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**LEADERSHIP ACTIONS AND STRUCTURES  
SUPERINTENDENTS BELIEVE TO ENHANCE SUPERINTENDENT  
LONGEVITY:  
A QUALITATIVE STUDY**

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A QUALITATIVE STUDY**

by

Susanna Vaulx Russell, BA; MA

**Treatise**

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of  
The University of Texas at Austin  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements  
for the Degree of

**Doctor of Education**

The University of Texas at Austin

May, 2014

## **Dedication**

I dedicate this to my family, who have been my inspiration, my helpmates, my motivation, and sometimes my cattle prod. Thank you for the unconditional love and encouragement - none of this would have been possible without you.

Mom, though you became my guardian angel before I was accepted into this doctoral program, I know that you have been with me every step of the way. You have always been my model of resilience; your example taught me that there is a way around every obstacle. In so many ways, I am who I am today, because of who you were. Keep those pennies coming; they mean the world to me.

Daddy, you believed in me and sustained me through some of the greatest challenges in my life. You taught me the power of integrity and the never-ending gift that comes from working with America's youth. You were and ever shall be my hero. Thank you for loving me as only a father can. I'll meet you at the gate. Matthew 25:42-43.

Margie, none of this would have been possible without you. The childcare, the "hotel" service, the encouragement, the love, and the reassurance that you provided made this come together. You are amazing in every way, and I look up to you as a wife, mother, healer, and sage. Thank you for picking me to be your sister, and for sharing your daddy with me. You changed my life forever.

Susanna, my beloved namesake and niece, I dedicate this to you. As you finish high school and head to your next adventure, always keep your goals high, your

confidence strong, and your spirit indomitable. You are brilliant, beautiful, and incredible in every way.

Elizabeth, my amazing, darling niece, I dedicate this to you, as well. Your future is as bright as you are. I hope to show you what your Grandpa Don taught me: that the most important thing we can do in life is to give of ourselves to others. There is so much greatness in you, I can't wait to watch it all develop.

Richard, you are the best brother-in-law on the planet, and I couldn't love you more if you were my true brother. You give so much to those you love, and you have supported me beyond belief. Lily and I are truly blessed to have you there to watch out for us. I love you.

Rick, you have become my "little brother" in every way. I am so blessed to have been able to work with you as a colleague, and to complete this program with you. You have been with me every mile of the way, pushing me, challenging me, and making me laugh. You are forever a part of my family and my heart—we needed someone who looks good wearing a chair for a hat. You're next.

Dr. Z, thank you for seeing something worthy in me all those years ago when you hired me in Judson ISD. In the 13 years I have known you and Donna, you have become part of my family in so many ways. Truly, this is because of you—from nominating me for this program, to giving me the flexibility to attend classes, and calling me every week to check on my progress. I am forever grateful, and I love you both.

Most importantly, I dedicate this to my precious daughter. Lily Katharine, thank you for all you have sacrificed to help Mommy realize this dream. I know that it was not easy for you, dealing with my travel and my homework. Your laughter, your songs, and your hugs, and your belief in me kept me going when nothing else could. Never, ever forget that it is never too late to pursue your goals, and that you are never too old to make your dreams come true. You have been my greatest source of hope, optimism, and motivation from the moment you were conceived. This is for you, my darling. I love you utGalbJ...and Grand-ma-ma.

## **Acknowledgements**

*The will of God will never lead you where the grace of God cannot keep you.*

The past two years have been the most difficult, challenging, and rewarding of my life. As each successive obstacle arose, God put people in my path to support me in overcoming every barrier. That support system and my unrelenting faith have sustained me and allowed me to finish this race. Thank you to each of the “angels” who has accompanied me on this journey. This would not have been possible without you.

Annette, we have walked arm in arm, alone, on this last path. There are no words adequate enough to express the depth of my gratitude and appreciation for the support, the love, and the comfort you have given me. Truly, I would not have survived the madness of the final months without you. This is not the end, but the beginning; I am and always shall be your friend. You are my hero in so many ways and I love you so.

I would like to thank the Ysleta Independent School District Board of Trustees and my superintendents, Dr. Zolkoski, Dr. Perez, and Dr. De La Torre, for allowing me the flexibility to complete this program. I consider it an honor of the highest degree to represent Ysleta ISD in the Cooperative Superintendency.

