Retention Factors of Rural East Texas Superintendents

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Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to identify factors that influence retention of school superintendents in rural Texas. Constant turnover in the position of superintendent has created inconsistent learning environments for students and unstable working environments for staff. Small, rural schools have often served as steppingstones for superintendents who use their experience in these small rural districts to obtain positions in larger, suburban schools. The researcher used semistructured interview questions to conduct this study. In this qualitative case study, participants were recruited from the educational service center of Region VII school districts in Texas. One group included superintendents who had served in a small, rural school district for at least two years. The other group of participants consisted of school board presidents in small, rural school districts. The researcher interviewed eight superintendents and seven school board presidents from Region VII of Texas. The participants were recruited with the use of school districts' websites and email addresses. Previous research identified five mitigating factors: systems knowledge, school board relations, salary, stress level, and locations that influence retention of rural-based school district superintendents. Two themes emerged: relationships and leadership. Rural East Texas superintendents perceived the most important factor that contributed to their plans to remain in their current position was building effective and productive relationships. Rural East Texas school board presidents perceived the most important factor that contributed to retaining superintendents in their current position was valuing the importance of leadership knowledge, competence, and skills.

Keywords: East Texas, Region VII, school board, superintendent, retention, small, rural

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Superintendent retention in rural East Texas school districts with less than 700 students has posed a challenge due to location, salary, family, stress, and school board relations. Constant turnover of the superintendent position can have negative effects on student achievement and staff morale (Kamrath, 2015). Superintendents have left due to career advancement or for being fired or nonrenewed (Radford et al., 2016). Few studies have provided a deep understanding of how rural superintendents' perception of their role that may have influenced their decision to leave their superintendent position (Williams & Hatch, 2019). The departure of superintendents was not grounded in success or failure but may have been due to the retention factors to be studied (Fourney & Brown, 2018).

Significance of the Study

Rural schools have often served as the first employment position of new superintendents. Small, rural school districts often have not been able to attract veteran, experienced superintendents due to lower pay, lack of new or updated facilities, housing, benefits, or a decrease in responsibilities. Thus, potential candidates for these districts have sought employment there to gain experience as a superintendent and later move on to larger school districts. They have not intended to remain in the small, rural district. This constant turnover in the superintendent position has posed detrimental effects for students, employees, and community members.

Background

Rural superintendents have dealt with challenges unique to rural school districts. Superintendents have been overwhelmed with elected school boards, politics, community stakeholders, and financial strains (Tekniepe, 2015). Rural school districts provide places where necessary skills can be acquired and practiced to become successful in larger, suburban districts

(Radford et al., 2016). Superintendents hired by rural school districts are often new to this type of leadership position and do not stay long enough to develop the necessary skills to positively impact the district (Kamrath, 2015). Rural superintendents have been expected to wear many hats and serve in various roles and have been expected to be readily accessible by stakeholders (Copeland, 2013). Superintendents must constantly be aware of the community's expectations and values (Rey, 2014). Copeland's study (2013) addressed the importance of creating a sense of belonging in rural schools by superintendents bringing their families and living inside the school district. The location of the superintendent's residence can affect a marriage and can apply stress to their family (Klatt, 2014). The position of superintendent is a highly visible job and the impact from community groups can make the day-to-day operations of the district further stressful (Lamkin, 2006). A superintendent must be equipped with the ability to manage the diverse needs and demands of communicating with stakeholders and the community (Alsbury, 2008).

School climate and culture are vital for rural school districts and the impact of stress on leadership. To produce positive effects on student and staff morale, there needs to be a cohesive relationship between the school principals and the superintendent (Webner et al., 2017). In most small, rural school districts, the superintendent and principals work closely together due to accountability measures, such as graduation, drop-out rates, athletics, extracurriculars, and budgeting. Compensation and training opportunities must also receive further attention regarding rural superintendent retention (Yates & Jong, 2018). A superintendent must be able to work collectively with the staff and the community as an insider or as an outsider. An insider, or the leader that is a native of the school district, may be familiar with the district but be ill-equipped to solve modern, complex issues facing the district. Leaders who are labeled outsiders, however, may be equipped with skills and knowledge from prior experiences to implement school reform

(McHenry-Sorber, & Budge, 2018). Regardless of their background, rural superintendents must involve all stakeholders in the education of students.

Superintendents in rural school districts are confronted with the responsibility of wearing many hats, working longer hours than campus principals and doing it all for considerably less pay than suburban superintendents (Kamrath & Brunner, 2014). Rural school districts are often the starting point in a superintendent's career to gain the knowledge and skills to move on to larger, higher-paying districts (Kamrath & Brunner, 2014). School districts that are searching for reform must alleviate stress by providing support or compensation for superintendents and maintain continuity for school board members to ensure successful reform has a chance to happen (Hammer et al., 2005).

Statement of the Problem

Superintendent retention in rural East Texas school districts has posed a challenge due to location, stress, and school board relations (Lamkin, 2006). Superintendents hired by rural school districts are often new to this type of leadership position (Lamkin, 2006). Rural school districts in East Texas are viewed by many as steppingstones (Béteille et al., 2012) or places to begin developing the necessary skills to be successful in larger, suburban districts. The position of a superintendent has often included carrying out the district's mission and vision of providing a high-quality education to aid students in escaping poverty. The superintendent or school's perception of quality education can produce tension with parents' perceptions of a quality education (Rey, 2014).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to interview eight superintendents and seven school board presidents in rural East Texas school districts and to explore their perceptions and challenges due to the following factors: systems knowledge, school board relations, salary,

stress, and location. I interviewed superintendents and explored each of the five factors and how each has impacted their retention plans. Rural school districts have suffered the effects associated with ongoing turnover in key leadership positions. This study was designed to gather insights that could remedy the problem.

Superintendent retention in school districts has been a major concern for stakeholders and critical to the success of students and staff (Grissom & Mitani, 2016). Houston (2001) found that the requirements of the superintendent position have increased over time. Constant turnover of the superintendent position has negatively affected student achievement and staff morale (Kamrath, 2015). Federal mandates, student achievement, low funding, in addition to a full agenda have been other issues that challenge the retention of superintendents in small, rural school districts (Canales et al., 2008). At the time of the study, the average tenure of a superintendent in one school district was three to five years (Grissom & Andersen, 2012; Johnson et al., 2011).

For this qualitative study, I focused on small, rural schools in East Texas. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) has classified districts as city, suburban, town, and rural using factors such as population size and proximity to urbanized areas. For this study, I chose school districts that were characterized as rural. Rural territory was more than 25 miles from an urbanized area and more than 10 miles from an urban cluster (NCES, 2017). These school districts and superintendents were located within a population of less than 2,500 people. In 2017, the Texas Education Agency (TEA) began reporting both TEA and NCES district classifications. There were 221 rural, remote school districts in Texas according to NCES. Therefore, when referring to districts and superintendents of small, rural school districts in East Texas, I identified a common definition.

Herr and Anderson (2015) reported that qualitative research is intended to focus on how

people's lives are lived and how they place meanings on things important or local to them (Miles et al., 2020). By utilizing the interviewee's office and carrying out the interviews face-to-face, I met the requirements of Miles et al. (2020). The purpose of this qualitative research was to investigate if and why school board relations, systems knowledge, salary, stress, and location led to the early departure of superintendents of small, rural school districts. The departure may be referred to as voluntary, where an employee elected to quit, or involuntary—the result of nonrenewal or termination (Shaw et al., 1998). I wanted to unpack the experiences of small, rural East Texas superintendents and school board presidents and what influence systems knowledge, school board relations, stress, salary, and location had on retention in their current district.

Research Questions

The following are the research questions that guided this study:

RQ1. What mitigating factors— systems knowledge, school board relations, salary, stress, and location —do rural East Texas superintendents perceive to be the most important factors that contribute to their plans to remain in their current position?

RQ2. What mitigating factors— systems knowledge, school board relations, salary, stress, and location —do rural East Texas school board presidents perceive to be the most important factors that contribute to their plans to retain superintendents in their current position?

Definition of Key Terms

Location. Location is one of the five variables in this research. Location will be used to refer to the location of the school district as it pertains to rural area (Hawley et al., 2016).

Region VII. Region 7 serves 96 school districts, seven charter schools, and 13,305 square miles in 17 East Texas counties (Education Service Center Region 7, 2020).

Retention. Defined by Wright and Papa (2017) as staying in a school for at least four years. Texas school district superintendents typically receive three-year contracts.

Rural area. A rural area is defined by the U.S. Bureau of the Census as a county with a population of at least 2,500 but less than 50,000 people (Hawley et al., 2016).

Rural school district. As defined by the Texas Administrative Code 19 § 23.25(7), a rural school district is a Texas public school district having most of its schools located in a county with populations less than 50,000 (TEA, n.d.).

Salary. Salary is one of the five variables in this research. Superintendents receive salary as approved by the school board and may include, but not limited to insurance, travel allowance, vehicle allowance, memberships to clubs or organizations, professional development, and life insurance (Texas Association of School Boards, 2020).

School board. According to the TEA (2015), Texas school districts and charters are overseen by school boards. The boards are elected by the citizens of their communities. The board and the superintendent work together as a team to bring about the best education possible for the students they serve.

School board relationships. The quality of the relationship between the school superintendent and the school board (Rey, 2014). It is a variable in this study.

School community types. According to the TEA (2015), public school districts are classified into eight community types according to enrollment, growth in enrollment, economic status, and proximity to urban areas. For this study, the term rural school district included the following TEA community categories: nonmetro, fast growing; or non-metro, stable and rural.

Stress. Stress is one of the five variables in this research. Superintendents undergo stress that may range from politics, community pressure, board relations, fiscal stress, and personal life that may impact their performance (Rey, 2014).

Superintendent. As defined by the Texas Education Code §§21.003(a), 21.041(b)(2)-(4), and 21.046(a), a superintendent is an educational leader that works for the success of every student in their district (TEA, n.d.).

Systems knowledge. Systems knowledge is one of the five variables in this research. The idea of systems knowledge and how to lead school reform is crucial for leaders to be successful in change initiatives (Fullan, 2010). It is also the "ability to recognize the hidden dynamics of complex systems, and to find leverage, [which] goes hand-in-hand with engagement" (Senge, 2012, p. 418).

Summary

Superintendent turnover in rural school districts requires further study. The causes of turnover in leadership continue to be studied (Grissom & Andersen, 2012). The School Superintendents Association (2006), formerly known as the AASA reported an annual turnover rate of 14% to 16%. It is vital to continue studying the effects of turnover in the superintendent position as it can have negative effects on student achievement and staff morale (Kamrath, 2015). Thus, this study was rooted in the literature to determine perceptions related to superintendent retention and turnover to positively impact superintendent tenure in small, East Texas rural school districts.

This study is organized in five chapters. Chapter 2 includes the literature review. Chapter 3 contains the research method and design. Chapter 4 includes the results followed by Chapter 5 discussion and recommendation for further study of the research topic. This study took place virtually in offices of superintendents and home or place of business school board presidents who elected to participate in this research to capture different perspectives regarding retention (Creswell & Creswell, 2020). The importance of this study was the intended benefit to the small, rural schools of East Texas and their potential superintendents. School boards and search firms

may also benefit from greater awareness of the experiences that could lead to an early departure of the superintendent from the school district (Radford et. al, 2016).

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This research addressed the problem of poor superintendent retention in rural East Texas school districts due to factors, including systems knowledge, school board relations, salary, stress, and location (Lamkin, 2006). Rural school districts have often hired superintendents who had limited relevant leadership experience, and many did not stay in their superintendent role long enough to develop the requisite professional skills and leadership skills to positively impact the district (Kamrath, 2015). In response to this problem, the purpose of this qualitative study was to interview eight superintendents and seven school board presidents in rural East Texas school districts to explore their perceptions and professional challenges due to school board relations, systems knowledge, salary, stress, and location. The retention of school superintendents has always been a concern for stakeholders in a school district; however, the factors that contributed to early departure was not as evident to stakeholders (Grissom & Mitani, 2016). Researchers have conducted studies that supported the difficulty of retaining superintendents and the factors that led to departures of superintendents.

This literature review explored superintendent retention, the factors that led to an early departure or voluntary or involuntary departure among superintendents, and the impact on student achievement, finances, and accountability. In the first chapter, I discussed the background and context of the study followed by a conceptual framework of contextually relevant factors leading to superintendent departure. Factors discussed in this chapter include stress, school board relations, rural location, salary and compensation, and systems knowledge. A summary concludes the chapter.

In the literature search, I used online databases, such as OneSearch, ProQuest, Google Scholar, and other databases located within electronic databases available at Abilene Christian University. The keywords and phrases I searched to locate relevant studies were the following:

rural superintendent, *superintendent retention*, *rural*, *East Texas schools*, *superintendent compensation*, *superintendent job satisfaction*, *superintendent tenure determinants*, *superintendent success factors*, *school district leadership implications*, *systems knowledge*, *superintendent leadership*, *superintendent departure*, *superintendent turnover*, *superintendent career path*, and various combinations of the included keywords and phrases.

Background

The promise of public education and its implications for children and the public at large has been a topic of growing research interest (Fullan & Quinn, 2016). To better understand the perceptions of superintendent retention in rural East Texas, it was important to explore literature concerning superintendents. This study took place in the educational service center area of Region VII in Deep East Texas. It investigated the participants' perceptions of retention factors as a sitting superintendent in a rural East Texas school district, and those factors were the foundation of this study. Additionally, I examined the experiences of sitting school board presidents and their experiences with new superintendents. By reviewing the setting of rural school districts, this study related the experiences of superintendents and school board presidents to the retention of superintendents and added context to the study. The study explored tenure trends of superintendents and how factors of stress, systems knowledge, location, salary, and school board relations influenced them. Further, understanding of factors related to the retention of superintendents in rural East Texas was vital to ensuring the success of student achievement within Region VII (Waters & Marzano, 2006). Jobs, such as superintendents, that have an undesirable public image have failed to attract high-quality applicants. For instance, the media often portrays the school district superintendent as a leader who repeatedly deals with conflict (Grissom & Andersen, 2012). This perception has not helped already struggling rural school districts to flourish or increased the longevity of high-quality leaders in the district they served.

Path to Superintendency

Becoming a superintendent of schools can happen differently for educators. First, a traditional superintendent qualification requires a bachelor's degree, a teaching certificate issued by the Texas State Board of Education, a master's degree, a principal certificate, and a superintendent certificate. Some superintendents elect to further their education and obtain an advanced degree, typically a doctoral degree. Only 28% of superintendents in districts with less than 1,000 students have a doctorate, while in larger, urban schools, 98% of superintendents hold a doctorate in educational administration (Domenech, 2009). In contrast, according to the TEA, a district can apply for a waiver for a person to serve as superintendent without the candidate meeting necessary certification requirements.

In small, rural school districts, the superintendent has tended to advance from the principal's position of a high school or elementary school (Domenech, 2009). In their study of rural districts that had experienced several short-tenured superintendents, Oishi (2012) found 90% of these troubled districts performed the search for the superintendent themselves. Most of the board presidents surveyed expressed concern about the hiring process. Superintendents are often hired by the district's school board, or some school boards hired a search consultant. The search consultants are responsible for the posting of the position, which includes a job description, timeline, and district demographics. Once the deadline for applications has passed, the consultant brings the applications to the school board during a specially called meeting that discusses them. To provide anonymity to the applicants, the school board exercises its right to go into closed or executive session.

