individual in her school district.

#### **4.5.8 Sharing Knowledge**

Using stories to share knowledge was not a prevalent theme throughout the interview. However, when asked about whether or not Autry used stories and if using stories was useful, Autry said:

Yes, I do. I absolutely do...for good and for bad, but most of the time for good, you know. And I feel the same way. Our board of education is very supportive. Again, there are five members. It's a small community and they are at everything. And I'm very transparent. Try to be. And, you know, don't hide anything. I tell how our financial situation is. I'm just trying to be a very open book and try to get my side of the story out, which might not be the right side necessarily but you know, let people know where I'm coming from.

Autry uses stories to share her knowledge and get her message out there. Speaking about the possibilities of the future in Magnolia Meadows Schools, Autry said, "we are looking to hopefully build a career academy. But what has happened is we're kind of on the backward end of things, you know... we are not very well-blessed with industry in our county." Although not a particularly salient theme for Superintendent Autry, the use of stories as a way to share knowledge may be more present than the preponderance of data gathered during the interview.

#### **4.5.9 Taming the Grapevine**

Autry discussed briefly how to deal with rumors in the organization through stories and Autry was very quick to mention that some rumors may not be given any credence and that honesty and transparency was the best policy. Autry said:

Sometimes it's the same people that were upset then that are upset now will have a negative story to say. But, you know, I think that it's just it's kind of like reading for us, you know, it's kind of like reading the negative tabloid type thing. But I try to tell our narrative.

Autry clarified that in order to deal effectively with rumors, clarity and transparency were the more reliable means. Autry commented,

I do my best to... tell the same person... the same story. And, you know, if you call me and you ask me, I'm gonna give you what I can. So I think that that consistency and just trying to, you know, honestly communicate. And I'm also not afraid to say I'm sorry.

For Autry, the way to deal with rumors in the organization and “tame the grapevine” was to maintain absolute transparency and consistency story or message in communicating with stakeholders throughout the school district.

#### **4.5.10 Third-hand Retelling**

Autry admitted that word-of-mouth leadership via retelling the district or superintendent's story were not uncommon in her school district. Autry acknowledged that storytelling can occur at any time and at any place within the community, particularly in the rural context. Autry talked at length about how important those school and church events were for Magnolia Meadows and that she must be prepared at all times with thoughtfulness, honesty and complete transparency.

#### **4.5.11 Trust-building**

Trust-building was a very important theme for Superintendent Autry. Although she did not tell the researcher any specific stories to build trust or how she uses storytelling to build trust, she did allude to it in a number of ways. For example, when discussing the idea of using a storytelling approach to communicate with the public and when asked about her roles as a rural superintendent, Autry made reference to a superintendent that was very good at his job, but ultimately did not have the trust of the community. Autry said:

He was a great superintendent. But, you know, people said he's not part of the community. We don't know him, and I think that is one of the things that I learned from my first superintendent and that how important that was or is.

Autry continued talking about the importance of building trust and mentioned that her involvement and investment into the community builds a large degree of trust. Autry commented, "My children are vested in the community as well as my husband. So that, I think, produces an amount of trust, if you will, that does support most of my missions." Autry acknowledged that storytelling and relating to people is pivotal for trust-building as a rural school superintendent. Moreover, she acknowledges the importance of others supporting your narrative to build trust. Autry talked at length about Mr. Jones, a special and well-loved, trustworthy individual in Magnolia Meadows that can be considered a champion figure for education in the community spoke highly of Superintendent Autry and Autry mentioned:

I honestly think that as I was named superintendent, he was a large part of that, truthfully. I think he spoke highly of me and that helped for me to gain the trust of a lot of people in our area.

Magnolia Meadows has been able to implement many new innovations as a result of their broad flexibility waiver from the state of Georgia. Autry said, “We’ve also gained the trust of some parents who may not have wanted to trust the school system because of negative experiences they had.” Building this trust with all stakeholders has been pivotal for the success of Magnolia Meadows and will continue to be so moving forward into the future.

## **4.6 Dogwood Ridge Schools**

### **4.6.1 District Description**

Superintendent Billy Reed leads Dogwood Ridge Schools whose boundaries cover over 280 square miles in the Blue Ridge Mountains of North Georgia and has an enrollment of approximately 4,000 students. Dogwood Ridge Schools is categorized as a rural fringe school district by the NCES (2019). In addition, the county is classified as mostly rural per the US Census Bureau (2010). At the present, a little under 15% of the county population lives below the poverty line, and the population density is a little more than 105 persons per square mile (US Census Bureau, 2019). Over 40% of the school population is considered economically disadvantaged per the state CCRPI indicators. In 2014, Dogwood Ridge Schools chose to be a charter school system and based on a reading of its flexibility contract with GaDOE, there is a clear focus on increasing student academic performance in accord with their approved contract as well as increasing community satisfaction and parent involvement. Part of the strategy in getting parents involved in the school district is to reduce the student absenteeism rate. Approximately 60% of its 2017 graduating class have enrolled in postsecondary education or training, with roughly 12% of those opting for technical postsecondary education.



Superintendent Reed was a believer and practitioner of leadership storytelling, offered several useful details on leading school systems in rural areas, and communicated the rural leadership context quite succinctly. Reed was particularly adept at building the “brand” of the school district as well as the different facets of communicating within and through an organization and in the local, rural community. Reed was also an expert at building school district partnerships.

#### **4.6.2 Leading Others into the Future**

Reed connected the past to the present in terms of his storytelling. For example, when asked about how he links Dogwood Ridge Schools’ story of the past with its’ story of the present and future, he said “That’s not always an easy thing to do, because you anytime you reference the past, you can be offending the people who served in the district or perhaps were the superintendent in the past.” He also explained that a new superintendent must be attentive to change and not maintain the status quo:

Nobody wants to be hired and show up as the superintendent and remain status quo...hey, let’s keep things where they are. You hire me and we’ll do nothing different. Well, that is not really exciting, nor I think it’s fair to your kids.

Reed emphasized that it is necessary to have the support of those that one serves:

What I try to do is emphasize the fact that what we’re dealing with today is different than what somebody was dealing with five and ten years ago. Things have constantly changed and our challenges that we face each day change.

Reed advocates using the stories of the past to inform everyone on where the school system has been and where there may be room for improvement. He acknowledged that there is an inherent difficulty of doing this in a smaller, rural community when a person has to be mindful of not offending the work in education that has been done in the past.

Reed mentioned:

It's a tough thing to do and especially doing so without offending the people, you know, when you say if you show up and you say, you know, this school system was failing 20 years ago...well, you got people in your school system who worked there 20 years ago and you're calling them part of the part of that failure, and so you don't do things like that.

Reed mentioned stories related to preparing his community for the educational challenges of the future. Reed discussed the work that has been done in Dogwood Ridge Schools to get students to take dual enrollment classes with local colleges and universities so that they can move forward with either college or technical college. Reed offered that they have been working diligently to promote not only four-year college options, but also getting students interested in careers and technology. He said, "they [technical schools] have grown into a full-on college now and we're still trying to help change that perspective." Reed was very focused on being innovative as a school system as a way to get students interested in different career paths as yet another option for them. He said, "We've tried to create the story of what technical colleges, what CTAE [Career, Technical and Agricultural Education] programs provide for kids now that they really didn't even when I was in high school."

#### **4.6.3 Fostering Collaboration**

Reed used sports analogies related to working together as a both an individual and as a collective unit as a school and school district. As a former coach, sports analogies are a big part of his storytelling tactics. For example, he said:

When you go into your classroom, you're an individual. You're walking in there with the whistle blowing and it's on you and what you do, your success or failure contributes to the team of individuals under your roof or under your grade level. Nobody has...we have the data for each individual teacher, but it doesn't come back and get reported as Mr. Reed's class achieved at this level. Mr. Barrett's class achieved this. That's not how they're going to run it in the news. But you are part of a team. As an individual, so I like to draw on those coaching analogies to help make the picture for our staff and I think most of them can relate to it, you

know, it's...you have to have some way for people to see that bigger picture and I like to use those sports analogies.

For Reed, sports analogies are both an effective and efficient mode of portraying the importance of everyone working together to accomplish a collective mission. Reed also had experience working in both urban and rural school districts. Reed explained that although there were more problems to deal with in an urban setting because of sheer volume, there were also more people to help deal with those problems. On the other hand, Reed stated:

In a rural system, you are much more involved and aware of what's going on at every level of leadership within your district. Whereas in a larger system, you simply have more people, you have more human resources to help deal with those issues. And so you're not kind of...you're not stuck in the weeds sometimes of dealing with them.

#### **4.6.4 Communicating the Brand**

Superintendent Reed spoke at length about stories as a way to build and communicate the branding of the school district. For example, Reed spoke about the innovative approaches with the end goal being a college and career academy, "We've tried to create the story of what technical colleges, what CTAE programs provide for kids now that they really didn't even when I was in high school." Reed talked about the award-winning programs in the school district as well as the different partnerships and innovations that they had been able to put in place in Dogwood Ridge. Reed mentioned the broad flexibility waiver and how the school district has used that flexibility to innovate to build not only award-winning programs for the district's students but also as a way to communicate the district's innovative brand.

When discussing the district's innovative programs, Reed talked about the story that the district has been actively engaged in with promoting career and technical

education in the district as an option for students. Regarding the negative connotations of “trade school” and how those have changed dramatically over the years and the challenges of changing that narrative, Reed talked about the prevailing attitudes and beliefs about technical colleges. Reed commented, “... and that was the mentality and so we keep trying to create this story about a career academy that we’re not building a trade school like it used to be 30 and 40 years ago.” The district has been able to make some progress in changing that narrative about technical education over the last few years in the district through social media presence and building up support for the district’s innovative features and programs. Reed explained:

I tell you all that, to say that the story that we have created to build on the last four years is really using our social media presence and to use our avenues of communication to inform people of what’s going on in our CTAE department in our high school.