The CSP 23 Cohort is a magical group; we have set the standard for what a true cohort should be. Rick, Annette, Andria, Joanne, Michael, Elvis, Shirley, Marisol, Jason, and Mollie, you have added so much to my doctoral experience. Thank you for the moments of laughter, madness, and compassion we have all shared. No matter where our paths may take us, we are forever a family.

None of this would have been feasible without the guidance of Hortensia Palomares. Hortensia, thank you for being my shepherd, and for guiding me through the mysteries of pink forms, petitions, and late registrations. Your patience, wisdom, and serenity in the face of panic have been invaluable. Thank you for keeping me on the right track.

Dr. Patricia Somers, you are truly my dissertation angel. Thank you for the late night calls, the many hours of time you have given me, and for always making the time to get me over the next hurdle. I have learned so much from you in this process, and am forever grateful to you for your support and encouragement. You are an amazing secret weapon. Thank you for being my dissertation chair, as well as my friend.

Dr. Rubén D. Olivárez, thank you for helping to shape me into the educational leader I am today. Like Yoda, you are quietly wise, always teaching, ever modeling, and continually pushing your students' reach to exceed their grasps. The impact you have had on Texas public schools, through your leadership of the CSP program, is immeasurable. The impact you have had on me is vast. I have been truly blessed to be your pupil. I hope to always make you proud.

Finally, I would like to express my gratitude to the balance of my dissertation committee. Dr. Barbara Pazey, thank you for taking on an unknown student from outside your department, and being willing to support her on the fast track to graduation. Dr. Edwin Sharpe, thank you for being a model of elegant professionalism and for driving me to perfect my research study. Your guidance made me a better scholar and a better administrator. Dr. Jess Butler, nearly everything I know about finance I learned from



you. Thank you for being my mentor and for your support as I seek my first superintendency. Dr. Michael Zolkoski, there are not adequate words to express my gratitude to you; I hope I will never let you down. Whatever I achieve in my career will be because you took a chance on me in 2001. Thank you for always believing in me and for pushing my reach to exceed my grasp.

**LEADERSHIP ACTIONS AND STRUCTURES**  
**SUPERINTENDENTS BELIEVE TO ENHANCE SUPERINTENDENT**  
**LONGEVITY:**  
**A QUALITATIVE STUDY**

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2014

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The modern American superintendency faces many challenges, including a national concern that there is a demonstrated shortage of qualified school superintendents in the United States. Reported superintendent tenure ranges from 2.5-4.8 years. Various research and anecdotal data identify and illustrate the complex factors influencing superintendent tenure, and in turn, organizational stability and student achievement. In Texas, superintendents identify strained relationships with the school board president, superintendent/school board communication and relations, and the inability to accomplish goals with the board as significant factors in their length of tenure. Superintendent success in creating and sustaining effective working relationships with his or her boards of trustees and various stakeholder groups is predictive of his or her longevity. Superintendents must successfully navigate interactions with their boards of trustees, as well as internal and external special interest groups, and the greater voting community. Studies abound, regarding causal factors in truncated superintendent tenure, as well as the intrinsic challenges of effectively managing the myriad functions of the superintendency. Those studies primarily focus on interactions with the school board, or

describe failed superintendencies from a postmortem perspective. However, the research literature lacks qualitative studies that focus attention on successful superintendent leadership strategies, which have contributed to increased superintendent tenure, and have resulted in increased organizational stability and higher levels of student achievement.

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## **Chapter One: Introduction**

Across America, headlines paint a portrait of superintendents and their communities in conflict: “Atwater superintendent abruptly fired by school board” (Sandrik, 2012). “Agreement calls for Ruidoso superintendent to receive \$75,000 in contract buyout” (Kalvelage, 2012). The climate of America’s school districts is a reflection of the working relationship between trustees and administration (Petersen, 2005). Similarly, the longevity of superintendents appears positively and directly associated with their level of collaboration and teamwork with the Board (e.g., Eadie, 2005; Glass, 2000; Grady & Bryant, 1991; Houston, 2001; Houston & Eadie, 2003).

As national concern over the impending shortage of qualified superintendents mounts (Kowalski, McCord, Petersen, Young, & Ellerson, 2011; Olivárez, 2013), it is important to focus on positive relationships and practices that nurture a strong “team of eight” working relationship, rather than satirical jabs. This study fills a gap in the existing literature on effective leadership strategies for superintendents and their constituencies. It seeks to answer the question of how long-serving superintendents perceive their own longevity through the lens of leadership strategies, using a qualitative phenomenological analysis via interviews with superintendents who served for six or more years in the same academically successful school district.