In Texas, this has been referred to as the Open Meetings Act and by Sec. 551.001: the document "Protecting the Public's Right to Know" (Texas Open Meetings and Texas Open Records Act, 2013). Interviewees are scheduled for first-round interviews with the school board.

There is not a set number of candidates to interview. Then a second round of interviews follows. The final round includes typically two candidates. From there, the school board names its lone finalist for the position of superintendent. In Texas, a lone finalist must wait 21 days or more before the meeting date where a final vote is tallied— as required by the Texas Public Information Act, Government Code Section 552.126: Confidentiality of Name of Applicant for Superintendent of Public School District (2013).

Lone Finalist

The lone finalist, if approved at a school board meeting, becomes the superintendent of schools as presented in the contract. The contract is typically drawn up by the school district's attorney. The lone finalist has the right to have his or her legal counsel review the contract prior to signing the document. The superintendent begins work in the district as agreed upon in the contract. Later, the school board and the superintendent discuss the superintendent's goals, district goals, and school board goals, as each of these three will be part of the superintendent's evaluation that happens each December prior to the January board meeting when the superintendent's contract is reviewed.

Texas Superintendent Standards

Superintendents in Texas have requirements that must be met as set forth by the Texas Administrator Code, Section 242.15: Standards Required for the Superintendent Certificate. The TEA states, "As required by the Texas Education Code, §21.046(b)(1)-(6), the standards identified in §242.15 of this title (relating to Standards Required for the Superintendent Certificate) emphasize "instructional leadership; administration, supervision, and communication skills; curriculum and instruction management; performance evaluation; organization; and fiscal management" (2009, p. 2).

There are eight standards to fulfill to comply with partial requirements for superintendent

certification. It is important to note that each standard references student learning. Each begins

with the following—"Learner-centered: A superintendent is an educational leader who promotes

the success of all students." The eight standards are (a) values and ethics of leadership, (b)

leadership and school district culture, (c) human resources leadership and management, (d)

policy and governance, (e) communications and community relations, (f)) organizational

leadership and management, (g) curriculum planning and development, and (h) instructional

leadership and management. Superintendents are the spokesperson for their school district but

should also aspire to be the spokesperson for public education. Superintendents must advocate

for public education that allows others to realize a new future for schools and learning (Björk et

al., 2018). Superintendents are also charged with telling stories about the great things their

district is doing and communicate it to all stakeholders frequently and strongly (Sampson, 2008).

Moreover, the superintendent is the lead communicator in a small, rural school district.

Sampson commented that the superintendent should be visible during the school day and attend

community events as the primary way to communicate with stakeholders. Larger, urban school

districts typically have multiple central office staff members and one of those positions usually

deals with public relations and communications. In a small school district, however, the

superintendent must utilize multiple ways of delivering information to stakeholders and not

become content on one-way communication practices (Sampson, 2008). Twitter, a two-way

communication tool, is a social media platform that millions of people use daily. Such tools can

be utilized by superintendents who need to strengthen communication with stakeholders and can

be a means of demonstrating how the needs of learners can be met (Lubelfeld & Polyak, 2017).

Characteristics of a Superintendent

Leadership characteristics are also an important factor when discussing superintendents,

especially superintendents in small, rural school districts due to the "many hats" they wear

(Björk et al., 2018). In a small, rural school district, the superintendent must interact with multiple people, multiple personalities and therefore requires a palette of general knowledge and nomenclature. Derue et al. (2011) found the effectiveness of personality traits correlates with the performance of leadership. Thus, they argued that leaders who are conscientious and highly intelligent are especially skilled at facilitating adequate role clarity, goals, and structure to improve task performance. Accordingly, Derue et al. (2011) predicted that the interpersonal leadership attributes of extraversion and agreeableness would have significant implications for the affective and relational aspects of leadership effectiveness criteria.

Modeling Leadership

Kouzes and Posner (2012) revealed that the superintendent must model the way to promote an effective school for stakeholders and students. According to Kouzes and Posner (2012), "Statistical analyses revealed that a leader's behavior explains most of the constituents' workplace engagement. A leader's actions contribute more to such factors as commitment, loyalty, motivation, pride, and productivity than does any other single variable" (p. 25). Superintendent leaders may also model the framework from Fullan and Quinn titled *coherence* (2016). Coherence is "the shared depth of understanding about the nature of the work" (Fullan & Quinn, 2016, p. 30). The coherence framework consists of four components: "focusing direction, which builds collective purpose; cultivating collaborative cultures, which develops capacity; deepening learning, which accelerates improvement and innovation; and securing accountability based on capacity built from the inside out" (Fullan & Quinn, 2016, p. 32). This framework has been especially effective because any action taken in one of the four components affects the others, because the coherence framework is nonlinear (Fullan & Quinn, 2016). This framework allows the superintendent to model leadership performing duties based on needs assessment from district data and to provide immediate, prescriptive attention rather than

following a generic step-by-step action plan.

Rural Superintendent Retention

The average superintendent tenure in a rural position, as of 2013, is 2.7 years (Defeo &

Tran, 2019; Kamrath & Brunner, 2014; Wood et al., 2013). In addition to compromising staff

morale and student achievement, frequent turnover in the superintendent position has costly

effects on the district (Björk et al., 2018). The ability to have success in one school district and

move on to another and replicate that success might drive leaders to want to "win" on multiple

teams. Other stressors have been attributed to complex teacher and principal evaluation tools,

student achievement, government regulations, and school board relations (Bell, 2019).

Superintendents in Texas are responsible for ensuring teachers and principals are evaluated each

year. Principals are responsible for evaluating teachers, and most districts in Texas use the Texas

Teacher Evaluation and Support System (T-TESS). Superintendents evaluate principals using a

system called Texas Principal Evaluation and Support System (T-PESS). In addition to

appraisals, superintendents use these data in conjunction with increasing student achievement

and instruction. Frequent superintendent turnover has sometimes been found to lead a district to

a state of crisis and poor student achievement (Wright & Papa, 2020).

The "American School Superintendent 2010 Decennial Study" found that 69% of

superintendents identified as satisfied with their career choice, but only 63% would choose to

become superintendent again if starting over in their professional career (Kowalski et. al, 2011).

School board relations and time from family to remain effective in the position were cited as

factors that affected superintendents and their retention plans. In rural districts, there has been a

high turnover rate in the superintendent position (Björk et al., 2018; Kamrath & Brunner, 2014).

School boards enact short-term contracts. Tekniepe (2015) found that a board's lack of support

for the direction a superintendent has guided the district and a lack of commitment toward fostering the superintendent's leadership stability have been reflected in single-year contracts.

Stress

Stress has not helped struggling rural school districts to flourish nor increased high-quality leaders' longevity in the district they serve. The role of superintendent can be a rewarding job for some educators. However, there are successes and failures. Some superintendents flourish in their leadership role and eagerly confront the challenges they encounter without becoming overwhelmed. Superintendents find ways to deal with both internal stressors and external stressors. Internal stressors (personal) are the individual's ability to cope with the interaction of specific aspects of life. External stressors (situational/environmental) are the factors that are not anticipated that lead to specific actions to alleviate the stress (Gan & Anshel, 2006). These stressors are compounded when associated with the superintendent's professional role at the personal, organizational, and community levels (Bell, 2019; Lefdal & Jong, 2019), thus, increasing their likelihood of leaving their position after a short time in the role. Balancing the stressors associated with the superintendent role and giving proportionate attention to numerous challenges is easier for some than others, a notion that Covey et al. (1994) addressed:

> The key to quality of life is in the compass—it's in the choices we make every day. As we learn to pause in the space between stimulus and response and consult our internal compass, we can face change squarely, confident that we're being true to principle and purpose, and that we're putting first things first in our lives. (p. 76)

Internal Stressors

Personal Stress

Stress experienced by superintendents can have negative impacts on their personal life (Kowalski et al., 2011). There are numerous consequences when superintendents experience

excessive stress that extend to various stakeholders. Platsidou and Agaliotis (2008) claimed that stress and burnout "have been linked to dissatisfaction with the job and to negative personal and professional consequences (i.e., depression and impaired occupational functioning), not only for the teachers themselves but also their families, students, and schools" (p. 61). Excessive stress can impact a superintendent's capacity to participate in fulfilling personal relationships, as well as the extent to which they can effectively lead their district and support schools. Lefdal and Jong (2019) also provided research evidence of the effects of stress on the superintendent that spilled over to their personal family life. The superintendent role has been traditionally associated with enduring higher levels of stress due to their role as the face of the district (Bell, 2019), however, many superintendents feel underprepared for how stressors and pressure in the superintendent position differ from stressors they experienced as a teacher or administrator. Research on rural superintendents and their tenure have identified that their lack of personal time and family time are negative consequences of the job (Yates & Jong, 2018).

Stress-related factors have played an important role in the shortage of rural superintendents (Lefdal & Jong, 2019). The nature of balancing personal and professional responsibilities in the role can be somewhat paradoxical in this way, in that superintendents require ample social support to persevere through adversity in their professional role, but their professional role makes it more difficult to maintain close personal relationships. Superintendents require a strong family-like support system to survive and succeed (Laffe, 2012). Lefdal and Jong (2019) noted that stress from work can have negative effects on the superintendent's personal and family life as the spillover from work to home can lead to an easier decision to leave. Superintendent careers have lost some appeal for young administrators due to the stressful nature of the position (Moschella, 2019).

Professional Development

While the high-stress nature of the superintendent position may be unavoidable to some extent, training, resources, and support can lessen the extent to which superintendents feel underprepared for or overwhelmed by the role. Higher education superintendent certification programs and school boards must find ways to support superintendents with training, staffing, and care to prevent the premature departure of the superintendent (Moschella, 2019). Superintendents have many texts and studies available to them that address stress and other topics that are related (Bell, 2019). Social media platforms such as Twitter offer a chat titled #SuptChat that invites superintendents worldwide to join in the discussion (Lubefeld & Polyack, 2017). Roberts et al.'s (2012) text *The First-Year Experiences of Successful Superintendents* is an example. Within that text, Roberts et al. stated, "Each step up the ladder you go, the more criticism you will receive. You will not be able to satisfy everyone" (2012, p. 122). Byrd et al. (2006) found that stress can be attributed to the high standards and people-intensive nature associated with the demanding role of superintendent and their increased exposure to criticism. There will always be dissatisfaction among constituents with respect to the leader's performance to some extent (Wright & Papa, 2020). Roberts et al. (2012) advised that superintendents should also invoke humor when appropriate to alleviate stress. Gilmour et al. (2009) found that leaders who have spiritual leadership skills cope with stress better. Spiritual leadership may encompass success due to followers embracing membership or having a greater sense of purpose in their position or career (Low & Ayoko, 2020).

External Stressors

Time

Lefdal and Jong (2019) reported that superintendents dealt with large amounts of stress that was often self-induced, in part because of high expectations set by the superintendent; thus,

superintendents also must find outlets to alleviate stress to preserve their mental and physical health. Glass and Franceschini (2007) found that superintendent stress was attributed to complex schedules and an inability to please all stakeholders. The role of a superintendent sometimes requires 80 or more hours weekly (Byrd et al., 2006). Time, or lack of time, adds stress to the superintendent. As the position of superintendent continues to evolve and more responsibilities are attached to the position, the role of the superintendent has become more complex in recent years (Bell, 2019). In many small, rural school districts in East Texas, superintendents can be found attending extracurricular events each night ranging from volleyball, cross country, powerlifting, football, basketball, baseball, softball, track, tennis, swimming, and other social events offered in the community.

Day-to-Day Operations

The context of a superintendents' school district is a significant determinant of the stress they experience in the role. Different districts are faced with different challenges, with some being easier to surmount than others (Lefdal & Jong, 2019). Small, rural school districts' lack of financial resources contributes to stress for superintendents. A lack of resources means superintendents have to spend more time and energy balancing priorities and allocating limited funds. State-mandated reforms, guidelines, and compliance further strain superintendents' efforts to maintain sound fiscal improvement plans for the district (Bell, 2019). Superintendents' stress related to their professional responsibilities vary based on the size and performance of their district; in smaller districts or rural districts, for instance, superintendents may be expected to fulfill more daily tasks that would be allocated to other administrators in larger districts or those located in urban settings (Lefdal & Jong, 2019).

Stress and other factors contribute to a lack of retention and short tenure on average in superintendent positions. Studies conducted across the past three decades have demonstrated a

lack of retention among superintendents. In a 2006 study of 215 current superintendents surveyed at the beginning of the school year, 45% departed that district within three years (Grissom & Anderson, 2012). According to Walter and Supley, in 1999, the Texas Association of Schools reported that out of 1,047 school districts at that time, only 137 superintendents remained in the role for 10 years. The School Superintendents Association's "American School Superintendent 2020 Decennial Study" recently reported that 45% of current superintendents were satisfied with their current position and the typical superintendent was previously a principal who had two to eight years of superintendent experience (School Superintendent's Association, 2020).

School Board as a Stressor

Byrd et al., (2006) found that stressful relationships between superintendents and school board presidents led to a 1.3 times higher chance of superintendent turnover. Previous studies have examined the retention of superintendents and why they exited their district as CEO. In 2006, Byrd et al. (2006) found that 62.5% of superintendents in Texas left their current positions for better opportunities and 20% left the position due to lack of support from the school board. Stress can be attributed to superintendent performance, budgets, accountability, student achievement, and superintendent-board relationships (Roberts et al., 2012). Further strains on the superintendent begin when school board members "meddle"—when they see factors regarding superintendent performance that causes intrusion (Roberts et al., 2012, p. 122).

Stress or tension has been presented as a common problem between superintendents and school boards, and this is known as role confusion. Role confusion happens when both the superintendent and school board encroach on each other's responsibilities, thus, limiting effectiveness, delaying progress, and causing tension or stress (Hall & McHenry-Sober, 2017). Role confusion is often brought on by a single "lone ranger." Lone rangers introduce role

confusion by working around the superintendent's authority, conducting secret staff meetings, and applying undue pressure on board and faculty members. In this way, the behavior of one member could lead to behavior that reduces the potential of positive collaboration and governance (Hall & McHenry-Sober, 2017).

School Board Relations

Superintendents are responsible for planning and conferring with numerous educational personnel to work toward district-wide goals (Bell, 2019), particularly with members of the school board. Positive school board relations are a source of support for superintendents. Conversely, negative school board relations contribute to heightened stress for superintendents in a professional role that is already considered to be a high-stress position under ideal circumstances.

Numerous researchers have found connections between superintendents' professional experiences and their relationship with their respective school boards. Retaining quality administrators in rural school districts has been found to be a difficult undertaking for these districts and their school boards (DeFeo & Tran, 2019). Grissom and Andersen (2012) revealed factors such as school board relations, the superintendent's performance, and whether the superintendent was hired internally as factors that led to superintendent departure. In some cases, superintendents' experiences or professional relationships in a given school district led them to vacate their position; in other cases, they vacated their position because they felt they had outgrown the role or wanted to seek different opportunities despite positive professional relationships (Bell, 2019). For instance, some superintendents leave rural districts to go to larger districts with higher salaries in urban and suburban locations.