Reed talked about the district using social media as a way to communicate the brand of the school district and the innovative programs going on there to get stakeholders to consider all avenues of college and career possibilities. For Reed and Dogwood Ridge Schools, social media presence and use has been a major driver of the education narrative to promote the school district’s brand. Reed said:

We use Instagram, we use Twitter, we use Facebook. We also use our website, which a lot of people go to directly to visit. And we still use our local print media...it’s just that [the] population that’s reading that print media is quite different than the one that’s reading the digital media.

Dogwood Ridge Schools makes use of a multiple platforms approach to drive the narrative and communicate the brand, but their social media presence was not very strong when Reed began as superintendent. And he explained the reasons for increasing social media presence:

If you're going to get information from the school system, it was usually going to come in the weekly newspaper or through the rumor mill, and so when we started to.... when we decided through our strategic planning process that we wanted to be in control and to share our message, and we began to build a social media presence. And we began to share information through press releases and to really push out what was going on. One of the mistakes that we made was thinking that we had to respond to everybody.

Reed was very aware of the influence and uses of social media to communicate the district's brand. He understood that building a brand of a successful school district takes time, planning and persistence in using multiple platforms to manage the district's story.

#### **4.6.5 Communicating Identity**

Communicating his identity was also an area of great strength for Superintendent Reed. When asked specifically about how he communicates who he is as a school leader,

Reed said:

You know, and having gone now to two different school districts where I didn't grow up, where I was a complete stranger. It was important when I started to work in both of the districts that I've served for them to know who I was and why I went into the profession that I did. And I've done that through not only meeting with the staff and faculty at every single school, but also with community organizations, with Kiwanis and Rotary Clubs, so that they know who their school superintendent is, what my values are, what my beliefs are, and why those values and beliefs were formed in the way that they work through my experiences.

Reed wanted to communicate his identity not only to those directly under his leadership, but with everyone at every single school as well as various community organizations.

Reed commented:

I think we all use our experiences and our stories, if you will, to communicate and to share your vision of where you're trying to go. We always try to draw on historical events or whether they're personal or global. You try to draw on something to help people see your perspective.

Reed was very quick to identify the use of experiences in the form of stories to communicate an identity as well as communicating a perspective of one's leadership to persuade others of a need for change. When asked about the different venues where he has a platform to communicate his identity, Reed explained that as a rural superintendent, people want to talk with him and he uses these opportunities to share information that they may have not heard through social media or local newsletters. Reed said:

Whether I'm talking with an employee, a bus driver that works for us or I'm talking to somebody in line at Wal-Mart or at a restaurant in town. I always try to find an opportunity to share something good that's going on in our school system.

For Reed, being out and about in the community in several types of venues offers multiple opportunities to communicate his identity as a leader.

#### **4.6.6 Sparking Action**

The pattern of using stories to spark action was not a particularly salient one, but Reed does like to use sports analogies when speaking with the staff; in a way, these stories can be used to spark action. In reference to one sports analogy related to fostering collaboration, Reed explained that although individual teachers are judged on their own merits, their success or failure contributes to the school's and ultimately to the district's success or failure. This story interwove sparking action with fostering collaboration. Although this analogy was used to talk about the importance of getting others to work together for the common good, Reed tells sports analogies as a way to spark action.

#### **4.6.7 Transmitting Values**

As someone with an appreciation for sports and teamwork, Reed transmits those traditional values of collaboration through stories. Although not a very salient pattern during this interview, Reed alluded to some examples where values are transmitted

through stories and trust of individuals in the community. For example, Reed talked about the individuals in Dogwood Ridge and how they bring a lot of traditional values to the school district. Referring to school district employees with traditional values, Reed explained:

They've never worked or lived anywhere else. They just...it's a cycle of investment into their community, into their hometown and they're outstanding high-quality employees. Many of them have become administrators in our district. Many of them work here in my office. And they take great pride in making sure that Dogwood Ridge has a great school system. And I don't know what more investment you'd want somebody to make.

It was evident that Reed values this dedication as well as the traditional rural values that local employees bring to their local school district.

#### **4.6.8 Sharing Knowledge**

Reed has a very relatable way of sharing knowledge through stories and although he did not specifically share any stories of him sharing knowledge with others, his conversational tone and willingness to share what he knows illustrated this pattern. For example, he discussed differences between working in urban and rural contexts:

I found quickly that you couldn't hide in the rural setting. Everybody knows if you're at the ballgame, they know you're if you're there supporting their kids and everybody wants to talk to you. When I was in the larger district, nobody knew if I was at a ballgame or not. They didn't care to talk to you...and it just, serving as a rural superintendent... everybody wants to talk with you.

Reed shared with the researcher his experiences of working for a larger, urban school district and having multiple individuals working for the district dealing with problems so that the superintendent could focus on managing and leading. In rural districts, the superintendent is in the spotlight a lot more in the local community. Reed then talked about in further detail how he has more in-depth meetings and is able to have a more direct approach in dealing with other district leaders. Reed commented:

In a rural setting, on my team, what we would call our executive leadership, if you will. We have a Monday meeting every Monday at nine o'clock, a stand-in meeting where we come together for about an hour to talk about what's on the docket for that week and to recap what was going on the week before, most of that is really to ensure that I remain aware of any potential hiccups or hurdles that we're going to encounter so that I can keep our board informed, but also so that we can talk through things as a group and sometimes commiserate and sometimes celebrate with each other when things are going well.

It was quite evident during this interview with Reed that he is very competent at using stories to share information about what is going on across the school district not only with district-level leadership but also with all stakeholders in the Dogwood Ridge school district and Superintendent Reed may use multiple stories to share wisdom and knowledge from his various experiences in managing and leading rural school districts.

#### **4.6.9 Taming the Grapevine**

Reed is a direct storyteller when it comes to taming the grapevine and dealing with rumors in the school district as well as rumors about the school district. After being asked whether or not he uses or had used stories to tame the grapevine and deal with rumors, he explained:

I don't know that I've necessarily shared stories when dealing with rumors. I like to share facts. Anytime I hear a rumor or something gets put on to social media, as every community now has some specific page dedicated to their community. And there are people in this world who will do anything to go on there and, you know, criticize or even make up stuff about your organization or any other organization or individual sometimes.

Reed is very direct when it comes to dealing with rumors in the organization and works swiftly to correct any misunderstandings or falsehoods that may arise. Reed said:

It's important for me to always share the facts, the truth, and not try to hide anything. And I personally, I think if you're telling stories sometimes and when you're addressing inaccuracies or falsehoods, then sometimes you can be deterring or distracting people away from the true issue at hand, and so I'm a little more direct when it comes to that.



Sharing the facts and getting to the heart of the matter is a cornerstone of Reed's leadership. Reed also takes a very proactive approach in dealing with rumors before they even start. Reed did address how they use social media to possibly disrupt rumors before they start and this was part of their strategic plan. In reference to information being circulated about the school district, Reed explained that before the district decided to increase its presence on social media that they wanted greater control of the narrative about the school district. Referring to getting information about the school district before they decided to begin using social media, Reed commented:

It was usually going to come in the weekly newspaper or through the rumor mill, and so when we started to...when we decided through our strategic planning process that we wanted to be in control and to share our message.

It was clear that in order to get a handle on the rumor mill, the district had to be proactive in using its social media campaign to get out the information directly rather than allowing the rumor mill to control the circulation of information about the school district. In this way, the district was better prepared to manage the rumor mill through using an ongoing media campaign through social media and the local newspaper.

#### **4.6.10 Trust-building**

Although Reed only addressed the issue of using stories to build trust a couple of times in the interview, he never did so explicitly. He spoke to other issues and only touched on this topic indirectly. It was clear that Reed builds trust in his community by setting a leadership example of trust by being involved. He used the other patterns of leadership storytelling of communicating one's identity and sharing knowledge to build trust in his leadership. Reed is very involved in the school district and talks to people when he is in line at the store or at any events going on in the district. Reed talked about

building trust when asked about a hero or champion type of figure in Dogwood Ridge Schools. Reed immediately thought of two individuals, one that had served as a former superintendent and another that served as a school board member; these individuals were trusted voices of the community.

Regarding the former superintendent who was a longtime educator in Dogwood Ridge, Reed said, “They look to him because he’s that trusted face and that longtime contributor, not just in education, but in service to this community.” The other individual that Reed referenced is a very highly respected businessman in the community and served on the school board for many years. Reed said that both individuals were instrumental in dealing with anything in education in Dogwood Ridge Schools. Reed explained, “...and they’re out there telling the stories and people know that they don’t have to worry about trusting the new guy when they have people who’ve been here forever and a day supporting what’s going on.” So, Reed relies on those trusted voices in the community as part of the backbone of his mission in Dogwood Ridge as a superintendent not being from the local area and he partners with those trusted individuals to connect with the local community to build that trust that he needs to manage and lead the innovative focus in Dogwood Ridge Schools.

#### **4.7 Summary**

Throughout the interview transcription data, the researcher identified four overarching storytelling patterns shown in Figure 4.2 that the superintendents used in their leadership regularly. These four major themes include: (a) leading people into the future, (b) communicating identity, (c) fostering collaboration, and (d) trust-building. These themes shared a large degree of connectivity, which illustrates an interwoven

storytelling pattern used by rural public school superintendents in this study. Chapter 5 provides a summary of findings, interpretation of these data, and an in-depth discussion of four major themes that emerged from a cross-case analysis of all five school districts. Then, it will include some Dedoose-generated qualitative visual representations included in the appendices presenting the data findings as well as discussing the interaction and interconnectivity between the four major themes in a thematic co-occurrence chart. A discussion of future research recommendations will be included as well as implications for professional practice.