### **Background of the Study**

There are varying reports of the mean tenure for urban superintendents—from the generally used national figure of 2.5 years to the mean of 3.6 years (Casserly, 2010, Kowalski et al., 2011) developed jointly by the Council of the Great City Schools

(CGCS) and the American Association of School Administrators (AASA). Longitudinal research reports, such as those by the CGCS (Casserly, 2010) and AASA (Kowalski et al., 2011) consistently reflect that superintendent longevity matters, if superintendents and school boards are going to successfully move their district forward. “A district is as stable and grounded as its superintendent” (Pascopella, 2011, p. 31). Significantly, the McREL research group data reflect that increased superintendent tenure is positively correlated to increased student achievement outcomes (Waters & Marzano, 2006). In addition, the communities they serve, and the boards of trustees that hire and fire them, judge superintendents’ value; rapid turnover in the position is viewed negatively.

We expect them to be superintendent[s] at least five years if they want to make the impact they want...if you really want to lay a foundation and make things last and get the district where it needs to be, you need to stay longer. (Pascopella, 2011, p. 32)

In addition to the issues of brief superintendent longevity, there is a demonstrated superintendent shortage in both Texas and the nation in a time when leading schools is complicated by multiple difficulties (Glass & Bjork, 2003).

Today’s superintendents face the challenges of a struggling national economy, budget shortfalls, increasing federal accountability standards, and a likely job expectancy of less than four years (Casserly, 2010; Olivárez, 2013). Likewise, “the significant challenges facing school boards—declining funds, rising employment costs, stagnant performance, and persistent achievement gaps—have directed a new spotlight on governance issues” (Campbell, 2012, p. 2). In short, they must do more with less, and in a very compressed timeframe.

Leading a school district is a challenging job for both school superintendents and board members. The difficulty of providing for our nation's schools is well-understood. "Boards of education and superintendents are often targets of criticism and live in a permanent state of turbulence and pressure" (Petersen & Fusarelli, 2001, p. 3). School districts across the country are "constantly undergoing change, stress, and transition, as communities elect new school board members, new demands are made on schools, and key leaders come and go" (Natkin, Cooper, Alborano, Padilla, & Ghosh, 2002, p. 1). The resultant instability of district leadership impedes school change and improvement (Danzberger, 1994), has a negative effect on student achievement (Waters & Marzano, 2006), and threatens district morale and stability (Alsbury, 2003). Superintendents must be intentional in their efforts to cultivate positive relationships with the board, not only if they seek a long tenure (Tamez, 2011) but also if they are to be effective in their leadership capacity as the CEO of the district (Olivárez, 2013).

This chapter introduces the research focus for this study through the statement of the problem. An overview of the format of the study, the research questions, the methodology, definitions of key terms, and the study's significance are provided.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Effective school district leadership depends on the skill and effectiveness with which a superintendent creates and sustains focus on student achievement, as well as the tenure he or she is able to maintain in his or her school district (Waters & Marzano, 2006). The ability of a superintendent and his or her board of trustees to provide organizational stability - especially during times of perpetual change - is essential to

developing and maintaining successful school districts (Bolman & Deal, 2010; Dervarics & O'Brien, 2011). A superintendent's success in creating and sustaining effective working relationships with his or her boards of trustees, stakeholders, and community is predictive of longevity for school leaders (Byrd, Drews, & Johnson, 2006; Kowalski et al., 2011; Petersen, 2005). There are multiple internal and external forces that can limit a superintendent's tenure in a given position. The ability to leverage power and influence with trustees and various constituencies can be a determining factor in maintaining longevity as a superintendent.

Yukl (2012) discussed various forms of power: positional, personal, and legitimate, as well as three outcomes of influence: commitment, compliance, and resistance. He characterized influence as the ability to change someone's behavior through words or acts, and power as the ability to successfully exert that influence in order to solidify one's own status. Yukl argued that effective leaders successfully utilize a variety of powers to influence outcomes.