The successful results of effective school district governance have been linked by research to positive, working relationships between the superintendent and school board

(Henrikson, 2018). Yates and Jong (2018) found superintendents departed from districts due to poor board relations. The School Superintendent's Association (2020) reported that current superintendents spend between two to eight years as a principal or assistant principal before becoming a superintendent. The change in relationships from reporting to one administrator to seven elected officials is a learning curve that not everyone can conquer.

Superintendent-school board relations can be complex and multifaceted. Relations may be favorable on the surface while masking elements of social politics or manipulation. Farkas et al. (2001) found that 65% of superintendents perceived that school boards ideally want a leader who can be controlled by the board. School board turnover and board elections have also been a cause of stress for superintendents (Bell, 2019). Tekniepe (2015) identified that the relationship between board and superintendent was more pleasant with a long-standing board. However, when the board changed, it presented a conflict with each new board member. Thus, when turnover among board members is frequent it can be difficult for reliable and discernable professional superintendent–board relationships to be established.

A difference in collective purpose or guiding values was cause for school boards and superintendents to agree to part ways (Campbell & Fullan, 2019). Disagreements and friction over individual policies and procedures reflected a deeper disagreement on the direction of a district's progress, priorities, and goals. Campbell and Fullan noted that five themes were crucial to instilling a moral imperative in local governance:

> Making a commitment to good governance; a shared moral imperative that drives the work of the school board, the superintendent, and the strategic direction of the district; highly effective trustees and superintendents who have a governance mindset to govern effectively; effective school boards as coherence makers who govern with a unity of purpose; leadership from the middle, and system responsibilities. (2019, pp.16–17)

School boards and superintendents commit to good governance—they must make a commitment to effectiveness and create a long-term commitment to the future of all the students and their education, and to the district's activities, finances, and accountability (Campbell & Fullan, 2019). In their follow-up title to *Core Governance*, Campbell and Fullan provided an action handbook for school board members, but it would also be useful for superintendents as well (2019). Campbell and Fullan acknowledged that there is a gap in the literature regarding the relationships between school superintendents and school boards in their latest book: *The Taking Action Guide for the Governance Core: School Boards, Superintendents, and Schools Working Together* (2019). They also provided guidance and characteristics of superintendents who had effective relationships with their school boards. Those characteristics included purposefulness, morality, focus, coherence, and respect.

School boards have a responsibility to nurture superintendents' professional development; thus, a lack of growth opportunities can be a source of contention (Bell, 2019). School boards offer support by providing their time, professional journals, conferences, and association memberships to support superintendents' professional development (Tekniepe, 2015). The Texas Association of School Administrators holds conferences reporting legislative updates each year and are geared toward superintendents and their on-going training. Opportunities like these allow for superintendents to make peer connections and bring back new ideas to their districts. A successful mentoring relationship can have long-term positive outcomes for the mentee (Henrikson, 2018). Nishimura and Sharpe (2007) reported coaching and mentoring were tools that allowed individuals to grow and learn how to work as a team, to build necessary leadership skills that serve as a tool for growing professionally; it is goal-oriented to produce effective results. Superintendents are responsible for the required training and continuing education hours for their school board. Mayer (2016) encouraged superintendents to

use his book *How Not to Be a Terrible School Board Member* to provide training to the school board and to provide goal training to achieve a highly effective team to produce desired results.

Superintendents in Texas have access to training that is designed for building relationships between them and their school board members. Texas Education Code Chapter 11 (1995) requires school board members to undergo annual training, including new member training, open meetings training, and team-building sessions. These training sessions must be provided by a licensed Texas Association of School Boards (TASB) trainer. TASB is a statewide, nonprofit educational association for Texas school board members (TASB, 2019). However, as McAdams argued, "Board savvy superintendents should provide new board members with orientation and training and help sitting board members fold them into the governance team" (p. 6). Superintendents need to identify the difference between required training and training that will build the relationship between the school board and themselves. Table 1 includes the required training for Texas school board members.

Table 1

Training Requirements for School Board Members

Training requirements	Training provider	Length of service	
		New trustees (First Year) 25 hours	Experienced trustees (After First Year) 9–16 hours[*]
Local District Orientation[**]	School District	Within 120 days, 3 hours	Can attend, but not required
Intro to TEC	Education Service Center	Within 120 days, 3 hours	N/A
Open Government	TASB or other registered provider	OMA[***] Within 90 days, 1–2 hours PIA, 1-2 hours	N/A
Cybersecurity	(See Department of Information Resources website)	1 hour each year	1 hour each year
Post-Legislative Update to TEC	TASB or other registered provider	N/A because update is incorporated into Intro to TEC	Sufficient length, 1–2 hours, after each legislative session
Child Abuse Prevention	TASB or other registered provider	1 hour every two years	1 hour every two years
Evaluating and Improving Student Outcomes (formerly SB1566)	TASB or other registered provider	Within 120 days, 3 hours[2] every two years	N/A
Team Building	TASB or other registered provider	3 hours each year with all trustees and superintendent	3 hours each year with all trustees and superintendent
Additional Continuing Education (based on assessed needs)	TASB or other registered provider	10 hours first year	5 hours each year

Note: OMA = Open Meetings Act; TEC = Texas Education Code; PIA =Public Information Act; SBOE = State Board of Education. *Required hours after the first year will vary depending on how the Post-Legislative Update, Child Abuse, and Student Achievement and Accountability hours fall for an individual trustee. **Trustees may receive any training online except Local Orientation for new board members, Team Building, and Evaluating and Improving Student Outcomes. *** OMA and PIA training is required (outside of SBOE rule) of all elected officials within 90 days of election or appointment. PIA training may be delegated by district policy. Adapted from Texas Association of School Boards website: https://www.tasb.org/services/board-development-services/images/boarddev_trainingreqs-img-en.png

A common school board and superintendent training in Texas is the Team of Eight training. The Team of Eight describes a structured approach to developing a districtwide vision, mission, and objectives that are supported by an agreed upon system of standard operating policies and procedures that are established by relevant stakeholders. In a Team of Eight approach, the board establishes procedures and policies for the district that the superintendent and school personnel implement through leadership and professional actions (TASB, 2019).

TASB (2019) listed effective board practices as follows: "a clear vision and defined priorities for the district; an understanding of what their work entails; a formalized approach to their work through defined procedures; a free flow of information within the community" (p. 2). TASB (2019) suggested four steps to ensure effective practices of a board-superintendent team: planning and governance, oversight of management, team operations, and advocacy. Within these practices were action steps to achieve best practice. One of the actions was a governance calendar that established the who, what, when, where, and why of the board-superintendent team's responsibilities throughout the year.

A governance activity calendar can help to ensure major responsibilities and objectives are not overlooked; it can be used by the board to prepare for actions to be taken; it helps the board and administration schedule their work and develop strategic agendas; and it encourages regular information and knowledge sharing on district progress toward established goals (TASB, 2019). TASB provides a document titled "Effective Board Practices: An Inventory for School Boards" (2019). The document suggests that by adhering to effective board practices, there are fewer opportunities for conflict due to a lack of knowledge of roles and duties by the board-superintendent team.

Two good ways for a board to clarify assumptions and expectations are to adopt a code of conduct or statement of ethical principles and written board operating procedures.

Statements of ethical principles help to articulate ideal behavior and are intended to guide

board members' actions. Discussion by board members about what to include in a code

of conduct and in a set of operating procedures can help the members of the team further

understand the expectations, priorities, and motivations among members of the board.

These types of discussions can help identify possible sources of conflict in the future and

reduce their likelihood. (TASB, 2019, p. 9)

Another approach to promoting a positive, school board-superintendent relationship is

Todd Whitaker's use of the word "shield" (Donlan & Whitaker, 2019). A school board member

can invoke the superintendent as a shield of protection against his or her constituents when they

become angry or seek immediate action, such as the firing of school personnel that has upset

them. Typically, the school board member may visit the superintendent after hearing of concerns

from their constituents; not addressing the concern would be a problem (Superville, 2020). The

superintendent can be the shield and address the concerns appropriately in an appropriately

scheduled executive session with the board and formulate a plan to address the concerns. It is all

a matter of effective communication between the board and superintendent that impact the

relationship and ultimately retention. A superintendent can also engage in a proactive approach

that Whitaker and Donlan named the "three-pronged approach" (p. 54): (a) superintendents make

a personal commitment to reach out to school board members; (b) superintendents must be

intentionally seen by each board member's constituency; and (c) superintendents must schedule

personal time with each board member and provide the board with updates as to the

superintendent's connection with the community.

Donlan et al. (2016) presented the Delta Force of School Leadership and extended four

components necessary for a good, working relationship between the school board and school

superintendent: trust, deference, assurance, and humility. Superintendents must trust that their

school board is well-representing the cares and concerns of the community. School boards must be willing to defer the day-to-day activities to the superintendent and the superintendent must defer to the board what policies should be made, approval of the budget, and both parties should defer to building principals for decisions to be made on their respective campuses. School boards must give assurance to superintendents that their day-to-day authority will not be interrupted, and superintendents must assure weekly updates to the school board. Finally, humility ensures the positive working relationship between the school board and superintendent and each provides mutual support to the team.

Rural Location

The rural location of many East Texas school districts can have negative effects on retaining superintendents due to lack of professional development and personal growth. In rural school locations, many superintendents in East Texas are hundreds of miles away from professional development opportunities. According to TEA (n.d.), Texas has more schools in rural areas than any other state in the United States. In the 2015-2016 school year, rural schools, as classified by TEA, accounted for 459 of the 1,247 school districts in Texas (TEA, 2015).

Beyond issues of recruiting for superintendent positions in rural districts, rural districts that are characteristically constrained in terms of resources and funding rarely attract superintendents that are inspired to implement ambitious changes (Elizalde, 2019). Superintendents who are tasked with leading districts that do not have proportionate access to resources may lose motivation or self-efficacy over time in terms of their perceived ability to inspire change and enhance student outcomes; when funding is perceived as the root cause of systemic issues in a district, it does not inspire action on the part of administrators who have little power in terms of how resources are allocated by state and federal governments (Elizalde, 2019). Continuous, directly-relevant professional development opportunities are necessary for school

administrators to experience success and job retention in any educational setting, though such opportunities can be more challenging in small rural districts (Augustine-Shaw & Liang, 2016). Like rural East Texas superintendents, rural superintendents in Kansas are also affected by isolation from professional development and mentors. For leaders to grow in their craft, develop their staff, and continue to be informed in educational reform, professional development opportunities are necessary for the continued goals for all stakeholders. According to Lubelfeld and Polyak (2017), "Learning is sustained when learners are creating their own knowledge" (p. 79).

The classification of a district's location and student population indicates a relationship between superintendent turnover and district size (DeFeo & Tran, 2019). It is common for small, rural school superintendents to move away from small district size to larger, urban districts (Kamrath & Brunner, 2014). This is typically because smaller districts pay less in salary for superintendents than their urban counterparts (Yates & Jong, 2018). However, regardless of the size of the district, there is a similar rate in turnover of the superintendent. This suggests that superintendents move to larger districts with more students, more opportunities for professional growth, and increased salary potential (DeFeo & Tran, 2019).

Those seeking superintendent positions may also be incentivized away from seeking positions in rural districts due to the expectation of fulfilling more professional responsibilities than they would in urban or suburban districts for less pay (Curry & Wolf, 2017). In a recent study, Curry and Wolf (2017) exemplified this issue by researching 102 superintendents employed in rural Illinois districts that also served a dual role as principals. Calling it "a position born in purgatory" (p. 31), the researchers found that by encouraging principals to take on the additional responsibilities of superintendency, participants were forced to establish a ranking of their priorities that left some tasks unaddressed or given little attention. Participants reported that

they commonly filled the roles of chief financial officers and role models; further, they reported that their primary responsibilities were those of establishing a positive school climate and financial oversight, and that their roles and responsibilities of lesser importance included acting as politicians and overseeing or supervising student activities/events (Curry & Wolf, 2017). The results of Curry and Wolf's (2017) research demonstrated how placing education professionals into a dual superintendent-principal role due to concerns and consideration of resources in rural districts can decrease the likelihood that they will thrive in either role or increase their likelihood of experiencing role confusion.

There was also an apparent trend that rural school districts have not been as successful in hiring experienced superintendents. Roberts et al. (2012) found that troubled districts often hired a new superintendent to become the "savior" for their issues. However, the longevity was less than three years, while the average turnaround time for a troubled district was five years.

Recent research evidence has demonstrated that rural communities have difficulty attracting and retaining superintendents (DeFeo & Tran, 2019; Kamrath & Brunner, 2014). The structure of rural school districts, and superintendents' roles by extension, can make succeeding in all their professional responsibilities difficult. Many rural school districts are small, with fewer resources than their urban and suburban counterparts (DeFeo & Tran, 2019). Rural superintendents were often characterized by a strong sense of commitment and closeness to their community, thus making them more prone to burnout when they felt they were unable to meet the needs of the community or improve academic outcomes.

In addition to attracting and retaining superintendents, school districts consider community expectations and feedback when choosing a new leader (Kamrath & Brunner, 2014). Community members in rural school districts want a leader that is active and engaged publicly. Rural school districts demonstrate community success when there is not a series of short-tenured

superintendents. Constant turnover affects school districts negatively due to the lack of direction and purpose for stakeholders and potentially has adverse effects on future superintendents.

The Greater Texas Foundation (2017) reported that Texas is home to more than 900,000 rural students and grows by about 30,000 students each year. The location of small, rural schools also increases the workload of the superintendent due to ensuring students' postsecondary readiness and the retention of effective teachers. The relationship between student achievement and teacher quality demonstrates a need for "evidence-based guidance" to help recruit, prepare, provide professional development for teachers, principals, and superintendents in rural communities (Powell et al., 2009). In addition to the responsibility of student achievement and recruiting and retaining high-quality staff, the small, rural superintendent has various duties as well. It is important to note that superintendents of different school sizes and locations shared many of the same responsibilities and challenges. However, superintendents in small rural schools did not share the same amount of staff to address student achievement, transportation, finance/budget, curriculum, implementation of policy, human resources, and public relations (DeFeo & Tran, 2019; Weiss, 2016).

The superintendent is the top executive in the school district. The day-to-day demands and stress can keep the superintendent away from interacting with instructional staff and students. Small, rural school districts employ one superintendent, and thus, there were rarely opportunities for the superintendent to benefit from on-site peer advice or personal and professional dialogue (DeFeo & Tran, 2019). The superintendent did have similar peers in administrative positions, such as campus principals, assistant superintendents, and business managers, but due to the managerial tasks of school safety, finances, and school board relations, there was little opportunity for professional dialogue (Cicchelli et al., 2002). There have been several attempts to provide opportunities for dialogue and professional development for

superintendents (Cicchelli et al., 2002). The Region VII Education Service Center (ESC) has

provided monthly superintendent meetings in Kilgore, Texas. Superintendents in Texas have the

opportunity to attend Texas Association of School Administrators Mid-Winter Conference held

in Austin, Texas each January.

Salary and Compensation

Salary and compensation were significant determinants of job satisfaction and retention

in many professions, as salary is a tangible expression of an employee's value within their

organization. Ryu's (2016) research on public employee's well-being and the correlation of

increased salary revealed that long hours and extra duties benefit the employee in some

circumstances. An increased compensation plan and salary was often the next step for principals

and assistant principals. Cullen and Mazzeo (2008) found that principals in Texas who made a

career switch to principal received an increase in their salary, "on average, by 3.8%, and for

those who switched to a new district that increase, on average, was 5.9%" (p. 109).