## CHAPTER 5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This multi-case exploratory study focused on how rural public school superintendents used storytelling to lead change and innovation initiatives in the Appalachian region of North Georgia. The context of this study was defined both by Georgia's adoption of broad flexibility waivers for school districts to encourage innovation and the rural characteristics of Appalachian school districts in North Georgia. Three of the school districts in this study were charter systems and they include: Laurel Brook Schools, Magnolia Meadows Schools, and Dogwood Ridge Schools. Two districts were Strategic Waivers School Systems (SWSS): Mountain Pines Schools and Mountain Oaks Schools. The charter system superintendents were more inclined to talk about innovation in their school districts as opposed to only flexibility. In this chapter, the researcher will answer the two questions that guided the study including:

1. How did rural public-school district superintendents use storytelling in leading change and innovation?
2. Were there similarities in how rural school district superintendents used stories to lead change and innovation?

This chapter is organized in the following manner. First, each question will be presented and followed by a summary of major themes that are relevant to answering the question. These themes were identified in Chapter 4 and include: (a) leading people into the future, (b) communicating identity, (c) fostering collaboration, and (d) trust-building. Analysis of each of these themes will include a recap of relevant literature, a summary of events and a discussion which incorporates concepts drawn from appropriate literature and theories to explain each of these several themes. The answer to question two will follow

the same format of presenting relevant themes, concepts, and literature, recapping data and then discussing findings. However, the answer to question two will also incorporate a cross-case analysis that facilitates understanding similarities in how superintendents used storytelling to lead change and innovation in their respective school districts. Then, after each question is answered, several thematic co-occurrences that emerged from the data will be discussed. Lastly, this chapter will conclude with a discussion of implications of study findings for practice as well as recommendations for future research.

### **5.1 Question 1: Using Storytelling to Lead Change and Innovation**

The first research question that guided this study was:

How did rural public-school district superintendents use storytelling in leading change and innovation?

This question is directed towards exploring and better understanding distinct and also unique ways in which rural Appalachian public school district superintendents used storytelling to implement change and innovation. Data suggest that superintendents participating in this study approached change and innovation using their leadership and management skills to implement the vision that they had for their respective school districts particularly with regard to working with and through others. They facilitated this work through the use of stories. In sum, these five rural superintendents used stories to overcome challenges, communicate their identity, get others to work together and build trust among their peers as well as in their communities in support of implementing educational change and innovation. The preponderance of evidence support a finding that four major themes help understand how superintendents in rural, Appalachian school districts use stories to lead change and innovation. These four major themes are relevant

to answering the first research question and include: 1) leading people into the future, 2) communicating identity, 3) fostering collaboration and 4) trust-building. The concept of leaders using stories to build trust was not anticipated in this study by the researcher. Each of these themes will be reviewed and discussed using interview data and relevant literature in the following sections.

### **5.1.1 Leading People Into the Future**

Using stories to lead others in the future emerged as a pervasive theme across all five interviews with rural superintendents. Two of the superintendents were local to their respective school districts meaning that they grew up and were educated in the school districts in which they served. Although three of the superintendents did not grow up in the communities in which they served, they all worked in and valued their respective rural contexts and previously led other rural school districts. The two local superintendents served in Mountain Oaks and Magnolia Meadows. They knew many individuals in their communities and were very familiar with local stories. Although the other superintendents were hired from other rural school districts in Georgia, they candidly expressed the need to learn the past history of their respective school district communities in order to effectively lead others into the future. They expressed the importance of using stories to link the past to current conditions as well as articulate how their districts may move in future directions.

The two local superintendents knew the lore of the community intimately and were able to draw upon their repertoire and effortlessly use these stories in communicating with others. In contrast, two of the non-local superintendents expressed a need to listen and learn from others from the community to develop a working

understanding of where the district had been in the past, who had been involved as well as the relationships between people in the school district. Connecting with the past, understanding current conditions in order to adopt change and innovations was an important pivotal focus that would shape their districts' future educational practices. This appeared to be an important leadership strategy. For example, when leading change, Superintendent Russell, a non-local serving in Mountain Pines Schools expressed that as a newly-hired, non-local superintendent he did not like to make a lot of changes. However, he understood that some situations called for immediate action. He referred to his recent experience leading virtual schooling during the COVID-19 pandemic. Russell explained,

It wasn't thought of doing it that way, but it's like, you have that kind of mandate, you do it and you move on...and so you do at times look at what's been successful or sometimes you have to revamp things or...so it really depends on what's going on and kind of what you're looking at or what you're diving into and knowing the culture and I didn't want to come in and upset the apple cart and make tons of changes right off the bat.

He also related a story about leading his faculty during his first principalship. He explained that leading people into the future is about getting them involved in your mission. He recounted, "if you can pick their brains and get them engaged, get them excited, get engaged, good things will happen." Superintendent Smith, a local superintendent in Mountain Oaks Schools noted that he had a bit more of a direct approach in leading people into the future. He relied on directness and honesty about not being able to control what is in the past and advocated looking to the future and constantly moving forward. He explained, "Anybody can trade on yesterday's market, so let's don't worry about what happened yesterday, where we can't do anything about it. Let's focus on where we are today and go forwards." In another part of the interview

when retold a story that he told to all the teachers in his district before tackling the challenge of managing in-person schooling as well as a virtual option, Smith said that it was a direct, honest, and emotional appeal. He recounted,

You know, this year's going to be unique and... I can promise you right now you're going to be inconvenienced at some point. You're going to have to do something that you don't want to do. It's going to be irritating and whatever. But I said, just remember that there's a child out there that you're gonna have an opportunity to make an impact on them and they'll remember it 20 years from now, whether you did a good job or not. And nobody else will have the opportunity that you did...

Superintendent Dixon, superintendent of Laurel Brook Schools used an approach of connecting to the past when using stories to lead others into the future. He emphasized reaching back into the past to share something that people knew and to which they could relate. Dixon said:

So, there were a lot of stories from those times that you have to know and be aware of. So, if you're trying to bring about some change that may take you to a new golden age or a new glory days, it's hard to present something that people can't relate to.

In Magnolia Meadows Schools, Superintendent Autry focused on her positive outlook, transparency and sense of togetherness to lead others into the future to get through the hard times. She focused her stories on the idea of everyone helping each other survive, recounting, "so, you know, I think that group of friends that you have as educators help pull you through it and help you see the light. You know, that we'll make it."

Superintendent Reed of Dogwood Ridge Schools used stories to lead others into the future by using a social media campaign to try to change the negative perceptions of career education and technical colleges. Reed commented, "we've tried to create the story of what technical colleges, what CTAE [Career, Technical and Agricultural Education] programs provide for kids now that they really didn't even when I was in high school."



The five superintendents anticipated the future and used stories to lead their districts in a forward-looking manner. Shenger and Rubin (2017) observe that leaders make extraordinary dreams and visions seem possible through stories. Stories help engage communities and sustain innovative efforts. However, Denning (2013) notes that telling compelling stories about the future are rare and most stories about the future are informally told. He also suggests that in order to accomplish innovation that transforms, “future stories are necessary but not sufficient.” (p. 248). Rather, he says that all of the narrative patterns must be used for full effect. The five superintendents in this study not only told stories about the future but also did it in a way that connected with the mindset and expectations of the communities they served. According to Bolman and Deal (2017) highly effective leaders use their organization’s founding stories, accounts of difficult times and re-emergence to affirm the past, build commitment and implement change and innovations that affirm their collective future. In similar fashion, these five superintendents told informal stories about their districts’ past, current struggles with meeting students’ educational needs and projected a hopeful future. In other words, they used stories to connect the communities’ past in order to build a sense of collective commitment and togetherness in a manner that would also lead them into the future and obtain collective commitment from their communities.

### **5.1.2 Communicating Identity**

Superintendents in the rural, Appalachian public schools who participated in this study used stories to communicate their identity with the individuals they serve. Denning (2013) noted that using stories to project an individual or organizational identity was an important dimension of leadership. It was evident that superintendents participating in

this study told stories in both formal and informal contexts that contributed to projecting the identity of the school district in the community it served. Serving in their rural school districts gives them many opportunities to talk face-to-face with their stakeholders. They were frequently available to the general public and all felt comfortable in being transparent in their communications with community stakeholders, school board members and policymakers to gain their support. This characteristic is consistent with observations of Kowalski and Björk (2005, 2011). All of the superintendents who participated in this study used stories to communicate their identity in their respective communities and recognized the importance of face-to-face interaction with their constituencies to both gain support for their educational change initiatives and also engage in open and transparent discussions with those who may be opposed to change. Taken together, stories enable them to project identity, and in many respects, proactively influence the narrative about education taking place in their communities.

In this respect, their communicating their own and their respective districts' identity through stories enabled them to influence the narrative about who they are as well as the future direction of their school districts. Stories and narratives about the school district and its organizational saga (Clark, 1992) were ultimately linked to the community members loyalty and support of their educational institutions. Some of the venues in which the superintendents told stories included sporting events, shopping in local grocery stores, attending local church services as well as participating in back-to-school prayer events. All of these venues increased their visibility in the school district and community. Consequently, they were always prepared to be in the spotlight at a moment's notice. Communicating their own identities as well as conveying the identity

of the school district appeared to be an inherent part of leading district change and innovation.

For example, Superintendent Smith in Mountain Oaks Schools told a story that related his down-to-earth personality. He did this to emphasize the need for revamping the literacy curriculum in his school district. It was also important to communicate his identity as someone with whom teachers and administrators could relate. Smith recounted,

Here I am, the school superintendent and when I start reading within the first three sentences, I realized that this isn't easy reading stuff. And so I better be sure that I pronounce it right or they're gonna think, you know that poor old superintendent...he can't even read, how is he gonna lead the school system.