Research on the use of different forms of power by leaders suggests that effective leaders rely more on personal power than on position[al] power. Nevertheless, position[al] power is still important, and it interacts in complex ways with personal power to determine a leader's influence on subordinates. As Kotter (1982) suggested, effective leaders probably use a mix of different types of power. (p. 84)

Yukl (2012) asserted, "influence is the essence of leadership" (p. 207). That is, the quality with which a superintendent deploys influence defines the caliber of his or her leadership and resistance to external threats. Three theories can be applied when considering superintendent longevity.

Callahan's vulnerability theory (1962) proposed that the longevity of a superintendent is directly related to his or her ability to remain aligned to the school board's decisions. Superintendents who are unable to maintain that alignment become vulnerable, which may decrease their tenure. Eaton's cumulative theory (1990) extended Callahan's vulnerability theory by asserting that superintendent vulnerability reaches beyond superintendent/board member relationships and extends to external special interest groups such as community members and teachers' associations. Further, Eaton suggested that superintendent vulnerability increases between years four and six of tenure in the role. Lutz and Iannaccone's dissatisfaction theory (1986) described a series of events that begins with community changes in satisfaction, values, or demography and ultimately lead to dissatisfaction with the board or the community's support of the superintendent. This process can lead to board and superintendent turnover. Together or separately, these theories comprehensively address the majority of causes for superintendent turnover.

Confirming the significance of these three theories, various research and anecdotal data identify and illustrate the complex factors influencing superintendent longevity (Carver, 2006; Eadie, 2005; Smoley, 1999; Williams, 2008). In addition to categorizing broad themes to explain superintendent turnover, there remains a substantive need to understand and to identify strategies superintendents can employ to nurture and to strengthen relationships with the board of trustees (Callahan, 1962), various external organizations (Eaton, 1990), and the greater community, as a whole (Lutz & Iannaccone, 1986). Managing spheres of influence is essential to forming

internal, external, and school board relationships to maximize effective leadership (Allen, 2008; Greenleaf, Spears, & Covey, 2002; Yukl, 2012).

### **Purpose of Study**

As superintendents refine their skills at leveraging influence for leadership (Yukl, 2012), specific study on successful leadership actions, which translate theory into action, seems necessary. The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative study was to examine the perceptions of superintendents who have been in an academically successful district for six years or more, and to explore leadership strategies that they believe have led to long-term organizational stability. The overarching goal of the study was to relate superintendent leadership actions to organizational sustainability. The research focused on superintendents' leadership strategies and their relationship to superintendent tenure and district organizational stability.

This intent of this study was to describe and analyze long-serving superintendents' leadership actions they reportedly believed to be influential to their longevity. This study built on prior research recommendations derived from studies of superintendent longevity (Allen, 2008; Merrell, 1997; White, 2007; Williams, 2008), and sought to deepen an understanding of actions and structures that superintendents with greater than average tenure employ (Allen, 2008; Ancona, Malone, Orlikowski, & Senge, 2007; Goodman & Fulbright, 1999; Orr, 2006). Further, this study highlighted superintendents' assessments of specific areas of training that should be provided in superintendent preparation programs.

## **Research Questions**

This study asked the following questions about superintendents with longer than average tenure in their position in an academically high-achieving school district:

1. How do superintendents maintain alignment with their boards of trustees?
2. How do superintendents cultivate relationships with external and internal special interest groups?
3. How do superintendents navigate connectivity with their community?

To answer these questions, a qualitative research design was used.

## **Methodology**

To answer the research questions, a qualitative research design was employed. This study used a phenomenological qualitative design method, adhering to the five core tenets of qualitative research:

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

(Merriam, 2009, p. 38)

This study used an interpretivist paradigm, wherein all meaning and reality were constructs of individual meaning and experience. When using an interpretivist paradigm, the researcher must acknowledge she cannot separate herself and her values from the research process. Through the dialectical process, meaning emerged and understandings



deepened. Angen (2000) delineated criteria to adhere to when conducting and evaluating research from an interpretivist perspective:

- careful consideration and articulation of the research question;
- carrying out inquiry in a respectful manner;
- awareness and articulation of the choices and interpretations the researcher makes during the inquiry process and evidence of taking responsibility for those choices; and
- a written account that develops persuasive arguments. (pp. 394-395)

Angen also addressed ethical validity, considering the political and ethical impact of choices reached through the process of conducting research. For the purposes of this study, the language utilized by the superintendents interviewed was meticulously recorded and evaluated. Understanding the individual perspectives of the research subjects as **their** reality was the major focus of the study.