Higher pay has been a factor in superintendent turnover (Grissom & Mitani, 2016;

Wright & Papa, 2020). In addition to salary, a superintendent evaluated factors, such as their

work environment, board relations, and stress, to inform turnover decisions. An exit by the

superintendent based on salary, benefits, and other conditions was described as a voluntary

turnover (Grissom & Andersen, 2012). TASB (2019) reported that the average superintendent

pay increase was 4.2%, up from 3.1% the prior year. Of returning superintendents, 78% received

a base salary increase. Benefits converted to salary were excluded from pay raise calculations.

To retain superintendents, fewer than 50 school districts awarded a bonus; however, that number

increased from 6% in 2018 to 8% in 2019 (TASB, 2019). Most bonuses were paid to the

superintendent to reward job performance or retention. The average bonus paid was $13,637, or

6.5% of the superintendent's 2018–2019 average salary. More than half of the bonuses paid were

$10,000 or less (TASB, 2019).

It was important to note, however, that an increased salary was not perceived as an unconditional benefit by many administrators considering the position. Phenomenological research conducted by Moschella (2019) revealed that despite most participants clearly understanding the superintendent role and acknowledging the position would mean a significant increase in compensation, most participants perceived that transitioning into the superintendent role would be detrimental to their job satisfaction and quality of life. Participants' rationale largely centered on their desire to avoid the interpersonal politics involved in the position and the perception that the increased professional responsibilities associated with the position were not commensurate with the salary increase they would be offered (Moschella, 2019). Thus, compensation as a factor that influenced superintendent retention, and retention in many other professions, was not to be taken at face value in many cases; rather the factor of compensation represented the process of weighing the benefits and disadvantages of the superintendent position and whether those benefits and disadvantages correlated with the compensation being offered. It was also important to note that prospective superintendents' perceptions of the benefits and disadvantages of the position in relation to their compensation before accepting a position may or may not have accurately reflected the reality of the position.

Systems Knowledge

Another reason that superintendent retention is important to discuss is the knowledge or lack thereof regarding systems reform or the implementation of systems. Superintendents should also consider an approach like that of John Kotter's eight-step change process: "1. Create a sense of urgency; 2. Build a guiding coalition; 3. Form a strategic vision and initiatives; 4. Enlist a volunteer army; 5. Enable action by removing barriers; 6. Generate short-term wins; 7. Sustain acceleration; 8. Institute change" (Kotter, 2014, p. 27).

When a superintendent is hired, knowledge about the importance of systems, the presence of working systems or lack thereof in educational contexts, and the way leadership decisions affect educational systems at different levels may contribute to more holistic and informed leadership decisions. Nayfack et al. (2017) noted systems knowledge can be synonymous with continuous reform and improvement knowledge in educational contexts. The researchers outlined four lessons to inform effective continuous improvement in school districts: (a) effective systems analysis is guided by an established improvement team; (b) through a systems analysis, superintendents can revise, edit, and extrapolate their preliminary thoughts about the cause of problems that need to be addressed; (c) data-driven insights are necessary to comprehensively address problems of practice; and (d) expert facilitation and experiential learning are useful means of preparing improvement teams. In their work, Nayfack et al. (2017) explained and demonstrated how superintendents can go beyond broadly harnessing systems thinking to meaningfully conducting systems analysis and implementing systemic solutions in an evidence-based manner.

Whether or not the outgoing superintendent served the district two years or 10 years, the presence or absence of cohesion at all levels of education systems impacted their ability to positively influence the trajectory of their district in pursuit of educational objectives. Fullan and Quinn (2016) identified six steps for whole-system reform as follows: (a) develop collective capacity to impact results, (b) reframe perspective to create a collective focus, (c) reduce distracters, (d) shift the balance of capacity building and accountability, (e) continuously develop knowledge and skills, and (f) foster mutual allegiance and collaborative competition. In addition to school reform, the superintendent must also focus on hiring well and building capacity to ensure that reform can be sustained (Nayfack et al., 2017). Particularly in cases where superintendents aim to implement large-scale organizational changes within their districts, the

steps and skills were significant determinants of the extent to which reform efforts contributed to reform goals.

A lack of systemic thinking and planning reduced the likelihood that educational reform outcomes can be sustained for more than a brief period. Fullan and Quinn (2016) indicated six aspects that impact the extent to which success can be sustained with systems reform: (a) instructional precision, (b) coaches/mentors, (c) school-wide instructional and assessment practices, (d) professional learning, (e) curriculum and assessment, and (f) resources. The extent to which superintendents and administrators' liaisons at individual schools heeded the importance of these aspects determined whether any positive outcomes from reform efforts were sustained in the long term.

Peter Senge (1994) identified five disciplines or components of systems (organizations) that learn and adapt: (a) systems thinking, (b) personal mastery, (c) mental models, (d) building shared vision, and (e) team learning. Every organization has its mission that should be its purpose. Senge stated that its purpose is the "fundamental reason for the organization's existence" (Senge, 1994, p. 303).

Another key rule to shared vision is the identification of goals, both short-term and long-term. Superintendents must identify a plan of action and goals for their district (Filippi & Hackman, 2019). School boards and superintendents often evaluate and adopt goals each summer that are aligned to the district's mission and vision. It is vital to have a road map for the school district. When the district has an established goal or path, superintendents are better prepared to know when and how to remedy the path if it goes off course or if a new path is needed.

Systems thinking may also be beneficial to superintendents who are responsible for a low-performing district's state standardized scores or financial concerns, attendance and

enrollment, and the retention of high-quality staff. In systems thinking, leaders do not need to waste time on superficial solutions. Rather they must steer to new goals and identify beliefs that will result in a change in behavior and produce desired results regarding school reform (Fullan & Quinn, 2016). A systems perspective can be a useful tool for superintendents to avoid problematic approaches and generalizations when seeking to address key issues in their district or individual schools, as it is a perspective that emphasizes the role of issues at many levels, the interconnected nature of causes and effects in educational systems, and the implications for various stakeholders.

Superintendents must look to the importance of focusing on the underlying causes of problems and "avoid skating on the surface" (Senge 2012, p. 200) of what Senge calls "symptomatic barriers. Regarding systems thinking and reform, Senge (2012) advised focusing on doing fewer things better than all things well. This will require an intentional focus on the approaches that will enact change, strategically disrupt the status quo, and maintain focus on the levels for better results of school reform.

Systems thinking can also be beneficial for the school board-superintendent team to continue to evolve professionally. In this form, the relationships among board members and the superintendent are identified as a living system that regularly communicates with a regular willingness to discuss and improve education for all stakeholders (Senge, 1994). Ultimately, systems thinking is only one perspective that can inform effective reform and leadership in educational systems, and thus, it is not a necessity for superintendents to succeed in their professional role. However, given the multitude of challenges many superintendents face in their professional role regardless of context and the likelihood that they will leave after a relatively short time in the role, the need for constructive and evidence-based theoretical perspectives like systems thinking to guide tough leadership decisions is apparent.

Summary

In summation, the purpose of this qualitative study was to determine the impact that stress, salary, location, school board relations, and systems knowledge had on superintendent retention in small, rural East Texas school districts. Participants were superintendents with direct experience fulfilling their professional role in rural districts and currently seated school board members in rural districts. Developing a better understanding of factors related to the retention of superintendents in rural, East Texas is key to enhancing student achievement within Region VII (Waters & Marzano, 2006). As this review established, the context or system in which superintendents are employed can significantly impact their performance and likelihood of remaining in the position over time. Accordingly, the context and factors that are unique to rural districts in East Texas were considered heavily throughout the study.

Certain factors and determinants of superintendent tenure were of particular concern in this study. The average superintendent tenure in a rural position is 2.7 years due, in part, to the high-stress nature of the position (Kamrath & Brunner, 2014). While the role was highly rewarding for some, other superintendents were overcome by stress associated with their professional role that originated at the personal, organizational, and/or community levels (Bell, 2019; Lefdal & Jong, 2019). The consequences of superintendents who experienced excessive stress impacted numerous stakeholders. Fortunately, training, resources, and support decreased the likelihood of superintendents feeling underprepared or overwhelmed. Role confusion, which happened when the superintendent and school board encroached on or confused their separate professional responsibilities, also contributed to heightened stress, as could expectations of superintendents working 80 hours or more per week.

East Texas schools and other schools that were in rural districts have difficulty retaining superintendents due to a lack of professional development and opportunities for personal growth.

Rural districts, which often have particularly limited resources and funding, rarely attracted superintendents who sought to implement ambitious changes due to the expectation that significant change is unobtainable (Elizalde, 2019). Further, the expectation that a position in a rural district implied fulfilling more professional responsibilities for less pay incentivized superintendents to seek urban and suburban placements (Curry & Wolf, 2017). Rural school districts, and superintendents' roles by extension, are more likely to be structured in a way that makes it difficult for them to succeed in all their professional responsibilities.

School board relations significantly influenced superintendents' experiences in their roles. Superintendents work with numerous educational personnel in pursuit of district-wide goals in a capacity that frequently contributed to role confusion (Bell, 2019), and connections between superintendents' professional experiences and their relationship with their respective school board were apparent in the existing literature. Superintendent-school board relations were complicated; at times relations were superficially positive while masking deeper issues and unresolved problems. On a meaningful level, the collective purpose and guiding values that led districts caused school boards and superintendents to part ways (Campbell & Fullan, 2019). Because school boards were responsible for encouraging superintendents' professional development and providing relevant growth opportunities, a lack of opportunities bred contention (Bell, 2019).

Salary and compensation were also significant determinants of job satisfaction and retention in many professions, including superintendence. While higher pay was a significant factor in superintendent turnover (Grissom & Mitani, 2016), it was important to note, however, that salaries were not considered unconditionally by incoming superintendents. Evaluating compensation reflected weighing the benefits and disadvantages of the superintendent position in comparison to the compensation being offered and whether the offering was perceived as fair or

worthwhile.

Systems knowledge impacted superintendents' professional experiences. The ability to identify effective/ineffective educational systems and how leadership decisions affected educational systems at different levels contributed to more holistic and informed decisions by superintendents. An inability to think and plan systemically reduced the likelihood that educational reform was sustainable. By focusing on the underlying causes of district-wide problems and not blaming superficial influences, superintendents increased their likelihood of enacting meaningful changes.

In response to this review, the following research questions were developed to guide the current study:

RQ1. What mitigating factors (i.e., systems knowledge, school board relations, salary, stress, and location) do rural East Texas superintendents perceive to be the most important factors that contribute to their plans to remain in their current position?

RQ2. What mitigating factors (i.e., systems knowledge, school board relations, salary, stress, and location) do rural East Texas school board presidents perceive to be the most important factors that contribute to their plans to retain superintendents in their current position?

The third chapter provides details about the methodology selected for this study. Key methodological details that are discussed include the participants, research design, research method, data collection and analysis approaches, and ethical considerations. A summary concludes the chapter.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Superintendent longevity and their ability to flourish in the rural East Texas school districts that they serve pose challenges due to location, salary, stress, school board relations, and systems knowledge. Superintendent turnover has had negative effects on staff, students, and accountability and is detrimental to school climate and culture (Waters & Marzano, 2006). Superintendents have been leaving for reasons, such as location, salary, stress, and school board relations (Growe et al., 2003). Superintendents must serve in a district between two to five years to make an impact on student achievement (Glass & Franceschini, 2007; Simpson, 2013; Waters & Marzano, 2006). The superintendent must wear many hats—manager, planner, listener, and communicator (Copeland, 2013). Glass and Franceschini (2007) explained the complex role of superintendent with the responsibilities of instructional leadership, fiscal management, community relations, board relations, and personnel management.

The purpose of this qualitative research was to investigate the factors that may have led to the early departure of superintendents serving small, rural school districts. I addressed the two research questions concerning how the factors of systems knowledge, school board relations, salary, stress, and location impact retention of rural East Texas superintendents through data collection and analysis. A multiple case study research design was used to interview eight rural East Texas superintendents and seven school board presidents. I interviewed participants and collected data through Zoom meetings and e-mail. The themes that emerged from the interviews were determined with the aid of software named Dedoose. In addition to interviews, artifacts, such as the school board meeting minutes, superintendent reports, and principal reports, gave me insight on the day-to-day operations of each district and helped me identify differences and similarities. I informed each participant of his or her right to revoke their consent from participation in the study at any time (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). I collected data only after

Abilene Christian University gave Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, participants were screened, and participants provided their consent. I ensure the trustworthiness of the research's findings, methods, quality and rigor, (Leavy, 2017) and that the integrity of the research was confirmed. To convey credibility to the reader, I explained the processes and techniques that brought acceptable results (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018).

Research Design and Methodology

For this research, I utilized a multiple case study. The research design best suited the needs of the study and allowed me to begin with the goal to interview and analyze data from the experiences of eight rural, East Texas school superintendents and seven rural, East Texas school board presidents. The number of cases allowed me to reach saturation after interviewing nine superintendents and six school board presidents. I determined saturation at the point where no new data contributed any additional learning (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). Therefore, research focused on the experiences of nine rural, East Texas superintendents and seven rural, East Texas school board presidents.

The 2016 AASA *Superintendent Salary & Benefits Study* reported that 50% of superintendents' tenure was one to five years and 25% of superintendents' experience was six to 10 years (as cited in Domenech, 2017). Waters and Marzano (2006) reported the relationship between superintendent tenure and accountability for curriculum, instruction, and assessment was seen in the second year of tenure. According to Simpson (2013), students showed improvement on achievement tests when the superintendent served in the same district for more than five years. The range of experiences for superintendents in this qualitative, multiple-case study was two to 10 years based on research that suggested effectiveness increased during tenure and consecutive years within one district (Simpson, 2013; Waters & Marzano, 2006).

Qualitative research was better suited for this study rather than quantitative because the

discovery of superintendents' experiences needed to be researched and retold through interviews, stories, anecdotes, and life-lessons rather than percentages and means represented in a table (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). Superintendents and their experiences provided the best data for this qualitative study because the information was derived from primary sources and not secondary sources or other studies. Qualitative research encouraged me to find patterns and interrelationships within the data.

I sought to answer the following two research questions:

RQ1. What mitigating factors (i.e., systems knowledge, school board relations, salary, stress, and location) do rural East Texas superintendents perceive to be the most important factors that contribute to their plans to remain in their current position?

RQ2. What mitigating factors (i.e., systems knowledge, school board relations, salary, stress, and location) do rural East Texas school board presidents perceive to be the most important factors that contribute to their plans to retain superintendents in their current position?

The interview questions were aligned to the research questions and to the demographic, career path, and career preparation experiences of the participants. This alignment is detailed in Table 2 for superintendents and for school board presidents.

Table 2

Interview Protocol Alignment With Research Questions

Research Question 1 Superintendents		Research Question 2 School Board Presidents
What mitigating factors do rural East Texas superintendents perceive to be the most important factors that contribute to their plans to remain in their current position?		What mitigating factors do rural East Texas school board presidents perceive to be the most important factors that contribute to their plans to retain superintendents in their current position?
Superintendent interview item alignment	Mitigating factors	School board president interview item alignment
14	Salary	14
5, 11	Location	5, 11
7, 8, 9	Stress	7, 8, 9
10, 12, 13	School Board Relations	10, 12, 13
15, 16	Systems Knowledge	15, 16
1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 16, 17	Demographics	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 16, 17

Note. Full text of the superintendent interview questions is included in Appendix A. Full text of

the school board president interview questions is included in Appendix B.