Superintendent Dixon from Laurel Brook Schools emphasized the need to communicate one's values and identity and the importance of maintaining a consistent message. Dixon stated, "The consistency in message is extremely important. And I think what you have to do is you have to make sure that those who are telling your story, your team is on the same page." In Magnolia Meadows Schools, Superintendent Autry emphasized her personal narrative through transparency and her everyday personal interactions. Autry explained, "Every daily encounter I had was somewhat of a personal narrative that, you know, I use my cell phone number, my personal cell phone number on the line of my signature for every email that I have." Superintendent Reed took a very direct approach in communicating his identity to his local community by participating in Rotary and Kiwanis club meetings, standing in line at Wal-Mart and talking with school bus drivers. Reed explained:

Having gone now to two different school districts where I didn't grow up, where I was a complete stranger. It was important when I started to work in both of the districts that I've served for them to know who I was and why I went into the profession that I did.

One of the principal reasons that leaders tell stories to communicate their identity is to be viewed as a member of the community rather than being an outsider. Denning (2013) notes that leaders tell authentic stories about their life to communicate their identity. He also suggests that transformational leaders link their identities with the identity of their organization in an effort to embody the values they that promote (Denning, 2013). It is evident that stories used by these five superintendents enabled them to communicate their own as well as their school districts' identity to their respective communities and constituencies. As leaders they also understood the importance of using their life stories to communicate their identity and illustrate their beliefs and values as well as the identity of the district as a way to advance their educational missions in their school districts.

### **5.1.3 Fostering Collaboration**

Using stories as way to get individuals to work together for a common goal not only was a theme shared across all superintendents but also it was a theme that interconnected with two other of the major themes that emerged in this study: communicating identity and trust-building. Each will be discussed later in this chapter. All five superintendents used stories either directly or indirectly to communicate the importance and necessity of working together, particularly collaborating to navigate the COVID-19 pandemic while trying to implement change and innovation. Each of the school district superintendents in their rural communities exhibited personal involvement in school programs (Murphy, Hallinger, & Peterson, 1985) as part of their teacher-scholar role (Kowalski & Björk, 2005) as superintendents. For example, Superintendent Russell

in Mountain Pines Schools advocated a process-approach in the story that he told the researcher about the results he was able to get in his first principal's position in getting others to work together towards a common goal of his school getting off the needs improvement list. Russell recounted,

I just kind of helped them in the process of learning how to go through that process. And once I showed them the process, they worked as a team and soared and they didn't look back. They did well every year after that.

Superintendent Smith in Mountain Oaks Schools told a sports analogy from his high school basketball coach and relayed this story to the staff. He recalled,

I said, you know, coach told me one time...he told us when we were going through a period in the season where we had about two or three games in a row where somebody got a technical foul and he said, I can remember him saying boys, you can't...that's giving away points.

Smith used this sports analogy of a well-loved and respected basketball coach when there was an issue in the school system of a lack of cooperation with others to get his staff to work together. Superintendent Dixon in Laurel Brook Schools takes an approach of using stories to help people understand that in order to effect long-term change and innovation initiatives, one must rely on what the community will support. He referenced a story that he told about the biblical figure of Uriah and how he was sent to the front lines and realized that no one was supporting him. In regard to the importance of getting others to work together, Dixon stated,

Oh, I tell people that it's paramount. I mean, you know, one of the things that I've learned in my own personal career, and it's a story that I tell and it's a biblical one, but I tell it because most people know it.

Dixon relied on this story to reference a familiar biblical story to teach the importance of collaboration. In contrast, Superintendent Autry in Magnolia Meadows didn't rely as

much on telling a story to get others to work together but rather shared stories about how the community is already working together. Autry explained,

So, you know, that's been a very positive thing where we've worked together to get all of that going. Lots of help there. And working together through COVID has also been. We fed every student and every family during the COVID crisis and continue to do so. And so that has been, you know, a place that our community has really worked together to get a lot done.

Autry expressed a strong belief in her community's initiatives to work together during the COVID-19 pandemic and lauded her school district as a special place where collaboration happens organically. Superintendent Reed in Dogwood Ridge Schools routinely uses sports analogies to create awareness of the necessity of working together for change and innovation initiatives. Referring to a sports analogy, Reed said:

I use that analogy when I'm talking with our teachers, that when you go into your classroom, you're an individual. You're walking in there with the whistle blowing and it's on you and what you do, your success or failure contributes to the team of individuals under your roof or under your grade level.

All of the rural superintendents in this study were deeply committed to the value of working with and through others to achieve the mission of the school district of educating children and preparing them for the challenges ahead in their communities. The stories that they told during the interview are evidence of the pivotal focus of fostering collaboration. Denning (2013) suggests that the underpinnings of group collaboration in an organization rests on shared values and without shared values, collaboration is not effective because it may not occur without a core set of common values. These five superintendents fully understood the shared values of their communities and the importance of getting others to collaborate in launching and sustaining change and innovation.

Data suggest that all of them relied on others to accomplish high-level tasks including leading schools off a needs improvement list and getting others on board with new ideas. They accomplished this by connecting teachers, principals, and other community members to the past by using stories and personal anecdotes to project a future state of affairs. The importance of working together to implement change and innovation to alter the organizational culture and innovative orientation of the school district was a pivotal dimension of their leadership (Bolman & Deal, 2017; Deal & Kennedy, 1982; Schein, 1996).

#### **5.1.4 Trust-building**

The notion of trust-building was a theme that was not anticipated by the researcher when reviewing the relevant literature on the use of storytelling and leading change and innovation. Consequently, it was not included in the interview protocol. However, trust-building emerged as a prominent if not one of the most overarching themes of this study. Trust-building was also closely connected to three other themes including communicating identity, fostering collaboration and leading others into the future. For example, Superintendent Russell of Mountain Pines Schools told a story about when he was a principal about dealing with difficult teachers who resisted his change efforts in a low-performing school. Russell indicated that he was able to build trust by emphasizing his support of them in their classrooms. He explained, "You know, most of them felt like I still supported them and understood that it wasn't a gotcha. I wasn't going after you." Superintendent Dixon in Laurel Brook Schools attested to the challenge of building trust and considered it paramount as part of his leadership. Dixon affirmed,

You know, people don't trust that the school is going to do exactly what you need them to do for the community. It's more of an old Reagan "ask, trust, but verify." You have to build trust and you've to build people's buy-in.

Superintendent Autry in Magnolia Meadows Schools focused in on her community involvement and using stories when she is out in the community to build trust. Autry recalled, "My children are vested in the community as well as my husband. So that, I think, produces an amount of trust, if you will, that does support most of my missions."

In Dogwood Ridge Schools, Superintendent Reed as a non-local relied heavily on other trusted individuals in his community as a way to build trust. Referring to these trusted individuals in Dogwood Ridge, Reed commented, "they're out there telling the stories and people know that they don't have to worry about trusting the new guy when they have people who've been here forever and a day supporting what's going on."

The notion of building trust was viewed by the superintendents as critical to their leading change and innovation and described their using stories as a way to build trust and, consequently, support for their educational initiatives. This finding is consistent with Auvinen, Aaltio, and Blomqvist (2013) who found that managers saw stories as a primary way of building trust among peers and employees in their organizations. Data from their study of Finnish managers suggest that stories help leaders and managers effectively build trust among their subordinates. All five superintendents in the current study valued using storytelling as a way to build trust and use it as a cornerstone of their leadership.

## **5.2 Question 2: Comparisons of Similarities Between Rural Superintendents' Stories**

The second question that guided this study of superintendent storytelling in leading change and innovation was:



Were there similarities in how rural school district superintendents use stories to lead change and innovation?

Interview data suggest that there are several similarities among rural superintendents in how they expressed each of the four major themes that emerged in this study. The researcher also found interconnectedness among these major themes including leading others into the future, communicating identity, fostering collaboration and trust-building. In addition, there were distinct but complementary approaches in how rural, Appalachian school district superintendents used stories in leading their respective school districts.

### **5.2.1 Comparisons in Communicating identity**

Denning (2013) noted that communicating identity is a key dimension of leadership storytelling. This dimension of leadership storytelling is particularly important when leaders are new to their organizations and therefore unknown. In order to be known, leaders need to communicate who they are. For example, Superintendent Russell of Mountain Pines Schools used his main focus of communicating the school district's identity of success to community members at board meetings. For example, he used opportunities to spotlight student success at the board meetings to communicate that Mountain Pines Schools is a district of excellence with high-achieving students. In Mountain Oaks Schools, however, Superintendent Smith emphasized the more personal face-to-face interactions with the community members to communicate his and the school district's identity. As a superintendent local (native) to the area in which he serves, Superintendent Smith has an intimate understanding of the local stories and he communicates many of them in a down-to-earth manner that contributed to cultivating his

identity. For example, his down-to-earth persona came through when talking about the challenge of improving the literacy curriculum. Smith recalled,

I mean, it didn't [doesn't] matter how well you can do on your phone... you can text or whatever, but if you can't read and understand what you read and comprehend what you read and turn and apply that, you're in trouble no matter what you do.

In Laurel Brook Schools, Superintendent Dixon took another approach and communicates his identity verbally as well as the school district's identity by emphasizing the importance of controlling the narrative and ensuring that there is a consistency in communicating identity across the school district because he believes that unless superintendents drive their own narrative, that inevitably someone else will drive the narrative. He suggested that superintendents have to use data but without a story, these data may fall on deaf ears. For example, Dixon stated, "you can have all the data in the world, but if you can't tell your story, the data is almost useless." In similar fashion, Superintendent Autry of Magnolia Meadows Schools emphasized an individual's personability, particularly their personal interaction with others is a key factor in communicating her and the school district's identity. For instance, Autry said: "So, you know, every daily encounter I had was somewhat of a personal narrative that, you know, I use my cell phone number, my personal cell phone number on the line of my signature for every email."

Lastly, in Dogwood Ridge Schools, Superintendent Reed focused on using multiple venues to communicate identity throughout the community through club meetings such as Rotary and Kiwanis club meetings to communicate identity throughout the community as well as explain his beliefs and values as a leader. He also tries to

communicate his identity whenever possible in his community. For example, Reed affirmed,

whether I'm talking with an employee, a bus driver that works for us or I'm talking to somebody in line at Wal-Mart or at a restaurant in town, I always try to find an opportunity to share something good that's going on in our school system.