### **Definitions of Terms**

*Academically High-Performing District:* a district that has attained national or state recognition as a district with high levels of student achievement.

*Governance:* the control over decision and policy making for an organization; Texas school districts are governed by local, state, and national authority.

*Phenomenological study:* describes the meaning of individuals' lived experiences

*Superintendent:* the chief executive officer of a school district. For the purpose of this study, a superintendent must have served at least six years in an academically successful Texas school district.

*Team of eight:* the superintendent and his or her board of trustees; most Texas school boards are comprised of seven trustees, though some have nine.

*Trustee:* an elected community member serving on a multi-member school board.

### **Significance**

As the role of the American superintendent continues to evolve, influence and communication are key for the contemporary superintendent (Kowalski et al., 2011; Yukl, 2012). Gaining a deeper understanding of superintendents' effective leadership practices supports can support aspiring, novice, and veteran superintendents by enhancing their professional skill sets and applying proven strategies when managing influence with their boards of trustees. Further, superintendent preparation programs could incorporate information from this study into curricula and training modules. Beginning superintendents could benefit from embedding effective leadership strategies into high-impact entry plans. Sitting superintendents could apply practices highlighted in the study to work with new trustees when elections create board member turnover, and to negotiate challenges from external stakeholders. In addition, school board members could also find value from this study, as the outcomes could focus their efforts toward creating and sustaining positive team of eight relationships. As they conduct searches for superintendents, the results of this study could guide their questions and search parameters for hiring a new superintendent. This study could provide valuable information to a wide range of stakeholders in school district leadership. It could yield a deeper understanding, from a practitioner's perspective, of the actions and structures that

may produce positive relationships with superintendents, their communities, and their boards of trustees.

### **Assumptions**

This study was based on the assumption that participants would answer truthfully and provide authentic answers based on their own professional experiences. This required the researcher to develop a relationship of trust with all participants and to assure anonymity, as further discussed in Chapter Three. It was further assumed that the research process would identify strategies that would have an impact on superintendent longevity.

### **Delimitations and Limitations**

The following delimitations defined the scope of this study. This study was limited to six superintendents of Texas public school districts, as defined in the definitions portion of this chapter. Results were based entirely on qualitative data rather than quantitative data.

Limitations of this study included those related to a qualitative study: the findings only apply to the districts being studied and are not necessarily generalizable to other school districts. The validity of the study was dependent on the reliability of the survey instruments. Yukl (2012) criticized leadership research for its tendency to overlook large scope in favor of narrow studies. The scope of this work was limited due to the limited number of participants. It was a narrowly constructed investigation, such as those disparaged by Yukl.

## **Chapter Summary**

This chapter introduced the research focus for this study, established the context for the study of actions and structures that superintendents consider to have facilitated their longevity in their position. A roadmap for the study was provided. This chapter delineated the research questions and introduced the overall areas of research conducted. Chapter Two provides a review of the related literature relevant to this study. Chapter Three specifies the methodology. Chapter Four conveys the results, and finally, Chapter Five provides a discussion of the findings and a summary of the study.

## **Chapter Two: Review of the Literature**

A purposeful review of the literature regarding how school superintendents create positive relationships with their stakeholders emphasizes the relational nature of leadership in the superintendency and the necessity of responsive leadership in order to meet the ever changing demands of the position (Byrd et al., 2006; Eadie, 2005; Harris, 2012; Williams, 2008). The complex nature of the contemporary superintendency demands leadership at all levels act as members of a collective group, both within the school system, within their community, and with their boards of trustees (Grogan, 2000). As the superintendency has evolved, the types and mechanisms of leadership structures used by superintendents have likewise changed. Today's school leader is challenged to work within his or her professional network, in order to gain the support and confidence of the community (Tschannen-Moran, 2004; Eaton, 1990; Lutz & Iannaccone, 1986; Callahan, 1962). Bjork and Keedy (2005) suggest the most effective leaders are those capable of creating a process through which "information is exchanged in multiple directions and persons influence one another's behavior over and above their organizational role, rank, and status, orchestrating multiple layers of collaboration and communication that are responsive to the varying contexts in which they occur (Grogan, 2000). The initial portion of this chapter traces the evolution of the modern superintendency, outlines the contemporary functions of superintendents, and discusses leadership concepts. The latter half of the chapter explores the challenges facing superintendents, including the superintendency in crisis, and barriers to superintendent

longevity. A conceptual framework to be used for the study is also provided is also provided.