Population

The participants of this study were superintendents serving in Region VII of Deep East

Texas who had served in their current district for at least two years. There are 20 regional ESCs

in Texas. In 1997, the 75th Texas Legislature specified the purpose of regional ESCs. Chapter 8

of the Texas Education Code specified the following purposes: assist school districts in

improving student performance in each region of the system; enable school districts to operate

more efficiently and economically; and implement initiatives assigned by the legislature or the

commissioner (TEA, 2020).

Sample

Texas had 1,029 public school districts, according to the TEA website (2019). Each school was led by a superintendent and school board. According to the Texas Education Code (n.d.) § 11.051. Governance of Independent School District; Number of Trustees (b) a school board must consist of the number of members it had on September 1, 1995. If a school board consists of three to five members, it may request to improve to seven members. However, 1,029 was a significant potential superintendent candidate participant count. In addition, 7,203 was a large potential candidate count for school board members. I multiplied the number of school districts by 7 to equal the product of 7,203. Therefore, a specific criterion was used to populate a more manageable participant list. The experiences from different years of leadership yielded insightful perceptions of teamwork, leadership, and the bridging of organizational levels. I selected a sample of eight superintendents and seven school board presidents based on the recommendation from my chair; and that Yin (2018) suggested saturation happens after 8–10 interviews. I used the Region VII ESC's website to locate 96 potential superintendent candidates for this qualitative case-study and a potential 672 school board member candidates. Each school district website provided me with contact information, including each superintendent candidates' email and phone number. The average tenure for superintendents was between five and six years in the district they served (Herr & Anderson, 2015). As Herr and Anderson indicated in their 2018 study, the context regarding superintendents and their situation must be identified to determine the length of time it took them to become effective. I selected two years of experience as a superintendent because for a superintendent to make an impact on student achievement, research showed it required a minimum of two years in the district (Simpson, 2013; Waters & Marzano, 2006). I also selected school board presidents, who were from the small, rural districts,

as interview candidates. School board presidents and their email address, name, and terms were listed on district's website per Texas Education Code, Subchapter D, Chapter 11, Section 11.1518 (n.d.).

Qualitative Sampling

Qualitative research assesses life using interviews and observations (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). Case study research tends to zone in on a single case and it is selected due to some of its respective characteristics. However, multiple case studies allow a researcher to identify the phenomena using a replication strategy (Yin, 2018). Multiple case-study design lacks strict rules about the number of cases required to satisfy the requirement of replication strategy. Six to 10 cases are suggested by Yin to "provide compelling support for the initial set of propositions" (2018, p. 46). A multiple case-studies approach does not rely on the sampling logic used in survey research (Yin, 2018). This design allowed me to identify similarities or differences regarding the reasons why superintendents left districts. The sample size was determined by the number of interviews when saturation was reached. Saturation occurred when no significant new data came to light. I utilized purposeful sampling in order to narrow the candidate list from 110 candidates to a manageable eight interviewees. Purposeful sampling allowed me to identify superintendents who had transitioned from small, rural districts to larger districts based on my prior knowledge of their transitions.

> The logic and power of purposeful sampling lie in selecting information-rich cases for study in depth. Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the inquiry, thus the term purposeful sampling. Studying information-rich cases yields insights and in-depth understanding rather than empirical generalizations. (Patton, 2002, p. 230)

Materials/Instruments

IRB ethical guidelines and Abilene Christian University's guidelines for informed consent were used in this study. After I obtained informed consent, I scheduled interviews and used a semistructured interview protocol to collect data. The questions for the interview protocol were from a field-tested instrument. I obtained them with permission from Dr. Travis W. Miller (2017). The interview protocol was also based on one more previous study from Marcia Lamkin's dissertation *Challenges and Recommendations for Preparation for Rural School Superintendents* (Lamkin, 2003). Her study keyed on groups of rural superintendents. Research from the literature review suggested aspects of leadership that influenced retention. Questions were designed to identify the factors that played a role in retention rural East Texas superintendents. The interview protocols were free of leading participants to answer without being led or seeking compliance (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). I used Zoom to video and record the interviews and transcribed them with Dedoose, also using Dedoose to identify common themes found throughout the study. All audio recordings, video recordings, and transcribed data will be destroyed five years after the completion of the study to ensure confidentiality.

For the research to discover the experiences of rural East Texas superintendents and rural East Texas school board presidents and identify the factors that led to retention or departure, an effective interview instrument needed to be utilized. During research on this topic, several similar studies on rural superintendents that contained interview questions proved to be useful. The similar studies of rural superintendents did not focus on retention factors. Their studies focused on the changes of preparing rural superintendents prior to assuming the position of superintendent, while this study focused on superintendents who have weathered the storms of leadership as sitting superintendents from two to 10 years and also school board presidents who have experienced superintendents leaving small, rural districts for larger districts. The studies

performed by Lamkin on rural school superintendents guided me to a dissertation titled *Challenges and Changes in the Role of Superintendent of Nebraska's Small Rural Schools* (Miller, 2017). A Google search obtained the author's email address and I informed him of my similar study of rural school superintendents and requested his permission to use his interview protocol. He responded and gave permission to use his interview questions. He also encouraged me to look at further studies regarding the similarities and differences of superintendent retention, studies in other states, and rural schools. Each of the 17 questions were grounded in the literature of Lamkin (2003) and Kochan et al. (1999). The questions considered whether the data of constant turnover of the superintendent position had negative effects on student achievement and staff morale (Kamrath, 2015).

The interviews were semistructured and based on an interview protocol. I conducted the interviews via Zoom due to the COVID-19 pandemic. I saved the video interview and then had it transcribed through Rev.com and coded with the software Dedoose. Saldaña and Omasta (2018) found that decoding allows the researcher to create more manageable units to help expedite data and analyze recurring themes. The findings from these interviews are found in Chapter 4. This qualitative study echoed the research from Saldaña and Omasta (2018) that there are "too many unanswered questions about life, too many unsolved problems, and too many unresolved issues" (p. 24).

I developed the interview protocol on the premise of two prior studies, and I developed questions were based on Marcia Lamkin's dissertation titled *Challenges and Recommendations for Preparation for Rural School Superintendents* (Lamkin, 2003). A focus group of rural superintendents was utilized in the study. Another study used in the development of the interview protocol was *A Thousand Voices from the Firing Line: A Study of Educational Leaders, Their Jobs, Their Preparation, and the Problems They Face* (Kochan et al., 1999).

Qualitative Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

I identified the themes developed from the interviews with the aid of software named Dedoose. Each participant was informed of their right to revoke their consent from participation in the study at any time (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). Data were not collected before Abilene Christian University gave IRB approval, participants were screened, and participants provided their consent. I ensured that the readers trust the research findings, methods, quality and rigor, (Leavy, 2017) and that the research's integrity was confirmed. To convey credibility to the reader, I explained the processes and techniques that brought acceptable results (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). Yin (2018) suggested a "one phase approach" or mini-case study that screens candidates based on limited criteria (p. 105). I developed a screening tool with an online application called Survey Monkey. It was an electronic questionnaire that asked each superintendent for their years of experience, transition from a rural district of less than 700 students to a larger district, their willingness to participate, and contact information if they chose to participate. I selected a criterion of two years of experience because for a superintendent to make an impact, they needed to remain for more than two to five years in the district (Simpson, 2013; Waters & Marzano, 2006). School board presidents also received a Survey Monkey questionnaire that asked them for the size of school district, total years of service, and experiences with transitioning superintendents. Once I received the returned surveys, the school board president participants were identified by those who had served in their district as superintendent from a range of two to 10 years. The superintendent participants were selected based on the number of years they had served as superintendent (at least two years) in a rural district and identified potential candidates who no longer worked in small, rural schools. I contacted each superintendent via email and a follow-up phone call to explain to them the nature of the interviews and provide them with a consent form electronically to sign and return. I

selected school board presidents as participants based on responses that identified the transitioning of superintendents from small, rural districts of less than 700 students to larger districts. In addition, I provided candidates with the interview questions ahead of time to review. The candidates then received an invitation through email to a Zoom link that scheduled the time and date for each interview.

The research data consisted of the 15 participants' responses to the 17 questions in each respective survey. There were two interview protocols for this study. One set of questions targeted the superintendent sample. The other set was intended for school board presidents. The interviews were imported to Dedoose 8.3.41, the software used to conduct the data analysis. Dedoose was used because it was the best software for the data analysis. Also, Dedoose is collaborative, integrating different types of data, able to interpret mixed method data analysis, secure, and inexpensive. The transcription services of Rev were used to convert the audio from the Zoom file into text. Zoom has a feature that separates the video and audio into separate files. Yin suggested that a multiple case study requires that more time and resources are required than just the researcher alone (2018).

The interviews were hosted by Zoom. Zoom was the best software to use because it was the leader in ease of use for video conferencing and collaboration. Its platform was easy to use, and the quality and safety made it the best choice. It was also the medium I used most often regarding meeting with professors and staff members at Abilene Christian University.

To further analyze the invaluable amount of data that I collected through interviews, I utilized coding to determine reoccurring themes, keywords, phrases, and ideas. Codes are the smallest unit of text that conveys the same meaning (Yin, 2018). For this multiple-case qualitative study, I used deductive coding based on factors that impact superintendent retention, such as location, salary, board relations, stress, and systems knowledge. I analyzed the data for

significant statements and highlighted these using Dedoose. The software allowed me to begin

initial coding as I reviewed all data. Next, line-by-line coding occurred as the focus shifted to

reoccurring themes and ideas. Next, I organized similar codes in categories to detect overarching

themes. Themes were phrases that served as abstract sequences of ideas that aided the study's

results (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018).

The categorization of the codes reflected the themes of the study. The goal was that the

15 different perspectives of superintendents and school board presidents interviewed told a

similar story that connected to the themes found through the literature and research. Dedoose

permitted the selection of the participants' responses for qualitative data analyses and themes

(Saldaña & Omasta, 2018).

Qualitative research allowed for a naturalistic study and a poetic likeness with local

interpretation (Christians & Carey, 1989). To ensure this study resonated with rural East Texas

themes, I used Dedoose and Rev to search for significant statements, concepts, patterns, and

trends. The significant statements, based on the participants' lived experiences, included the

participants' relevant perspectives, insights, and stories. Saldańa and Omasta (2018) have found

that decoding allows the researcher to create more manageable units to help expedite data and

analyze recurring themes. The findings from these interviews are found in Chapter 4. This

qualitative study echoed the research from Saldańa and Omasta (2018) that there are "too many

unanswered questions about life, too many unsolved problems, and too many unresolved issues"

(p. 23). Qualitative data analysis was vital in exploring the similarities and differences regarding

the retention of rural East Texas superintendents.

Methods for Establishing Trustworthiness

I ensured that the readers trust the research's findings, methods, quality, and rigor

(Leavy, 2017), and that the research's integrity was confirmed. To convey credibility to the

reader, I explained the processes and techniques that obtained acceptable results (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). Member checking was used to establish the credibility of the data (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). Member checking for this study solicited feedback from Region VII superintendents that were not in the study and potentially professors who instruct superintendent preparation classes from Stephen F. Austin University in Nacogdoches, Texas. I asked members to review the overall themes from the research interviews and themes found throughout the artifacts that I collected.

Researcher's Role

In this study, I maintained an unbiased approach toward the retention factors that affect superintendents in rural East Texas. This study greatly impacted my leadership perspective, and I grew as a scholar and as an educator from conducting this study. I had certain prior knowledge of the superintendents and their school districts only because of having lived and worked solely in Region VII as an educator and as an administrator since 2005. I was acquainted with a few of the participants, but had had no prior relationship with most. I collected and analyzed the data without bias. Personal perceptions of other school districts, leadership, and opinions did not influence my interpretation of the data.

Ethical Considerations

IRB approval from Abilene Christian University was received prior to all data collection. Data were stored on an encrypted computer. The sample of participants was selected from school districts in Region VII. There was no identification of the participants during the study. The methods of protecting participants identities and confidentiality were explained prior to the interviews. All other data, such as school demographics can be found on the TEA's website. The Belmont Report and the guidelines it established were followed. The Belmont Report requires researchers to respect privacy of those in the study, maximize the benefits of participation while

minimizing harm, and that any risks are distributed fairly (Friesen et al., 2017). Participants

completed a consent form that acknowledged their understanding of the study's purpose, their

willingness to participate, and their role. Each participant was informed of their right to revoke

their consent from participation in the study at any time (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). Data were

not collected before Abilene Christian University gave IRB approval, participants were screened,

and participants provided their consent.

Assumptions

This study was based on several assumptions. First, was the assumption that

superintendents do not stay in districts for very long periods. There was also an assumption that

small, rural superintendents leave the remote setting for large, urban districts. Another

assumption was that responses of superintendents with less than five years would vary from

superintendents with 10 or more years' experience.

Limitations

Because this study was limited to eight superintendents and seven school board

presidents in rural East Texas, the geographical breadth was limited to small, rural school

districts within the Region VII service center boundary. Because the primary focus of this study

was on rural school districts with less than 700 students, I excluded superintendents and school

board presidents serving larger population districts.

Delimitations

Simon (2011) stated that delimitations are the characteristics that define boundaries and

are variables controlled by the researcher. The following delimitations were taken into

consideration. First, the study was limited to public school superintendents and school board

presidents within the Region VII ESC. Second, the school districts were small, rural school

districts with less than 700 students. The superintendents' experience was a minimum of two

years' service as a superintendent and limited to superintendent experience. Lastly, the school board presidents' experience included only those who had been serving while their district's superintendent transitioned from a small, rural district of less than 700 students to a larger district.

Summary

This qualitative research investigated the stressors that led to small, rural school superintendents' early departure. A multiple case-studies approach allowed me to identify the phenomena through the use of a replication strategy (Yin, 2018). Six to 10 cases are suggested by Yin to "provide compelling support for the initial set of propositions" (2018, p. 46). This allowed the identification of similarities or differences regarding the reasons why superintendents leave districts. The sample size was determined by the number of interviews when saturation was reached. For this case study, I used a multiple-case design in order to investigate multiple experiences of eight rural East Texas superintendents and seven rural East Texas school board presidents. I designed the study's research questions to address the overarching question: "What affect does stress, salary, school board relations, location, and systems knowledge have on superintendent longevity in their school district?" The questions were answered through qualitative research because it best suited this study due to its ability to assess life through interviews and observations (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). The interviews were semistructured and based on an interview protocol. These interviews were conducted via Zoom due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

TEA provided COVID mitigation guidelines for school districts this year due to the pandemic. Beginning in the fall of 2020, school district restricted the frequency of visitors, deliveries, and community events hosted at the district to slow the spread of COVID-19 and maintain the integrity of providing a safe and secure environment for employees and students.

When visitors were allowed, the social distance between people had to be six feet and face shields or approved face coverings had to be worn. To provide a safer interview experience, I used Zoom to conduct interviews online. This provided a safe and intimate atmosphere that allowed the interviewees and me to conduct safe, confidential, and beneficial research virtually in any location that had reliable internet service and a device on which Zoom could be used.