Data suggest that two patterns of using stories to communicate identity emerged in how superintendents communicate identity. One way superintendents used stories to communicate beliefs and values, especially those who were not local and were recently hired and did not grow up in the communities that they served. Both of the local superintendents emphasized the personability aspect of their stories more than the non-local superintendents. They also focused on communicating their values and beliefs and managing their respective narratives through multiple platforms. In practice, however, these two patterns of using stories to communicate identity overlapped. In sum, leaders may use stories to confirm their identities in leading change and innovation rather than simple commands or directives (Wines & Hamilton, 2009). Both patterns of using stories suggest that communicating identity is a dimension of leadership that may be explained as an influence relationship (Rost, 1991). Although these superintendents' storytelling strategies were similar, the way in which each superintendent operationalized their stories were unique.

### **5.2.2 Comparisons in Fostering Collaboration**

Outside of a highly-structured command and control situation that may be evident in the military, getting others to work together in educational organizations may require an influential, empathetic approach (Zalesnik, 1977, Pfeffer, 1992). Denning (2013) suggests that collaboration is rooted in shared values, is subliminal, and a deeply-rooted

cultural disposition. Consequently, getting others to work together precludes an ability to communicate values that individuals share. Superintendent Russell of Mountain Pines Schools preferred to seek out a mutually-beneficial strategy for accomplishing work rather than having a situation where there may be a winner or loser. He considered these situations as being detrimental to fostering and sustaining collaboration. Referring to what he had learned in his career about getting others to work together, Russell said:

I learned from one principal how to be a good leader within the school and build that collaboration...and I learned from another one that she didn't do the best job at collaborating. She got some results...but didn't get them the right way I thought at times, and had a lot of collateral damage. And so as a leader, I'm like...I don't think I'll try to go for that collateral damage like she did. It's not a win at all cost.

The superintendent of Mountain Oaks Schools preferred to draw upon local lore and used examples from the community to get others to work together in his school district. For example, he told a story about a well-respected basketball coach in the community to get others to work together. He recounted:

And I said, you know, coach instilled in me one thing about integrity, about working together. And that was what was always important to him was a team. And if you was going to accomplish anything, you had to forget about yourself and your first goal had to be about the team and if we're going to be successful, we've got to work together.

Superintendent Dixon in Laurel Brook Schools told stories that strongly emphasized the importance of getting “buy-in” from employees, peers and stakeholders to be able to accomplish change initiatives and focused on ensuring that everyone was on the same page because he believed that a leader can only promote and fight for what the community is willing to support. Dixon said, “you're only as strong as your weakest link, and so you have to have buy-in from your group to get anything done. So, working together is the only way to get anything done and get it done long-term and effectively.”

In Magnolia Meadows, Superintendent Autry emphasized individuals coming together and taking care of one another during hard times, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. She also emphasized that in Magnolia Meadows Schools, the community spirit of working together makes her school district a special place to work. She said that working together to accomplish collective goals and dreams is part of the organization as well as the culture of the local community. Autry recalled,

And so that has been, you know, a place that our community has really worked together to get a lot done and take care of its people. But honestly, every day in Magnolia Meadows is working together. You know, it really is. It's known for that.

Reed, the superintendent of Dogwood Ridge Schools, enjoyed sharing stories and sports analogies for getting people in his schools and within each school to work together for the common good. Reed stated, "as an individual, so I like to draw on those coaching analogies to help make the picture for our staff and I think most of them can relate to it." Koontz and Wehrich (2010) suggest that effective managers maintain an environment in which people can work in groups. It was evident that local superintendents effectively used their stories rooted in the community to get others to work together. In addition, non-local superintendents used stories from their life experiences and religious background to enrich their stories and convey important ideas to their employees and stakeholders as a way to launch and sustain a culture of collaboration. Telling their stories is an important dimension of these superintendents' roles as democratic leader and effective communicator (Kowalski & Björk, 2005).

### 5.2.3 Comparisons in Leading People into the Future

Leading others into the future may require change. Lindquist (1978) suggests that organizational change includes a modification in attitudes and behaviors. In addition, Denning (2013) notes that telling stories in the future or about the future comports with our routinely thinking about the future. In this regard, using stories about the future may help leaders overcome their resistance to change. For example, Superintendent Russell from Mountain Pines Schools advocated getting others involved in the change process and included using teachers' creativity and empowering them to envision and shape the future of education in the district. He viewed this as a key dimension of his ability to lead people into the future. He also deflected any credit away from himself for past successes and gave credit to his staff. For example, he recalled, "I looked like a hero and the greatest thing since sliced bread my first year being a principal and it was really my teachers, and I told everybody... I said, guys...it wasn't me, it was my teachers." Superintendent Smith in Mountain Oaks Schools focused on telling stories about overcoming the current challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic on the school district and the way forward moving into some uncertainties of when they will be back to normal in that school district. Smith had a lot of rich and vibrant stories to share from his past. For instance, Smith told a story about an uncontrollable situation with being in a cart attached to a runaway horse and related it to the challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic. Anna shows how he is heading into the district in the light of Smith's school cart goes over in the ditch and my buddy jumped out on me...he bailed out and I had the reins and I looked down and all those reins, we had so much they wrapped around my leg and I couldn't get out. I was tied in. So I was tied in and I couldn't get out. So I could do nothing but hold on. That's all I could do is ride it out.

Superintendent Dixon in Laurel Brook Schools focused on connecting the past to lead others into the future by connecting back to the “glory days” of the past and encouraged breaking out of the mold to do something new and innovative but still reconnecting with the past so that people can relate to current and future events. Dixon advocated constant improvement rather than maintenance of the status quo. He commented, “ the three words that every leader, every good leader hates ...is a few words: why do we do this? ...well, because that’s what we’ve always done...well, that’s never a good answer.”

Superintendent Autry emphasized an attitude of survival and helping others pull through it in response to the pandemic challenges. For example, regarding having to convey her messages via e-mail and video conferences during the COVID-19 pandemic, Autry commented, “It is hard to convey your message through email and in that format. But we did and we survived and hopefully we’ll keep surviving.”

Lastly, Superintendent Reed in Dogwood Ridge Schools pointed out that the future requires change and challenging the status quo. He challenged others to acknowledge that the challenges that we are dealing with today and different than other challenges faced in years past in his school district. Reed affirmed, “nobody wants to be hired and show up as the superintendent and remain status quo...hey, let’s keep things where they are.” Schein (1996) observes that leading into the future may require change and that stories may help to frame the direction and nature of change. Moreover, Kotter (2001) notes that leadership facilitates people dealing with challenges brought about by change. In sum, these five superintendents used stories to lead change albeit enacted in their own unique leadership styles.

#### **5.2.4 Comparisons in Trust-building**

Denning (2013) suggests that leaders tell stories to discontinue their being perceived as an outsider and is a key dimension in building trust. Auvinen, Aaltio and Blomqvist (2013) found in their study of managers that storytelling was a valuable source of trust-building. For example, in telling his story, Superintendent Russell from Mountain Pines Schools emphasized a need for trust-building to obtain collective commitment from employees to accomplish a common goal. For Russell, trust-building was a pivotal point for impactful and successful collaboration. In Mountain Oaks Schools, Superintendent Smith advocated a personal face-to-face interaction with the community members in which he could share stories and build trust. Superintendent Dixon in Laurel Brook Schools took the approach of considering trust-building as being just as important in his leadership as having all the right answers to his district's challenges. Consequently, he devoted time to the building of trust. Dixon commented,

You need to be able to tell your story, so people relate to you and buy into what you think is right...just because you have good answers and good outcomes doesn't mean you're going to be successful as a leader.

For Superintendent Autry in Magnolia Meadows, trust-building is a result of community involvement. She and her family are heavily involved in the local community and the trust she gained helped her lead through current challenges. Autry used her high degree of transparency to build trust. For example, Autry said, "I do my best to be... tell the same person, you know, and everybody the same story. And, you know, if you call me and you ask me, I'm gonna [going to] give you what I can." Lastly, in Dogwood Ridge Schools, Superintendent Reed builds trust by being involved in the community and relying on longtime trusted individuals that are highly regarded in his school community



to support his missions. He explained, “they’re out there telling the stories and people know that they don’t have to worry about trusting the new guy when they have people who’ve been here forever and a day supporting what’s going on.” Denning (2013) suggests that transformational leaders may use stories to build trust to help unite the leader and followers to the organization. It is evident that these five superintendents’ use of storytelling and ability to relate to others on a personal level as a way to build trust and lead educational change initiatives in their respective school districts.

### **5.3 Thematic Co-Occurrences**

The co-occurrence of the themes and their interconnectivity are illustrated in Figure 5.2 (Appendix I). These data suggest that the most important thematic co-occurrences include: trust-building and fostering collaboration, trust-building and communicating identity, sparking action and fostering collaboration and communicating identity and fostering collaboration. Analysis of these co-occurrences enabled the researcher to identify several themes were interwoven with other themes. It is evident that the five superintendents used stories that overlapped or co-occurred with primary thematic categories’ function and consequently necessitated identification and explication.

#### **5.3.1 Trust-building and Fostering Collaboration**

There was a high degree of interconnectivity between storytelling for the purposes of building trust and fostering collaboration. All of the rural superintendents that participated in this study indicated that building trust is a vital component of fostering collaboration, particularly with the additional challenge of the COVID-19 pandemic. Using stories to get others to work together required building trust to engage in work. An

unambiguous example of the interplay between trust-building and fostering collaboration came from Superintendent Dixon of Laurel Brook Schools. Dixon described a situation from a story about a superintendent who did an outstanding job but because he didn't have everyone's trust, he lost his job. Dixon explained that leading schools was not reduced to having all the right answers but also having the ability to build meaningful and impactful relationships among all stakeholders to gain their trust and support. This example summarizes superintendents' leadership as an interaction between building trust and nurturing collaboration to accomplish important district work. According to Superintendent Dixon, telling one's story and building trusting relationships are as important in a superintendent's sustained success as their ability to solve problems.