### **The Evolution of the Modern Superintendent**

As the demands on America's public school systems have increased, the expectations for the superintendent of schools have changed. Today's superintendent is the most publicly visible and accountable person in the school district's organization. The modern conceptualization of the superintendency builds upon its historical roots, as described by Callahan (1962) and Kowalski et al. (2011). According to Kowalski et al., the American superintendent has historically been viewed as teacher-scholar, business manager, statesman, applied social scientist, and communicator. Each of these identities comprises an essential skill and function for the 21st-century superintendent. As the position has evolved, various historical traits have been incorporated into each successive manifestation. It is critical for the successful superintendent to understand not only the history of the job, but more importantly, the essential knowledge and skills of each era to cultivate the particular competencies of each epoch and apply them to the myriad functions of the contemporary superintendency.

The superintendent as teacher-scholar model, prevalent in the late 19th century, cast the superintendent as a highly effective teacher, whose role was to oversee classroom instruction and educational initiatives and to mirror the mores of the community in which he or she served (Kowalski et al., 2011). The superintendent never separated himself or herself from the role of teacher (Kowalski, 2005). This role continues to be an essential expectation for the contemporary superintendent. At the turn

of the 20th century and with the birth of the industrial revolution, a shift occurred moving the emphasis to one of financial acumen and fiscal responsibility, and the onset of integrating business leadership models into the educational system.

Scientific management and implementation of a factory model became the standard in multiple areas of American business(Kowalski et al., 2011). As a result, public education similarly experienced a shift and the superintendent as manager role emerged (Kowalski, 2005). Curriculum and instructional prowess were viewed as less significant essential skills, as the perceived need for effective business managers took root. The superintendent as an “authoritative, impersonal and task-oriented” (Bjork & Keedy, 2005, p. 209) leader became the standard during this time. Kowalski et al. (2011) described the perceived need for significant superintendent control in managing the school setting scientifically. Superintendents of this era wielded significant power and authority as they implemented business values and models in their leadership (Kowalski, 2005). This role, however, was not universally embraced. A group of education professors warned that superintendents should “galvanize policymakers, employees, and other taxpayers to support the district’s initiatives” (Kowalski, 2005, p. 8) and that relying solely on business values eclipsed the involvement of the communities these leaders were employed to serve.

The Great Depression served as a catalyst for schools to nurture participative democracy, with a resulting erosion of superintendents’ authority and the emergence of the superintendent as classical statesman who advocated for the needs of his or her constituency (Callahan, 1962; Kowalski et al., 2011). Superintendents of this era added

the role of political strategist to their repertoire (Bjork & Gurley, 2005), as scarce financial resources forced them into the position of needing to lobby their legislatures in order to access governmental resources for their school districts (Kowalski, 2005). During this time, superintendents recognized various special interest factions existed within school communities, and identified the need to manage the inevitable conflict between competing interests (Bjork & Keedy, 2005).

In the years following World War II, a convergence of four factors precipitated another evolution in the role of the superintendent: (1) growing perception of democratic leadership as overly idealistic, (2) rapid development of the social sciences in the late 1940s and early 1950s, (3) seven million dollars in grants from the Kellogg Foundation which supported social science research into school administration, and (4) emerging issues such as pending desegregation, increased public criticism of public schools, the escalating Cold War, and a mass influx of baby-boomers (Callahan, 1962). Public disillusionment with the superintendent's role of democratic interaction led to a faction which advocated that the "everyday problems of superintendents were economic, social, and political; and knowledge and skills, not philosophy, were necessary to solve them" (Kowalski, 2005, p. 8). School superintendents became seen as heroic symbols for the community and "the new executive in peacetime America" (Grogan, 1996, p. 12). Superintendent training and implementation models shifted, as "the model of superintendent as social scientist encouraged professors and practitioners to emphasize empiricism, predictability, and scientific certainty in their research and practice" (Kowalski, 2005, p. 10).