I saved each video interview and then had it transcribed through Rev and coded with software Dedoose. The interviewees were superintendents located in Region VII of Deep East Texas who had served in their current district for at least two years and school board presidents located in Region VII of Deep East Texas who had transitioned a small rural superintendent to a larger district. To further quantify the invaluable data that I collected through interviews, I utilized coding to determine recurring themes, keywords, phrases, and ideas.

Chapter 4: Results

The fourth chapter of the study presents the results utilizing a thematic analysis of the interviews. The purpose of this qualitative study was to interview eight superintendents and seven school board presidents in rural East Texas school districts and to explore their perceptions and challenges regarding superintendent retention as related to five variables: (a) school board relations, (b) systems knowledge, (c) salary, (d) stress, and (e) location. A brief synopsis of the results according to the five variables is also provided. Two research questions guided the study.

RQ1: What mitigating factors (i.e., systems knowledge, school board relations, salary, stress, and location) do rural East Texas superintendents perceive to be the most important factors that contribute to their plans to remain in their current position?

RQ2: What mitigating factors (i.e., systems knowledge, school board relations, salary, stress, and location) do rural East Texas school board presidents perceive to be the most important factors that contribute to their plans to retain superintendents in their current position? This chapter presents the results of the interviews organized around several themes along with the verbatim responses of study participants.

Results

I determined that 15 themes were proposed by participants in response to the interview questions. Reponses to RQ1 revealed nine themes, with one major theme and eight minor themes. RQ2 revealed six themes, with one major theme and five minor themes. Table 3 presents these two levels of themes for each research question.

Table 3

Breakdown of the Number of Study Themes per Research Question

Research questions	Major themes	Minor themes	Total
Question 1 - superintendents	1	8	9
Question 2 - board presidents	1	5	6
Total	2	13	15

I determined that seven of the eight superintendents interviewed (88%) reported that the primary factor that contributed to the superintendents' plan to remain in their current position was their ability to build effective and productive relationships. In addition, eight minor themes were expressed by the superintendents as indicated in Table 4.

Table 4

Themes Derived From Superintendent Responses

Major Theme	#	%
Building effective and productive relationships	7	88

Minor Themes	#	%
Looking at factors as parts of a system	5	63
Importance of communication with the members of the system	4	50
Adjusting to the norms and culture of smaller districts	3	38
Seeing the positive changes and improvements within the district	3	38
Valuing the importance of truth and accountability	3	38
Continuous improvement of leadership knowledge and skills	2	25
Valuing the importance of loyalty and commitment as leaders	1	13
Needing to be open-minded in dealing with issues	1	13

Note: Possible responses to RQ1 for superintendents: $n = 8$

Research Question 1

The first research question was intended to explore the mitigating factors (i.e., systems knowledge, school board relations, salary, stress, and location) that rural East Texas superintendents perceived to be the important to their plans to remain in their current position.

A brief synopsis of the consensus of the superintendents has been provided for each of the variables listed as mitigating factors.

School Board Relations

The majority of the superintendents indicated building effective and productive school board relationships was of critical importance in order to remain in their current positions. They emphasized how maximizing networks and connections for advice and recommendations, having a support group of team members, and working closely with and connecting with students were factors in convincing them to remain in their roles as superintendents.

Systems Knowledge

The majority of superintendents answered the questions regarding systems knowledge in the sense of organizational skills, procedures, and protocols rather than the intent of the question. The idea of systems knowledge and how to lead school reform is crucial for leaders to be successful in change initiatives (Fullan, 2010). It is also the "ability to recognize the hidden dynamics of complex systems, and to find leverage."(Senge, 2012, p. 418). The participants may have been unfamiliar with the meaning of systems knowledge as defined by Senge (2012). Neither superintendents nor school board presidents mentioned any training of systems knowledge in their educational training or school board member training.

Salary

Salary negotiations, benefits, and incremental pay were very important to each superintendent. Initial contracts and salaries were accepted without negotiation to achieve the status of superintendent. However, each subsequent contract in a new school district led to more detailed negotiating between superintendent and school board. Superintendents recommended that they should always accept a raise when recommended by the school board each year when the superintendent's appraisal and renewal of contract occurred.

Stress

Superintendents did not directly emphasize stress levels when asked but did acknowledge stress related to school board relations and school board elections, finances, and state accountability. Superintendents noted the stress that occurs when there is a large turnover of school board presdents due to elections and the expiring terms. When the majority of a school board is no longer serving, it is believed that the superintendent will begin to lose the initial support from the trustees that hired them. Typically, the school board searches for a superintendent to achieve goals and complete projects. However, when there is turnover on the school board, goals and projects can easily shift and waiver causing inconsistent reform and support for the superintendent.

Location

In some cases, housing was not available when certain superintendents were hired, and these individuals were not forced to reside in the district. However, the majority of responders did mention the requirement of residence within the school district.

Major Theme 1: Building Effective and Productive Relationships

The first major theme of the study highlighted the need for the development and influence of effective and productive relationships for the superintendents and their decision to remain in their districts. Specifically, these relationships revolved around their networks with fellow superintendents and other administrators. Relationships were also defined through their connections and interactions with the board president, other staff members, and through the students and communities.

The superintendents made clear the impact of their own networks in their decision to continue with their roles. In their responses, superintendent participants were coded as SI 1 through SI 8. According to one participant, SI 2, one of the most important influencers was

networking. For this participant, the knowledge, information, and suggestions gained from his peers assisted in his small and big decisions:

> More than networking with others, nothing, because I've got a phone full of contacts on call and say, I've got this scenario, help me out, and then it's just that it's just perfect advice at the perfect time. You can't get this anywhere else. And I got those relationships at First Time Superintendents Academy because you're all in there together, you all know.

> So, I got I had probably about 35 people. Half of them you don't want to talk to. I don't really relate to now, but there's going to be five or six core guys and ladies that you'll call and it's going to save you once, once, or twice a year that that those contacts are going to come in that crucial, at crucial times when you need somebody and you ain't got nobody to talk to. It's just you and the board and you don't necessarily want to go to your board and go, hey, I don't know something because they're relying on your leadership.

Furthermore, SI 3 echoed the impact of building networks and educating oneself in the process. For SI 3, these two factors were deemed to be crucial in pursuing and maintaining his position:

> Well, after starting, I realized that this [is] just kind of like being a teacher, sometimes you realize, oh, man, I didn't have the courses to teach the material and I am learning from the information that came out of a book. But you know, a lot of networking with people that were in my career, just like you talked about building, building that network.

> As for SI 4, he has continued to seek advice from his network where the people he trusts are. This participant explained how the members of the network usually have much knowledge

and experience, and their expertise was helpful in his own responsibilities and decision-making processes:

> And one thing that I've tried to do as much as I can is, you know, I call my network. I call the people I trust, and I want their input. I mean, guys that are sitting in our chairs that have kind of been through things I know are going to shoot me straight and maybe not tell me what I want to hear. I think that what scares me is maybe doing what I think we should do, rather than what we need to do, that makes sense, and so I try to really bounce ideas off some guys. To say, hey, I must set myself up in my walk in myself in the line of fire or you're about doing a lot of them had been through it and they know when they talk you through it.

Finally, SI 5 also highlighted how networking and seeking advice from mentors had been helpful for him. He also described one mentor as "a valuable asset" in his position and role as a superintendent,:

> Man, spend time on the phone with your mentor. My mentor was my Region VII-assigned mentor. And that guy really helped me and is still one of my closest friends in this business. We call each other once every couple of weeks and I really feel awesome when he calls me because I feel like he has it all together. You know, he has the same questions that we have. So, staying in contact with your mentor and then secondly, trying to attend every meeting that you possibly can at your regional service center, because that's where you get into those conversations that aren't scheduled that really help you deal with all the challenges we've been talking about. Because I can guarantee you someone in that group has already been down that road and those old timers are wonderful to talk to.

The participants indicated it was the support group, consisting of the team and board members, which was helpful in performing their tasks and duties more effectively. Eventually, their board members became their support group as they made the decision to stay or leave as superintendents. SI 1 highlighted that having a good, competent team to help in responsibilities helps in attending to and fulfilling the responsibilities of a superintendent. He stated that in the long run, this has helped him appreciate his job and role more:

If you have good people and those jobs and a lot of things never get to you, so you end up being more of a manager of your administrative team and your cabinet becomes really important to you. And so, you spend a lot of your time working with your cabinet and working with your principals. And, you know, I've told people before when I was a trainee, I wouldn't give up anything for my time there. But my last, you know, my last year there, I felt more like the maintenance director than I was a superintendent because, you know, it is where . . . I spent my time.

SI 6 added that receiving support and guidance from board members made the job more manageable. The participant explained how such guidance assisted the leaders who constantly face difficult issues and challenges:

If you're in a bigger school where you were maybe a director and then assistant superintendent and then a deputy and then you became that. But when you go from principal level to superintendent, there's just a lot to it and you being at a smaller school like myself, you wear so many hats that you got to have, you got to know where everything, where if you get into a [larger] school district, they've got 15 different levels, . . . and now that presents a whole different set of problems. But you have people telling you what needs to be done to a large degree.

SI 8 has formed a good relationship with the board, which was achieved by

communicating well with them using different tools and strategies. The participant noted how technology was a huge part of this growth in relationships. The participant described it in this way:

But I had a good relationship with my board, but you got to remember, it was back in the early 90s and so communication, we didn't have texting; we didn't have, you know, we had email. But none of the board members are male. So, it was always . . . was just more of a struggle with them to try to communicate with them. I mean, for me to communicate with them, I would, I would have to actually write . . . out a letter or a sheet of paper.

And that's how we communicated. But they were all great and they were a great board. I mean, I was very transparent with them at board meetings, but the communication just wasn't there because of the technology. And then fast forward to wireless technology. At that point, it started to grow. And because of this, the sheer size of the district and the things that were going on, I communicated probably daily, with my board president daily, not all my board, but daily.

Participants believed the relationship with the students was helpful in pursuing their passion for leadership. As shared by SI 3, he has always liked rural schools and communities as he is able to work closely with the students and connect with them:

I think all of us are connected in education by the kids in a rural school. I still got to connect with those kids. I drove a bus, took kids to livestock show projects, still had that thing with them at lunch. And so that was something that . . . I really enjoyed about that position.

Similarly, SI 5 added that he has always had a connection with small schools, based on past experiences. The participant commented, "Because one, that's it's where I grew up. I grew up in small schools, and I just feel like you have more of a connection to staff and students in a

smaller place."

Minor Theme 1: Looking at Factors as Parts of a System

The first minor theme that emerged was the need to look at factors as parts of a system to address the potential problems and issues. Participants believed that by seeing each person addressing their needs and issues, problems and conflicts were addressed more effectively. SI 3 commented in line with the minor theme: "I can't quote them, but the fifth one is taking all the small parts and applying it to the whole. And that has, what has been so, I think, paramount in my success in five short months is looking at things as a system."

For SI 5, it was important to see the parts of the job and apply them as a system, interlinked and interconnected, to perform their roles and tasks successfully. Meanwhile, this participant also shared the need to treat each one equally and with respect:

In my job, I guess I could relate to 2010, to 2012 is when people started thinking about the system as a whole and that whole discipline and all that really started getting going. And I could see it at Region VII because I've always been in Region VII as a superintendent, and I really start talking about those things. So really, the systems thinking was just a little bit after when I did my work there. But when it comes to systems and you get into the business, you quickly learn that the job is all about systems and how those systems, they intertwine and work together.

This past Friday . . . I stood up in front of the staff, and got 140 staff members, and we talked about how no one person's job in that room was any more important than anyone else's job. Sixty percent of our kids' days start with the bus driver and then with the bus. And it's all those other people in the middle that fill in the dash.

Meanwhile, SI 7 shared that it was also crucial to become involved in the tasks, issues, and conflicts without micromanaging the members, which would make parts of the system become less effective. The participant shared the following:

> And so, I was always nervous about that, didn't want to leave the district in bad shape.
> So, I would say finance was one of them. Politics. Learning how to massage the board
> and work with the board that had board members that stayed on there 20 years, 30 years.
> And I was always a question that you would look at somebody, but now I know he did a
> good job of managing that board and keeping them as board members and not getting
> involved with his micromanaging his job.

Finally, SI 8 related his experience with the constant offers to raise his salary. However, he believed that money was not everything and noted the value of working as one team and seeing positive changes within the district:

> They don't understand that here. And I told them not to give me a raise every year
> because they're going to pay me out of being here. I said, but the real value is you're not
> telling me where to live and you're not telling me where to send my kids to school.
> That's more valuable than a twenty thousand dollar pay raise.

Minor Theme 2: Importance of School Board Communication

The second minor theme that followed was the importance of communication with the members of the institution to ensure that all goals were aligned and that needs were met accordingly. SI 2 shared the importance of communication for superintendents and the team members to warrant that their overall work, responsibilities, mission, and vision were addressed. The participant described the following:

> Okay, so if you know that you need to be a great communicator, a great superintendent,
> then you need to systematically go back to a system thinking systematically to develop a

communication plan. And so that's what I've done on some of the things you've seen. I started with the students, and I created a student advisory council for students to report to teachers and a teacher advisory council for teachers to report to administration so that there is a system for communication throughout the district.

For SI 3, communication was valuable as superintendents and the team could only fulfill their goals and desires for the students through proper communication across the system. Through proper communication, they can see that students were given the tools and opportunities to succeed. The participant stated that

I blew up 11 really good relationships in those two years because they knew I was there not to play gotcha. Never did we even go there. It was all about communication. Here's our plan. These are our expectations. And that's your job as the principal. Your job is to make sure that every one of your kids academically is advancing as far as they can while they're at your campus. And so that to me was my motivation. You've got to have a reason to get up every morning.

Lastly, SI 4 highlighted that communication was crucial to convey messages and information effectively across the board members and the rest of the team to ensure that all members were aware and satisfied. The participant reported during the interview that

you have two books on how to be a good superintendent: You got the book that is traditional and rote that everyone reads and the book of reality of being a superintendent. Guess what? There is nothing in the book that is a secret or great myth to being successful. Go to work and communicate and make the board happy and make teachers happy.

Minor Theme 3: Adjusting to the Norms and Culture of Smaller Districts

The third minor theme that followed was the decision to stay involved and the ability of the superintendents to adjust to the norms and culture of the stakeholders within small school districts. As SI 1 shared, he has simply become used to working in a smaller district, accepting the differences in mentality and norms. This participant explained how privacy has become difficult, but he has also started to understand and accepted the setup:

So, you know, there's a little bit different mentality. I think you have to be you, have to be wired that way to understand that it's just part of working in a small district like that, that that's going to happen. You know, when I was a principal, I had parents show up at my house, you know, and want to talk about issues with our kids. Sometimes it didn't happen a lot, but yeah, I mean, I can see where that's probably something that doesn't happen in larger districts.

SI 2 had the same experience as SI 1. In particular, SI 2 has found a solution to the privacy issue by trying to get out of the town from time to time. The participant also explained how smaller schools and towns demand one to become a leader daily, because then, he and his wife have adjusted accordingly:

There's a fine balance because they say, you know, if you live in a community, you need to shop there and get gas. And I do the best I can to support the whole buy local theory that you're supposed to have. But at the same time, we try to get out of town a little bit so that you're not having to constantly answer those questions because your hat never comes off. You're the superintendent every single day.

And I guess that the worst part about it is church. You want to at least have church to be sacred. And but then they'll come up to you at the pew and start asking you questions about school. And so that irritates me. That really irritates my wife. So that's,

can we not even escape it there? But I guess that's just part of it.