### **5.3.2 Trust-Building and Communicating Identity**

There is a strong interconnection between stories used for trust-building and communicating one's identity. In order to use stories to build trust, communicating one's identity is intimately linked to the emergence of trust. Dixon of Laurel Brook Schools illustrated this interplay rather succinctly when he said:

You have to build trust and you've to build people's buy-in. And just because you got doctor in front of your name or you've had years of experience doesn't mean people are gonna just follow you blindly. They're more likely to question you. So you gotta be even better at communicating, getting people to come along with you.

Dixon's statement highlighted the need to communicate one's identity and values as part and parcel of being able to build trust because people are not going to trust a superintendent who doesn't clearly communicate his or her identity as a leader.

Additionally, Superintendent Reed of Dogwood Ridge Schools captured this insight quite succinctly, particularly with an emphasis on rural school district leadership. Reed stated,

“I found quickly that you couldn’t hide in the rural setting. Everybody knows if you’re at the ballgame, they know you’re if you’re there supporting their kids and everybody wants to talk to you.” It is essential in rural settings to both communicate identity and build trust out in community events.

### **5.3.3 Fostering Collaboration and Sparking Action**

The theme of collaboration discussed as working with and through others may interplay with stories categorized as sparking action. There were several examples of this interaction of the use of stories to foster collaboration and spark action including examples from Superintendent Russell of Mountain Pines and Superintendent Smith of Mountain Oaks Schools. When Superintendent Russell was a first-year school principal, he was faced with the need to lead a change initiative. He recounted, “I looked like a hero and the greatest thing since sliced bread my first year being a principal and it was really my teachers, and I told everybody...I said, guys...it wasn’t me, it was my teachers.” Russell was able to get multiple individuals behind an idea and they collaborated and achieved a great level of academic achievement under Russell’s leadership.

Another example of the interplay between sparking action and fostering collaboration was told by Superintendent Smith. He related a story about an experience that he had with a friend and a farm animal in his youth that suggests a close relationship between fostering collaboration and sparking action that also illustrates what he was experiencing during the COVID-19 pandemic. Smith said, “and so what I want to tell everyone and when I do is, is, you know, we’re where we are...we don’t have a choice.” Smith’s idea is to use this story to spark action among the staff to get them to realize that

the pandemic is ongoing. However, there is a need to work together because in both cases, there is no choice but to make the best of the situation and work together.

#### **5.3.4 Fostering Collaboration and Communicating Identity**

The interconnectivity between communicating identity and fostering collaboration was one of the most common occurrences that emerged in this study of rural superintendents. All five superintendents emphasized several components of communicating identity that included their values and getting others to work collectively in common endeavors. The most salient interview excerpt that exemplifies this interaction came from Superintendent Autry of Magnolia Meadows Schools. Autry spoke about the realities of managing and leading a rural school district and the personal involvement and visibility in the community in terms of getting everyone to work together. Autry said, “So the school system is the center of the community and that becomes, you know, the face-to-face interaction on a regular basis. This is where a lot of the narrative is built.” Superintendent Autry mentioned on several occasions the central nature of Magnolia Meadows school district and that it functioned not only as an educational institution but also as the central feature that united the community.

#### **5.4 Implications for Leadership Practice**

The superintendents who participated in this empirical, exploratory study shared many stories as well as their thoughts on how to use stories as part of their strategies of leading in the contexts of change and innovation. Although these rural superintendents may not be viewed as master storytellers, all relayed interesting insights into how superintendents may use stories in leading school districts. It is evident that they used stories to lead organizations, particularly with regard to providing clarity and direction

and this dimension of leadership may be used by other superintendents to enhance their effectiveness. In addition, these five superintendents used stories to convey a sense of shared values, meaning, and purpose in district contexts characterized by the need to accomplish change and innovation. These strategies may inform and improve superintendents' practice who may be challenged by similar circumstances. Some of the findings may also be applicable to superintendents in more urban contexts who may want to apply lessons learned in rural contexts and enhance their capacity to link themselves and districts to the community they serve by using local stories, building trust, linking the past to the present and a future state of affairs that better serves students and uplifts the community as a whole. Each superintendent brought a unique focus in their storytelling depending on their district's situation as all of them were managing and leading district's with dissimilar needs.

The skills of leadership storytelling are rarely if ever taught in graduate-level educational leadership programs. Consequently, it may be beneficial for graduate programs to offer coursework that incorporates the notion of leadership storytelling for aspiring educational leaders. These experiences may enhance their insight into an important dimension of leadership. In addition, state superintendent associations may consider offering effective professional development seminars for superintendents and their peers on the topic of leadership storytelling and the interplay of trust-building and igniting collaboration among their employees. As stories have a powerful dimension of communicating values and building trust, among other functions, superintendents may share stories with their peers to enhance their own understanding of how they may use their own stories in their leadership. As a result, superintendents may benefit from a

cognizance of their own storytelling capabilities through vicarious naturalistic generalizations (Stake & Trumbull, 1982) and how to use their stories or others' stories that may be used in leading school districts in contexts of change and innovation as digital storytelling has emerged in recent years (McCall et al., 2019).

## **5.5 Recommendations for Future Research**

The researcher found that the theme of trust-building and its importance in sharing stories in a leadership context emerged from a constant-comparative data analysis described by Strauss and Corbin (1997) and Charmaz (2006). A promising line of inquiry may include replication and extension of leadership storytelling studies in the field of educational leadership and management, particularly with regard to school district superintendency. More specifically, North Georgia's charter school systems may be a promising line of future inquiry for researchers interested in leadership storytelling in contexts of innovation because of Georgia's broad flexibility waivers and a culture of storytelling in the Appalachian region. The area that appears highly promising includes studies focused on the use of stories to build trust as suggested by Auvinen, Aaltio and Blomqvist (2013). Trust-building and the emergence of trust in leading rural school districts may be a research topic worthy of consideration and findings may also suggest practical application in urban and suburban contexts. For example, larger, urban district superintendents may be informed by experiences of rural, Appalachian superintendents in terms of how they may relate to and engage local communities.

For identifying participants in future studies, the researcher recommends survey research as a way to identify participants who consider themselves as skilled storytellers or who see storytelling as a beneficial leadership strategy. Researchers may wish to

conduct an initial survey followed-up by a concluding question asking participants if they would be willing to complete a 45-minute interview to share their stories and examples of storytelling in their own leadership practice. As learned in this study, due to COVID-era and IRB constraints, the researcher does not recommend snowball sampling as data collection technique, unless both the researcher and study participants are able to directly call or text other potential participants that may be referred. With direct contact possible, snowball sampling may be a more effective technique for data collection.

In addition, researchers in a post-COVID era may consider conducting in-person interviews to expand the richness of data and understanding gained through conducting interviews via videoconference. In-person interviews may potentially yield more candid and intimate stories about leading school districts. Another promising line of future inquiry may include expanding the collection of commonly-used stories, analogies, and anecdotes to better understand the phenomena of how superintendents use stories to nurture and sustain efforts at working collaboratively to accomplish district goals. This topic emerged in this study and may be of interest to other researchers using quantitative survey methods on state, regional, or national samples of school district superintendents. Researchers may also opt to pursue other methods of unpacking rural identity beyond the official designations such as using demographic indicators such as education level and other indicators that are common to rural areas. A beneficial starting point may be to conduct cross-case analysis of demographic data associated with the 704 counties defined as 100% rural by the US Census Bureau (US Census Bureau, 2010) to further delineate common rural demographic considerations.

Future researchers who decide to conduct in-depth interviews either in-person or via video conference platforms may wish to inform participants to speak as clearly as possible for ease of data transcription. In the same vein, researchers are recommended to enunciate clearly themselves throughout the interviews. Due to the nature of storytelling, conversations can become more informal as participants and the researcher become more relaxed when talking about stories and interviews are susceptible to having multiple instances of conversational discourse markers such as “you know” or “I mean,” etc. Researchers interested in understanding stories being told as well as how they are received by stakeholders, subordinates, and other community members may invest a significant effort of time and work into conducting a study that would add value to the scholarly literature in educational leadership. Lastly, as storytelling and the themes of storytelling are often intertwined, several themes may be interrelated and these interrelationships of storytelling themes may be of interest in future research as it would also add to the literature in the field.

## **5.6 Conclusions**

This study examined the leadership storytelling practices of rural superintendents engaged in leading district-level change and innovation in the Appalachian region of North Georgia. The superintendents in this study were unambiguously committed to trust-building and working with and through others to implement new, more flexible education approaches to deliver a superior education for students in rural school districts. In recent years, the Every Student Succeeds (ESSA) Act has returned education oversight to the states. In the case of Georgia, that included extending a measure of flexibility to local school districts to explore adoption and implementation of innovative education



programs. This increased emphasis on innovation required a challenging dimension to school district leadership. Experiences of the superintendents who participated in this study increased understanding of their roles as teacher-scholar, organizational manager, democratic leader, applied social scientist, and communicator (Kowalski & Björk, 2011). In retrospect, their experiences in addressing the challenges of leading district-wide change and innovation contributed to understanding the complementarity and inter-relational nature of their roles in practice.

District-level flexibility introduced by Georgia's legislation supported educational change and innovation that may also suggest a continuing press for innovation in P-12 education in the nation. This study examined the work of rural Appalachian school district superintendents who used broad flexibility waivers to engage with and promote innovative approaches and their use of stories to facilitate their work. Although this exploratory study captured a small fraction of storytelling that may be used by rural school district superintendents in leading district-level change and educational innovation, it provides a measure of insight into how stories may be effectively used in accomplishing superintendents' educational goals and objectives in leading school districts in contexts of change and innovation.

## APPENDIX A

### IRB APPROVAL LETTER



#### EXEMPTION CERTIFICATION

IRB Number: 61636

TO: Tony Barrett  
Educational Leadership Studies  
PI phone #: 6783329776  
  
PI email: barrett.rt@gmail.com

FROM: Chairperson/Vice Chairperson  
Nonmedical Institutional Review Board (IRB)

SUBJECT: Approval for Exemption Certification

DATE: 9/17/2020

On 9/17/2020, it was determined that your project entitled "*LEADERSHIP STORYTELLING OF RURAL SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENTS ENGAGED IN CHANGE AND INNOVATION*" meets federal criteria to qualify as an exempt study.

Because the study has been certified as exempt, you will not be required to complete continuation or final review reports. However, it is your responsibility to notify the IRB prior to making any changes to the study. Please note that changes made to an exempt protocol may disqualify it from exempt status and may require an expedited or full review.

The Office of Research Integrity will hold your exemption application for six years. Before the end of the sixth year, you will be notified that your file will be closed and the application destroyed. If your project is still ongoing, you will need to contact the Office of Research Integrity upon receipt of that letter and follow the instructions for completing a new exemption application. It is, therefore, important that you keep your address current with the Office of Research Integrity.

For information describing investigator responsibilities after obtaining IRB approval, download and read the document "[PI Guidance to Responsibilities, Qualifications, Records and Documentation of Human Subjects Research](#)" available in the online Office of Research Integrity's [IRB Survival Handbook](#). Additional information regarding IRB review, federal regulations, and institutional policies may be found through [ORI's web site](#). If you have questions, need additional information, or would like a paper copy of the above mentioned document, contact the Office of Research Integrity at 859-257-9428.

## APPENDIX B

### PARTICIPANT E-MAIL FLYER



## RESEARCH STUDY ON RURAL SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENTS IN CONTEXTS OF CHANGE AND INNOVATION

### Participant E-mail Flyer

Dear superintendent,

Your experience and insights as a public school superintendent will help the educational community learn about successful school leadership in the context of change and innovation. The purpose of this research study is to help the field better understand how successful school superintendents use stories to lead their districts in contexts of educational change and innovation. This study will explore how superintendents may use leadership storytelling, particularly by looking at stories/storytelling through the lens of Denning's 8 Narrative Patterns in business leadership (Denning, 2011).

To participate in the study you may contact Tony Barrett by e-mail at [trbarrett@uky.edu](mailto:trbarrett@uky.edu) or by phone at 678-332-9776.

Mr. Barrett resides in North Georgia. This research consists of a semi-structured interview on Zoom (UK encrypted account) and lasts from 45 minutes to 1 hour in duration.

#### **Who is conducting the research?**

Tony Barrett, a PhD candidate at the University of Kentucky is the principal researcher, working under the direction of Dr. Lars Björk and Dr. Amanda Potterton. He is a current high school teacher and PhD candidate working towards the completion of his doctoral degree.

#### **What are the risks of agreeing to participate?**

As the researcher will be anonymously coding all interview data, there are no known or foreseen risks. No personal or identifying information will be disclosed as this interview is strictly for research purposes and analysis.

## APPENDIX C

### INFORMED CONSENT FORM



#### Consent to Participate in a Research Study

Dear participant,

I am contacting you as the principal investigator for this project from the Department of Educational Leadership at the University of Kentucky.

#### **Why am I being asked to be a part of this research?**

Your insights, experience and wisdom as a public school superintendent will help the educational community learn about successful school leadership in the context of change and innovation and the great things they are doing to “tell their district’s story” about the areas and communities they serve. The purpose of this research is to explore how rural superintendents manage and lead through leadership storytelling. You are invited to take part in this study and although you may not get personal benefit from taking part in this research study, your responses may help us understand more about superintendent leadership, particularly in the rural context. Some volunteers experience satisfaction from knowing they have contributed to research that may possibly benefit others in the future. If you decide to participate, it will take between 45 minutes to 1 hour for the interview.

#### **Study size**

The researcher plans to enroll between 5-10 participants for this study.

#### **Who is conducting the research?**

Tony Barrett, a PhD candidate at the University of Kentucky is the principal researcher, working under the direction of Dr. Lars Björk and Dr. Amanda Potterton. They may be contacted by e-mail at: [lars.bjork@uky.edu](mailto:lars.bjork@uky.edu) or [amanda.potterton@uky.edu](mailto:amanda.potterton@uky.edu)

#### **What are the risks of agreeing to participate?**

As the researcher will be anonymously coding all interview transcription data, there are no known or foreseen risks. No personal or identifying information will be disclosed as this interview is strictly for research purposes and analysis. The researcher will use trint.com for interview transcriptions which is ISO/IEC 27001 certified for data security and will use Dedoose which is a qualitative data analysis software program which has advanced encryption and is also certified by ISO/IEC 27001.

Zoom records both video and audio. Video recordings will be deleted immediately after the interview and audio recordings will be destroyed after the University of Kentucky has accepted the dissertation. At your convenience at any time, you may skip any question that you do not prefer to answer or discuss. Your information collected for this study will NOT be used or shared for future research studies, even if we remove the identifiable information.

## **Data Safeguarding**

We will make every effort to safeguard your data, but as with anything online, we cannot guarantee the security of data obtained via the Internet. Third-party applications used in this study may have Terms of Service and Privacy policies outside of the control of the University of Kentucky.

## **Confidentiality Statement**

We will keep confidential all research records that identify you to the extent allowed by law. However, there are some circumstances in which we may have to show your information to other people. For example, the law may require us to show your information to a court, or tell authorities if you pose a danger to yourself or someone else. Also, we may be required to show information which identifies you to people who need to be sure we have done the research correctly; these would be people from such organizations as the University of Kentucky.

## **Other information**

You may end this interview, at any time, at your discretion and we will stop the interview immediately and the recording will be destroyed. If you have any further questions about the study, you may contact the principal investigator, Tony Barrett at 678-332-9776.

If you have any concerns or questions about your rights as a volunteer in this research, please contact staff in the University of Kentucky (UK) Office of Research Integrity (ORI) between the business hours of 8am and 5pm EST, Monday-Friday at 859-257-9428 or toll free at 1-866-400-9428.

APPENDIX D

RURAL APPALACHIAN SCHOOL DISTRICTS IN GEORGIA

Appendix D is a list of Georgia school systems defined as rural by both the NCES and the US Census Bureau. They are also part of the Appalachian Regional Commission’s defined Appalachian counties in Georgia.

<b>Strategic Waivers School System (SWSS)</b>	<b>Charter Systems</b>
Floyd County	Gordon County
Chattooga County	Gilmer County
Polk County	Fannin County
Haralson County	Dawson County
Heard County	Lumpkin County
Murray County	Union County
Pickens County	White County
Towns County	Stephens County
Rabun County	Banks County
Habersham County	Madison County
Jackson County	Hart County
Franklin County	Barrow County
Elbert County	Calhoun City
Bremen City	Carrollton City
Walker County	Commerce City
Whitfield County	Foothills Charter Schools
Hall County	Mountain Education Charter Schools
Carroll County	
Jefferson City	
Bartow County	

## APPENDIX E

### FIRST AND SECOND-LEVEL THEMES

Appendix E delineates the first and second-level themes after the initial inductive and second-level deductive coding of data.

#### First-level themes based on an initial inductive open-coding analysis

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1. Change Management (CM)
2. Collaborative Leadership (CL)
3. Digital Storytelling (DS)
4. Driving the Narrative (DN)
5. Preparing for Success (PS)
6. Rural Community Values (RCV)
7. Third-Hand Retelling (THR)
8. Trust-Building (TB)

#### Second-level themes based on Denning's 8 Narrative Patterns (Denning, 2005)

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9. Sparking action (SA)
10. Communicating identity (CI)
11. Transmitting values (TV)
12. Communicating the brand (CB)
13. Fostering collaboration (FC)
14. Taming the grapevine (TG)
15. Sharing knowledge (SK)
16. Leading people into the future (LFT)

## APPENDIX F

### SUPERINTENDENT INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Interview protocol and semi-structured interview questions.

#### **I. Introduction**

Hello, my name is Tony Barrett and I'm interested in learning how rural superintendents use personal anecdotes and stories to connect with the communities they serve to lead their school districts through a changing educational environment and overcoming the challenges their communities face and how they promote the image and brand of their school district within and outside of the school district. I'm doing this because in the cities, superintendents use Twitter to get out their messages to the communities and since about 20% of America's K-12 students are in rural school districts, it's important to understand the role of the rural superintendent and how he/she engages with and connects with their communities to lead them in achieving excellence and managing difficult changes in education policy mandated by the state and federal governments.

#### **II. Interview questions & protocol**

I will begin the interview by asking some non-threatening, introductory questions to get the conversation flowing. On the following page, you will find my layperson's opening introduction to the conducting of the interview.



### **III. Opening**

Dear ma'am/sir, thank you for taking the time to meet with me today to participate in this very important and needed to understand how rural school superintendents are moving their districts forward with the leadership in these times of change and necessary innovation. I'm going to ask you some questions about the practice of leadership storytelling and the ways you use to connect with your local population to "tell your district's story." Please confirm, before we get started, that you received a consent form and that what we discuss is fully confidential and is protected from disclosure per the IRB of the University of Kentucky. Your name or your school district will not be mentioned in any write ups and the information will be coded to maintain confidentiality and the recording of today's interview will be destroyed after 1 year from the date of dissertation completion, which I anticipate will be in July 2021.

### **IV. Interview questions**

1. How long have you been a school superintendent?
2. Have you ever shared an anecdote to persuade anyone to obtain support for new change and innovation initiatives in your schools?
3. Have you shared your own experiences to illustrate who you are and communicate your values to your community?
4. What ways do you use to tell your district's story to the public?
5. How do you get your school community to believe in your educational product?
6. Is there a hero and champion of education in your school district?