Finally, SI 5 also indicated that the proximity of home to school is a huge advantage for him. He shared that he has adjusted to the privacy concerns of living in a small community, but he has adjusted and found ways to address them. The participant described it this way:

I share my personal cell phone with everyone in the community and I invite phone calls at the appropriate times after they've gone through the right channels. But, yeah, it's hard to step away from the superintendent position in a small community simply because there's not anywhere to go. But you're just . . . in the community. That's one thing I really love about not living in [school community] . . . I drive 30 minutes from here to home. So that's been good.

Minor Theme 4: Seeing the Positive Changes and Improvements Within the District

The fourth minor theme of the study was the positive changes and improvements that superintendents were able to make in their districts. Participants found these to be the key motivators to retain their positions. SI 5 shared how he has found meaning in using his position to help, stating, "Great people. And I was thankful that God placed me there to be able to help. It was a big win for the district and a big win for our staff and kids." SI 5 also added that there were maximum benefits available to him as a superintendent, but for him the highest and main goal was to make an effect in the lives of others:

We're at the pinnacle of the pay scale in our district. We didn't get into this district for money. We got in it to affect as many people as we could positively. And a lot of times our heart goes before our needs. And the life of a superintendent is just expensive. The expectations for a superintendent are higher than your John Q. Public. Your family begins to have a little bit higher expectation.

Meanwhile, SI 7 also touched on the need and fulfilment in making positive changes in

the district. The participant emphasized the following during the interview:

> I'm doing a good job. We've got good test scores . . . our athletics is successful. We have
>
> low turnover, everything was good. But as you know, boards are so funny. They'll debate
>
> for an hour over a twelve hundred dollar raise, but they're going to put something in a
>
> gym or a football field and they'll spend forty thousand at the drop of a hat.

Minor Theme 5: Valuing the Importance of Truth and Accountability

The fifth minor theme of the study was the value of truth and accountability in leadership. SI 3 believed that the values of truth and accountability were crucial in building and maintaining relationships as superintendents. He stated that

> You know, the administrative staff from directors down, they were the ones that really
>
> built the relationships with testing coordinators and counselors and principals. As
>
> superintendent, my number one goal was to reach out to the staff, do a survey and gather
>
> data, just things that we would do and we would take over a new district, so we feel a
>
> sense . . . an incredible sense of responsibility and accountability to each new district.
>
> Similarly, SI 5 echoed the importance of upholding truth and accountability at all times.

The participant shared an example:

> And when I was in . . . my first superintendency, I never lied to anyone. I'm not a
>
> dishonest person. But there were things that I didn't disclose that probably needed to be
>
> disclosed out of protection for either my job or someone else's job or the perception of
>
> my job or the perception of someone else's job. So go ahead and just be fully honest,
>
> meaning, of course, we're not going to lie, but you don't want to hold anything back from
>
> your school board.

Research Question 2

The second research question was designed to uncover the mitigating factors that

positively impact the superintendents' plans to retain their positions based on the perceptions and experiences of the board members. A brief synopsis of the school board presidents' consensus has been provided for on each of the variables listed as mitigating factors.

Systems Knowledge

Four of the seven school board member participants reported the value of leadership knowledge, competence, and skills in maintaining the superintendents' position, which can be linked to systems knowledge. The board presidents' understanding of the term systems knowledge was not as comprehensive as the definition provided in the work of Senge (2012). They did not mention the aspects of systems thinking, team learning, or building a shared vision. The lack of training in this area can be attributed to the difficulty superintendents have bringing about any school reforms, such as in academics and school finance (Nayfack et al., 2017)

School Board Relations

School board presidents highlighted the importance of communication with the members of the system as a factor in maintaining the superintendents' roles. The board presidents expressed the belief that it was crucial for the superintendents to give value and importance to leadership knowledge, competence, and skills to experience success and to remain in their positions.

Salary

School board presidents replied they were confident in negotiating superintendent contracts and salaries. Most school boards utilize their district attorney or a superintendent search firm to employ a new superintendent and receive counsel when applying salary and benefits to the job posting or negotiations. School boards usually negotiate on the lower side of the superintendent pay scale because most applicants are moving from a campus-level principal position to the superintendent office, whereas principals typically have a lower salary than the

superintendent, which is a district-level position.

Stress

Stress was mentioned more for first-time superintendents new to the district. There was also mention that new school board members can raise the level of stress during school board meetings, especially before they attend the new board member orientation. The stress of newly elected school board members is sometimes attributed to personal reasons and their reason for holding the position of school board member.

Location

In Texas, school board members must reside within the school district boundary lines to serve as a trustee. Housing can become an issue due to the rural, isolated area. Superintendents responded they never intended to stay in a small, rural school district but used them as a foot in the door to the superintendency. Small, rural schools are also farther away from larger cities that host annual conferences and monthly trainings that make it difficult for school board members to travel away from the district and be absent from their responsibilities outside of the school district. The superintendents did reside in the district according to most of the school board presidents' responses. Unlike new superintendents, school board members in small rural communities have long-standing ties to the community because they have resided in the community for many years. They have the knowledge of the history of the district and the people.

Five other minor themes were expressed in the interviews with board presidents. Four of the minor themes had only one reference each, respectively. I believe that these minor themes need further research to increase their trustworthiness. Table 5 presents a summary of all themes derived from school board presidents.

Table 5

Themes Derived From School Board President Responses

Major theme	n	%
Valuing the importance of leadership knowledge, competence, and skills	4	57
Minor themes		
Importance of communication with the members of the system	3	43
Valuing the importance of truth and accountability	1	14
Looking at factors as parts of a system	1	14
Continuous improvement of leadership knowledge and skills	1	14
Needing to be open-minded in dealing with issues	1	14

Note. Possible responses to Research Question 2 for school board presidents: *n* = 7.

Major Theme 2: Valuing the Importance of Leadership Knowledge, Competence, and Skills

The second major theme of the study reflected the school board presidents' prioritization of the importance of leadership knowledge, competence, and skills in the retention of superintendents. Four of the seven school board member participants believed that knowledge was key for superintendents and all other leaders in position. Participants believed that the drive to constantly learn and improve was a key motivator. For the verbatim responses, school board presidents were coded as BP 1 through BP 7.

According to BP 3, superintendents needed to have strong decision-making skills, and must be proactive and assertive in their positions. The participant shared an actual example or an experience:

He [the superintendent] was not assertive enough. There was a board member that I think kind of intimidated him and it took him a little time and I actually encouraged him a lot to stand up to him and not be cowed down, not to trickle down to one member who was a little pushy because he was young. And I guess my behavior is first, no worries, because he came from assistant superintendent. And I think the biggest deal on it was that he would let people bully him.

Furthermore, BP 4 believed in the role of competency and skills in retaining such a valuable and difficult position. The participant commented the following:

My philosophy on that is, is that I don't know that I want you to be here long. Yeah. And I say that to say this. You want somebody as your superintendent that other people want. Because my opinion, is kind of like my head coach at a college football team, if nobody's coming after you, coach, you are probably not winning.

Lastly, BP 5 also echoed that a superintendent must be skilled and competent, which also translated to their ability to stay in position and keep working as superintendents. The participant also related that the confidence of superintendents in negotiating contracts comes from their strong knowledge and background:

Negotiating contracts was not difficult because in regard to salary, I was always in the higher end because in my line of work. I've always learned you get what you pay for. And so, you know, if you're constantly looking to get bottom dollar, you're going to constantly be getting somebody who's looking for the next job or they're not going to put that much effort. So, I didn't have a problem negotiating contracts, especially salary.

Board presidents expressed that the ability of the superintendents to lead effectively necessitated that they stayed within their roles and boundaries. According to BP 4, superintendents must be able to deal with the issues correctly and adequately, stating:

And but, you know, we try to convince our board members, if they see something, if they've got a problem, go to her or the superintendent, whoever it is at the time, sit down and talk with them and let them deal with it. Don't you try to deal with it, too. And I think that relieves a lot of the conflict. I'm sure most of the conflict that you have as a superintendent, a young superintendent with board members, is not going to be anything

other than they're probably trying to get involved in stuff they don't need to be getting

involved in.

Minor Theme 1: Importance of Communication With Stakeholders

A minor theme that emerged was the value of communication with the members of the

institution. According to the board presidents, they found that it is important for superintendents

and their stakeholders to be able to communicate to address their issues, goals, and objectives as

a team. BP 1 stated that there needs to be open communication, and find the ability to cooperate

despite issues to keep the peace among the different members of the board and team:

> I'm open to ideas and realize that my personal opinion is not always going to win out.
>
> Like I said, well, I'm one of eight. Well, you have to be open. You also have to realize
>
> that, and you have to take a back seat and be OK with that.

BP 2 explained from experience that superintendents who do not have the ability to

communicate do not last long in position. The participant shared how they would receive

negative reviews and feedback:

> Every year the superintendent would get bad reviews on his communication skills. He
>
> would get bad reviews on his communication skills with the public. You know, you got
>
> to be able to communicate with the public better. You know, people say you're not open.
>
> They can't talk to you. You know, you don't intermingle enough with the public.

Finally, BP 5 believed that a big part of being a superintendent was the need to

communicate effectively with all stakeholders. The participant described the importance of

connection and involvement:
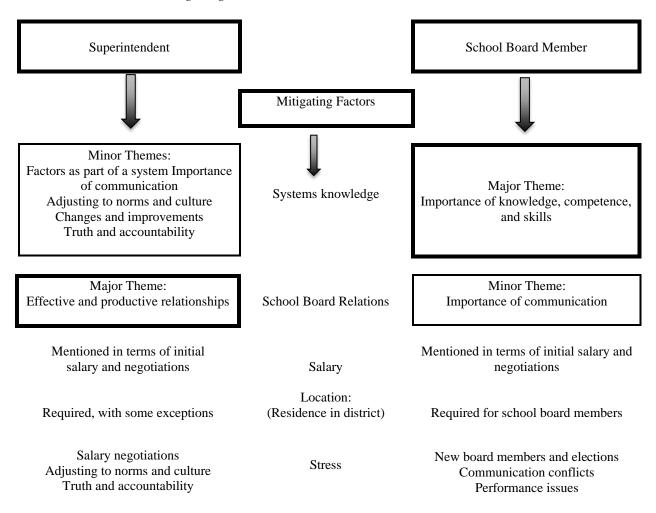
> I don't know if you're doing your job and communicating effectively, you should get
>
> there though. Sometimes I would say communication. I mean, sometimes some
>
> superintendents don't realize just how to be involved or communicate with the

community and school board like they do with faculty and staff. A lot of superintendents

have been principals, so they can communicate with the staff, but they know that they

have to be involved with the board and community. But there's a big part of you as the

CEO of the school. You've got to be involved with the community. A big part of it.

Connection Between Mitigating Factors and Themes

As presented previously, a total of 15 themes were extracted from the eight interview

transcripts of the superintendents and seven interview transcripts of the board presidents. I

presented the complete list of themes in Table 4 and Table 5 to fully demonstrate the firsthand

perceptions and experiences of the participants of the study. I narrowed down the minor themes

by removing those with less than three responses. I determined that these themes need further

research because of the limited number of comments and opinions concerning them. Figure 1

presents the connections between the mitigating factors and themes.

Figure 1

Connections Between Mitigating Factors and Themes

Superintendent		School Board Member
↓	Mitigating Factors	↓
Minor Themes: Factors as part of a system Importance of communication Adjusting to norms and culture Changes and improvements Truth and accountability	↓ Systems knowledge	**Major Theme:** Importance of knowledge, competence, and skills
Major Theme: Effective and productive relationships	School Board Relations	**Minor Theme:** Importance of communication
Mentioned in terms of initial salary and negotiations	Salary	Mentioned in terms of initial salary and negotiations
Required, with some exceptions	Location: (Residence in district)	Required for school board members
Salary negotiations Adjusting to norms and culture Truth and accountability	Stress	New board members and elections Communication conflicts Performance issues

I collected and analyzed interviews from two sets of participants: the superintendents and school board presidents. A total of 15 participants were gathered to communicate their perceptions and experiences to the phenomena of mitigating factors that help superintendents retain their positions. Using the interview responses, I determined the major and minor themes in response to the purpose and research questions. There was a clear difference in the priorities of the superintendents and school board presidents. The major themes for each group of participants were related to two of the mitigating factors of school board relations and systems knowledge;

however, they did not prioritize the same factors. Minor themes were also related to the same two mitigating factors. The mitigating factors of salary, location, and stress were expressed in terms of contractual requirements and personal perceptions, rather than connected directly to one of the major or minor themes. In the next chapter, the I discuss the themes and mitigating factors along with the recommendations, implications, and research conclusions.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The fifth and final chapter of the study contains the discussion of the study findings in relation to the literature along with the conclusions based on the results presented in the previous chapter. Again, the purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate the mitigating factors of superintendent longevity and by interviewing eight superintendents and seven school board presidents in rural East Texas school districts and to explore their perceptions and challenges due to (a) systems knowledge, (b) school board relations, (c) salary, (d) stress, and (e) location. I then thematically analyzed the 15 interview transcripts to address the purpose and the following research questions:

RQ1. What mitigating factors (i.e., systems knowledge, school board relations, salary, stress, and location) do rural East Texas superintendents perceive to be the most important factors that contribute to their plans to remain in their current position?

RQ2. What mitigating factors (i.e., systems knowledge, school board relations, salary, stress, and location) do rural East Texas school board presidents perceive to be the most important factors that contribute to their plans to retain superintendents in their current position?

With the analysis, I generated 15 themes that pertained to the phenomena of the current study. The majority of the superintendents reported that relationships were the key mitigating factor in their decision to retain their positions. Meanwhile, the board presidents, from their actual experiences, identified the importance of leadership knowledge, competence, and skills of superintendents to enable them to stay and continue as leaders of the districts. In this chapter, I present a discussion of the themes along with my interpretations, remarks, and conclusions.

Discussion

This section of the study contains the discussion of the themes along with the previously reviewed literature and the research framework. The section is organized according to the two

research questions of the study. The themes are explained based on both my interpretations and their connections or lack thereof to the literature.

Research Question 1

Both the literature review and the results of the study indicated the fact that there are numerous factors, challenges, and issues that superintendents face daily (Lamkin, 2006; Waters & Marzano, 2006; Grissom & Andersen, 2012; Lubelfeld & Polyak, 2017). Such issues result in the need to uncover the most critical factors that contribute to the decisions of the superintendents to remain in their current position (Kamrath, 2015) to reduce and eliminate the bigger and negative implications caused by the frequent turnover in the rural superintendent position. The analysis of the actual interviews with the superintendents led to the discovery that building and maintaining relationships with other superintendents, board members, and members of the community was considered the biggest mitigating factor that contributed to their plans to persist in their current position.

The major theme of the study was supported in a report by Byrd et al. (2006) that found that the presence of stressful relationships between superintendents and school board presidents and members resulted in 1.3 times greater chance of experiencing superintendent turnover. This statement implied that healthy relationships between superintendents and other stakeholders must be maintained to avoid stress, which could eventually lead to burnout and turnover. Campbell and Fullan (2019) supported this notion, stating that superintendents must value effective relationships, especially with their school boards. They highlighted how superintendents must then embody several traits, characteristics, and values that could promote the positive relationship between superintendents and stakeholders, including having resolution, upholding standards and morals, and staying focused, constant, and respected (Campbell & Fullan, 2019). Furthermore, the major theme was corroborated by the study's framework or model in which

relationships are seen as the most important part of the system and wherein the relationship is determined as a living system that communicates and interacts to reach the goal of improving and providing quality education for all stakeholders (Senge, 1994).