7. How do you link your school district's story of the past with the present?
8. What do tell people about the importance of working together?
9. How do you deal with rumors about your organization?
10. What issues and problems has your organization had to learn the hard way?
11. How do you prepare your community for the challenges of the future?
12. Additional questions will be asked as needed or as they come up in conversation.

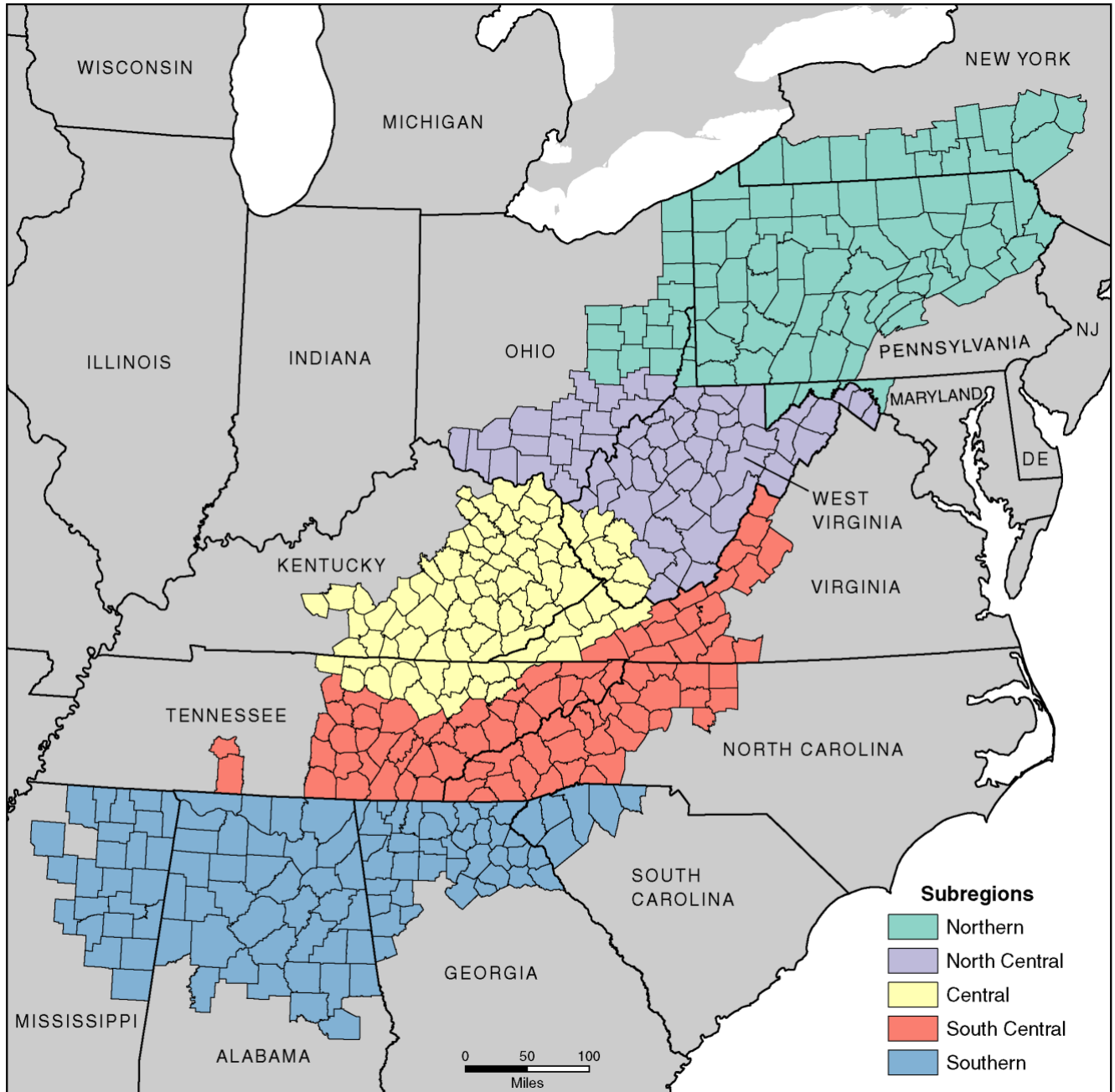
### **Closing**

Thank you for sharing your wisdom, expertise and experience in leading rural school districts and for your engagement in this important work as yours and many other rural school districts are faced with change and have begun engaging in more innovative practices to ready students for college and careers.

APPENDIX G

**Figure 1.1**

*Subregions of Appalachia (Appalachian Regional Commission, 2009).*



Map by: Appalachian Regional Commission, November 2009.

APPENDIX H

**Figure 5.1**

*Dedoose-generated code application chart*

Media	Codes										
	Communicating identity (CI)	Communicating the brand (CB)	Fostering collaboration (FC)	Leading people into the future (LFT)	Sharing knowledge (SK)	Sparking action (SA)	Taming the grapevine (TG)	Third-hand retelling (TRT)	Transmitting values (TV)	Trust-building (TB)	Totals
Interview 5E Dogwood Ridge	14	6	3	3	3	2	3		4	5	43
Interview 4D Magnolia Meadows	9	1	6	6	5	3	2	3	7	5	47
Interview 3C Laurel Brook Schools	9	4	9	7	8		4	6	4	8	59
Interview 2B Mountain Oaks	3	3	6	9	5	7	3	1	5	3	45
Interview 1A Mountain Pines	3	2	11	9	3	14	3	1		7	53
Totals	38	16	35	34	24	26	15	11	20	28	

Red = high code frequency, Green = medium code frequency,  
 Blue = low code frequency.

Dedoose Version 8.3.35, web application for managing, analyzing, and presenting qualitative and mixed method research data (2018). Los Angeles, CA: SocioCultural Research Consultants, LLC, [www.dedoose.com](http://www.dedoose.com)

APPENDIX I

**Figure 5.2**

*Dedoose-generated thematic co-occurrences*

Codes	Communicating identity (CI)	Communicating the brand (CB)	Fostering collaboration (FC)	Leading people into the future (LFT)	Sharing knowledge (SK)	Sparking action (SA)	Taming the grapevine (TG)	Third-hand retelling (TRT)	Transmitting values (TV)	Trust-building (TB)	Totals
Communicating identity (CI)		4	6	4	3	3	3		1	6	30
Communicating the brand (CB)	4		2	1			4				11
Fostering collaboration (FC)	6	2		4	3	5	1	1	3	5	30
Leading people into the future (LFT)	4	1	4		2	3		1		2	17
Sharing knowledge (SK)	3		3	2		1	1	2		2	14
Sparking action (SA)	3		5	3	1		1		2	3	18
Taming the grapevine (TG)	3	4	1		1	1		1	2		13
Third-hand retelling (TRT)			1	1	2		1			1	6
Transmitting values (TV)	1		3			2	2			3	11
Trust-building (TB)	6		5	2	2	3		1	3		22
Totals	30	11	30	17	14	18	13	6	11	22	

Red = high-frequency of co-occurrence, Green = medium frequency of co-occurrence, Blue = low frequency of co-occurrence.

Dedoose Version 8.3.35, web application for managing, analyzing, and presenting qualitative and mixed method research data (2018). Los Angeles, CA: SocioCultural Research Consultants, LLC, [www.dedoose.com](http://www.dedoose.com)

## APPENDIX J

### STUDY PARTICIPANT REVIEWS OF CHAPTER 4 CASE SUMMARIES

#### **Laurel Brook Schools – Superintendent Dixon**

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Dixon’s review and comments:

“I have reviewed the write up of our interview and I believe you did a great job of summing up and communicating the theme of our conversation. I was honored to be interviewed as part of Dr. Barrett's dissertation. His focus on the pivotal role of storytelling in leadership is a refreshing topic that adds to the pedagogy of effective leadership. My hope is that more research will be done to expand and explain the relationship between storytelling as a means of communication and effective leadership.”

#### **Magnolia Meadows Schools – Superintendent Autry**

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Autry’s review and comments:

“Thank you for allowing me to review your write-up and analysis of the interview. You have very succinctly detailed our discussion and my thoughts and feelings regarding storytelling and our community and school district. I appreciate your invitation to be a part of your study and your work.”

#### **Dogwood Ridge Schools – Superintendent Reed**

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Reed’s review and comments:

“My conversation with Tony triggered as much personal thought and reflection as it did help his purpose to conduct research. It is important for us in education to remember where we've been so we can either avoid going there again or know how to get back to where we want to be. By telling our stories along the way, we can ensure both.”

#### **Mountain Pines Schools – Superintendent**

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Could not be reached for comment or review of case summary.

#### **Mountain Oaks Schools – Superintendent Smith**

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Could not be reached for comment or review of case summary.

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**A.B. Spanish Language & Literature**                      May 2007

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

Cherokee County School District                      Canton, GA  
**French & Spanish Teacher**                                  July 2018 - Present

Fulton County Schools                                      Atlanta, GA  
**Spanish Teacher**    July 2017 – July 2018

Forsyth County Schools                                      Cumming, GA  
**Department Chair & Spanish Teacher**                      July 2015 – July 2017

Lanier Technical College                                      Cumming, GA  
**Adjunct Instructor**    July 2015 – May 2017

Gwinnett County Schools                                      Lawrenceville, GA  
**Spanish Teacher**    July 2014 – July 2015

Saint John XXIII High School                                  Katy, TX  
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Tomball Independent School District                      Tomball, TX  
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Lone Star College-Tomball                                      Tomball, TX  
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University of Houston    Houston, TX  
**Teaching Fellow in Spanish**                                  July 2009 – July 2010

Fairfax County Public Schools                                  Falls Church, VA  
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Language Learning & Service Award, 2004

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