The minor themes centered on (a) looking into parts of a systems, (b) communication, (c) adjusting to the norms and culture of a small district, (d) positive changes and fulfillment, and (e) truth and accountability. As observed, these factors are comprehensive but could also be deemed interrelated when looked at closely. Regarding the use of systems knowledge in managing the schools, it was noted that superintendents also worked to maximize the smaller parts of the system, mainly by treating them fairly and equally, to encourage a more collaborative and conducive workspace or environment for all stakeholders. As Fullan and Quinn (2016) explained, a system can only be reformed and attain its goals with the presence of the collective capacity to (a) influence change, (b) reduce diversions, and (c) promote balance. These three goals were achieved by building the capacity of stakeholders while promoting accountability, constant development of knowledge and skills, and mutual commitment to achieve the goals of the system. These factors are closely aligned to the minor themes of the study, emphasizing how systems thinking and knowledge and its values support the superintendents' motivations and even the processes followed as they create substantial implications and changes in their systems. It could be noted that with the attainment of these changes, superintendents become more committed to further their vision and mission as leaders and develop necessary personality traits to be strong leaders (Björk et al., 2018; Derue et al., 2011).

Research Question 2

The second research question of the study explored the board presidents' perceptions and experiences of the mitigating factors that they believed could contribute to the superintendents' plans to stay in their position. From the analysis, the majority of the board presidents reported

that superintendents' decisions were influenced by their own knowledge, competence, and skills to lead the board members and the rest of the stakeholders. Meanwhile, another minor theme was the impact of communication on staying on as superintendent of the district.

Both the results of the study and the literature on systems knowledge convey the same message: systems knowledge includes the presence of continuous changes and improvements within the system or in this case, the school district. The statement indicated the superintendents' ability to continuously develop knowledge and capacity to keep the system running and advancing (Nayfack et al., 2017). Without the ability to do so, it is believed that school districts would be unable to reach their educational objectives optimally; this; then translates to the leadership's ineffectiveness. Another important theme was the need for communication and its influence on the superintendents' decisions. In their experience, the board presidents have witnessed how the lack of communication skills led to the failure of a number of superintendents. Again, the finding was corroborated in the literature and framework: Without the presence of proper and effective communication across many roles (Björk et al., 2018), the parts and members of the system would find it impossible to work together and achieve their goals and objectives, which is corroborated in the research (Lubelfeld & Polyak, 2017). Again, as a result, superintendents as leaders would be unsuccessful in conveying their meanings, messages, and purpose.

Delimitations

With the completion of the current research study, I realized there were several delimitations, and I worked to reduce their impact on the final report or research study. First, I was limited to a total of 15 participants, which could be considered small compared to the total population of the public-school superintendents and school board presidents within the Region VII ESC. This small number may have then affected the transferability of the results of the study.

Another delimitation was the use of one primary source of data—the interviews with the participants.

Limitations

COVID-19 protocols required that the interviews be conducted via Zoom instead of in-person. The interviews may have been limited as well given the possibility that both sets of participants controlled their responses to the interview questions to protect their respective roles and positions in their respective schools and districts. For the superintendents, it is possible that they may have avoided sharing negative aspects about their leadership and other factors that may affect their decisions to remain in position to protect their leadership or other unknown variables and explanations. Meanwhile, the board presidents may have also controlled responses as they may have feared that their negative responses and perceptions may negatively impact their careers.

My lack of direct questioning pertaining to some of the mitigating factors (i.e., systems knowledge, school board relations, stress, salary, and location) may have had the effect of de-emphasizing the previous research involving three of these factors: stress, salary, and location. Stress was expressed in interviews that included discussion of participants' school board elections, meeting members of community at church, or family outings. The literature referred to this as internal stressors, or the individual's ability to cope with the interaction of specific aspects of life and external stressors or factors that cannot be anticipated (Gan & Anshel, 2006).

Salary and compensation are key negotiating points for superintendents, but they are also dependent on each school district and their respective dynamics, challenges, and resources. I did not ask the question: "Did you leave the small, rural school district for more money?" because that would be too direct and not serve the overall nature of this research. Moschella (2019) found that superintendents understood that with each position and increased professional

responsibilities, there was commensurate pay attached.

Rural location and its negative attributes found within the literature depicted that superintendents often do not stay in small, rural school districts for a long period of time and move to larger, urban districts (Kamrath & Brunner, 2014). The superintendents interviewed in this study were leaders who made the transition from small, rural schools to larger school districts.

I found that these assumptions on limited responses could be addressed through the two strategies: making the participants as comfortable and at ease as possible during the interviews and always reminding them of the confidentiality of the interviews. By building a rapport with the participants, I sought to extract as much information as possible from the superintendents and board presidents that could be useful for the study, while respecting their interview requests and preferences. Further, I also commenced the interviews once all informed consent forms were suBPitted. The ethical concerns, particularly the anonymity of the participants, were discussed before and after the interviews. I also assured them that their identities would not be known as participant codes were assigned and that data were stored in a password-protected computer.

Implications

The results of the study provide insights that could assist the key policymakers and decision makers in creating a more conducive environment for superintendents, assisting them in their leadership that could lead to a reduced turnover rate. Yates and Jong (2018) found that superintendents depart early from school districts due to poor school board relations. The Yates and Jong study represented the viewpoint of superintendents only. The unique aspect of this study compared to previously conducted research is the inclusion of the data from the second group of stakeholders, the school board presidents. It is important to represent the perceptions and experiences of both the superintendents and the school board presidents. It is also crucial to

explore the acumen of school board presidents as they interact closely with the superintendents and have the key knowledge and understanding of the factors that positively and negatively impact the superintendents in their position. Therefore, with the study themes, key policymakers and decision makers now have targeted, up-to-date data that they could employ to modify the current program structure and work environment for the superintendents. They could use the data from the two sets of participants to improve the experiences of the superintendents and clearly define the superintendent's responsibilities despite their many leadership duties and responsibilities. With the availability of a better program and environment for superintendents, reduction in turnover is not the only positive impact expected. I also believe that in the long run, better superintendent and school board relationships will be formed and collaboration will continue to increase. With these changes, educational objectives will be attained and quality education will be provided to more students across the country.

Recommendations

The recommendations are divided into two categories: for practical application and for future research. Under practical application, I discuss the suggestions that could be useful in the actual research setting. Meanwhile, recommendations for future research include the changes and improvements that future scholars may apply to advance and expand the current research study.

Recommendations for Practical Application

The first recommendation for practical application is for the key policymakers and decision makers who manage the programs and training of superintendents to consider periodically updating their training programs and manuals for the superintendents. This recommendation was determined based on the themes under the first and second research questions, which indicated the significance of effective relationships with all stakeholders, practicing active and open communication, improvement of knowledge and skills, and other

relevant leadership values and traits. With these key areas, programs may then be created or updated to ensure that superintendents are well-equipped with the practices and abilities to perform their jobs. The study and application of systems knowledge and systems thinking (Senge, 2012) to both groups would be effective given the apparent lack of familiarity on the part of the participants with the terms, which was evident from their responses to interview questions specific to systems knowledge. At the same time, it is also critical to constantly check the superintendent's workload to avoid stress or burnout. With the fulfillment of the said areas, superintendents would be better able to succeed and achieve their goals, which could increase the possibility of the superintendents remaining in their position.

The second recommendation is also connected to the first practical application. In the current study, the importance of the relationship between the superintendents and school board presidents was constantly highlighted. In this regard, I noted the importance of finding effective strategies that could continuously enhance the relationship between them. One strategy might be to acknowledge and discuss the disparity in the mindsets uncovered through the interviews. With the superintendents emphasizing the importance of building relationships and the board presidents highlighting the importance of leadership, competence, and skills, there appears to be an opportunity for conflict. With a harmonious and cooperative relationship, superintendents and board presidents can achieve increased educational goals and objectives and could provide quality education to their students.

Recommendations for Future Research

As for the recommendations for future research, I believe that future scholars must focus on collecting and analyzing data that include not only the factors that influence superintendents' decision to stay in their position but also the sources and challenges that need to be resolved to make the superintendents' job more manageable and sustainable. The current research study

strictly focused on the mitigating factors that contribute to the decision to remain. It would then be beneficial to also understand the root causes of their decision to consider leaving their position to better understand both the negative and positive factors that impact the leadership of superintendents.

The second recommendation for future research is to collect secondary sources, such as small surveys and small focus group discussions, with the same sets of participants. The second recommendation is in line with the limitation of the study, which could be used to determine whether the responses of all participants would corroborate their initial answers during the personal interviews. The additional data could then assist in finding more facts and meanings that discuss the perceptions and experiences of both the superintendents and board presidents.

Summary

The completion of the current study uncovered important findings that are crucial in understanding the high turnover rate in the superintendent position. In the study, it was revealed that the superintendents focused on relationships and values present in their leadership. Meanwhile, school board presidents highlighted the importance of the knowledge, competence, and skills of the superintendents that the board presidents deemed could impact superintendents' decisions to stay in their positions. The differences in their perceptions provide solid evidence that the leadership of superintendents may be viewed differently by the leaders themselves and the members under them. Such variations and differences could then be employed to better understand the thoughts, feelings, and positions of the two groups to work more effectively given that the current study also restated the constant need for the different parts of the system to eventually function as one as the superintendents themselves noted that they cannot fulfill their tasks alone.

As superintendents reported the value of relationships and the board presidents noted the value of knowledge, competence, and skills, they can then focus on building the two areas further to achieve a system that could be more conducive for both sets of participants. With the attainment of such a system, educational objectives would be attained more efficiently and resourcefully. In the future, a larger community and system would benefit from the changes and modifications performed to convince the superintendents to retain their positions with the help and guidance of the stakeholders and the board presidents themselves.

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Appendix A: Superintendent Interview Protocol

1. How many years have you served as a school superintendent?

2. How many years have you served in your current position?

3. What led you to the role of the superintendent?

4. Why did you choose to work in a small, rural school district?

5. Do you live in the community where your school district is located?

6. Tell me about your professional preparation, including any degrees or certifications you have earned.

7. Tell me about the primary problems and challenges you faced as a new superintendent.

8. Tell me about the primary problems and challenges you have faced in your work as a superintendent in a small, rural school district.

9. Regarding challenges in your role as a superintendent in a small, rural school district, tell me about some of the most significant challenges you have experienced.

a. Prompt: Financial, community relations, teacher negotiations, working with the teacher's union, politics, board relations, accountability, personnel, state and federal mandates

b. Potential follow-up question: How are the challenges you have experienced related to the fact that you are serving in a small, rural school as opposed to a larger or urban school district?

10. There has been research regarding critical incidents between board members and superintendents. Can you describe any major challenges you have had regarding

working with a board of education or individual board members?

a. Potential follow-up questions:

   i. How did you come to a satisfactory resolution to the problem(s)?

   ii. What lessons would you share with other superintendents based on that experience?

   iii. How has that experience changed how you approach your work?

11. There has been research regarding the limited privacy in small, rural school district communities. What experiences have you had related to this issue as a superintendent?

a. Potential Follow-up:

   i. How did you respond to the issue(s)?

   ii. How have these issues impacted your life or impacted your activities in the community?

   iii. What impact have these issues had on your family?

12. As you think about the challenges we have discussed, what strategies or tools have you used to minimize the challenges?

13. What other challenges have you experienced that are attributed to being in a small, rural school district as opposed to a larger or urban school district?

14. How confident were in negotiating your first contract as superintendent?

15. Did your superintendent preparation class or professional development for yourself present the idea of systems thinking? If yes, how has systems thinking influenced your district leadership and/or school reform (if necessary)?

16. How prepared were you for the challenges of the superintendency?

17. What recommendations do you have to improve preparation and support for new

    superintendents in small, rural school districts?

Appendix B: School Board Member Interview Protocol

1. How many years have you served as a school board member?

2. How many total years have you served in your current term?

3. What led you to the role of the school board member?

4. Why did you choose to serve in a small, rural district?

5. Do you live in the community where your school district is located?

6. Tell me about your school board trustee preparation, including any
   outside degrees or certifications you have earned. Have you ever
   presented at a TASB conference? Served as a member or officer at for
   TASB?

7. Tell me about the primary problems and challenges you faced hiring a
   new superintendent.

8. Tell me about the primary problems and challenges you have faced in your work
   with the superintendent in a small, rural school district.

9. Regarding challenges in your role as a school board member in a small, rural
   school district, tell me about some of the most significant challenges you have
   experienced.

   a. Prompt: Financial, community relations, teacher negotiations, working with the
      teacher's union, politics, board relations, accountability, personnel, state and
      federal mandates

   b. Potential follow-up question: How are the challenges you have experienced
      related to the fact that you are serving in a small, rural school as opposed to a
      larger or urban school?

10. There has been research regarding critical incidents between board members and

superintendents. Can you describe any major challenges you have had regarding working with a superintendent or individual board members?

    a. Potential follow-up questions:

        i. How did you come to a satisfactory resolution to the problem(s)?

        ii. What lessons would you share with other superintendents and school boards based on that experience?

        iii. How has that experience changed how you approach your work?

11. There has been research regarding the limited privacy in small, rural school district communities. What experiences have you had related to this issue as a school board member?

    a. Potential Follow-up:

        i. How did you respond to the issue(s)?

        ii. How have these issues impacted your life or impacted your activities in the community?

        iii. What impact have these issues had on your family?

12. As you think about the challenges we have discussed, what strategies or tools have you used to minimize the challenges?

13. What other challenges have you experienced that are attributed to being in a small, rural school district as opposed to a larger or urban school district?

14. How confident were in negotiating contracts with new superintendents?

15. Systems Thinking: Understand how individual parts or actions affect the whole organization. It is an understanding of how individuals can work together to impact the whole organization (School board members constantly receive phone

calls from parents regarding inconsistent discipline. Does the school or superintendent get mad at the principal or parents, or does the school or superintendent think about each factor involved: handbook, rules, communication, years of experience of principal, time of events, history of student, staff development, etc.) Did your superintendent present the idea of systems thinking? If yes, how has systems thinking influenced your district leadership and/or school reform (if necessary)?

16. How prepared were new superintendents for the challenges they faced? Where did their support come from? Professors, workshops, peers, service center, continued education?

17. What recommendations do you have to improve preparation and support for new superintendents in small, rural school districts?

Appendix C: IRB Approval

ABILENE CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY
Educating Students for Christian Service and Leadership Throughout the World

Office of Research and Sponsored Programs
320 Hardin Administration Building, ACU Box 29103, Abilene, Texas 79699-9103
325-674-2885

May 25, 2021

William Zachary Crawford
Department of Educational Leadership
Abilene Christian University

Dear Zach,

On behalf of the Institutional Review Board, I am pleased to inform you that your project titled
"Retention Factors of Rural East Texas Superintendents",

(IRB# 21-064   )is exempt from review under Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects.

If at any time the details of this project change, please resubmit to the IRB so the committee can determine whether or not the exempt status is still applicable.

I wish you well with your work.

Sincerely,

Megan Roth

Megan Roth, Ph.D.
Director of Research and Sponsored Programs