The 1970s marked a period of national political unrest and increased political pressure on school superintendents. During this decade, school board and superintendent conflict increased and centralization of power re-emerged (Cuban, 1976). The subsequent reform movements of the 1980s and 1990s emphasized the superintendent as facilitator in a de-centralized organizational structure (Provenzo, 2006; Tschannen-Moran, 2001; Zmuda, Kuklis, & Kline, 2004), the resurgence of the superintendent as instructional leader (Glass & Bjork, 2003; Glass & Franceschini, 2007; Hodgkinson & Montenegro, 1999), and a melding of business management and social scientist models for school leadership. Superintendents were “expected to have the expertise necessary to deal with social and institutional ills such as poverty, racism, gender discrimination, crime, and violence” (Kowalski, 2013, p. 11) and superintendents were expected to apply research findings to creating solutions (Petersen & Fusarelli, 2001).

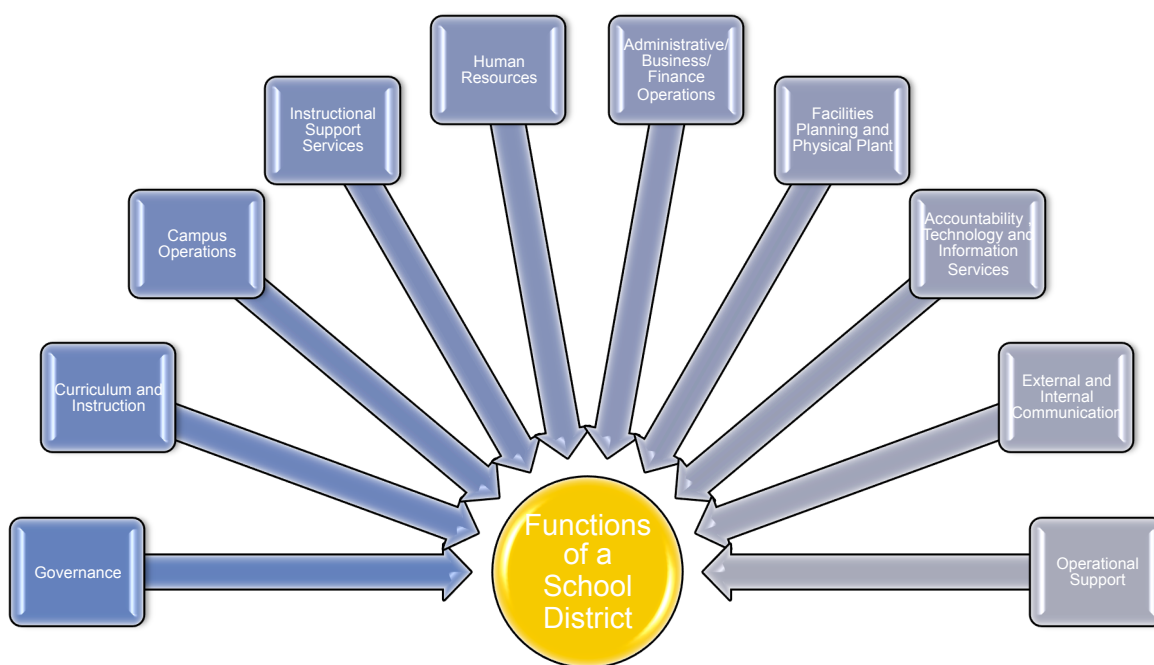
Ultimately, Kowalski et al. (2011) described the 21st-century superintendent as a communicator, effectively communicating with all stakeholders, in order to lead school improvement efforts. Historically, communication had been treated as a role-driven skill. Today, however, that definition is greatly expanded. “Normative communication behavior specifies two-way, symmetrical interactions for all school administrators. As a result, communication should no longer be viewed as a variable skill but rather as a pervasive role characterization” (Bjork & Keedy, 2005, p. 11). In the current phase of school reform, school leaders are being called upon to restructure schools and to create cultures of learning which are defined by shared values and beliefs about education (Deal & Peterson, 1998; Dufour & Fullan, 2013; Eaker, 2008; Fullan, 2001; Morrissey,

2000; Muhammad, 2009; Schlechty, 2002). Increasingly, scholarly literature explored the nexus of communication and culture (Conrad & Poole, 2011). Conrad (1994) described cultures as a product of communication. “They emerge and are sustained by the communicative acts of all employees, not just the conscious persuasive strategies of upper management. Cultures do not exist separately from people communicating with one another” (Conrad, 1994, p. 27). Kowalski (2005) explored the interdependence of culture and communication, explaining that “culture influences communicative behavior and communicative behavior is instrumental to building, maintaining, and changing culture” (p. 13).

### **Contemporary Functions of the Superintendent**

Superintendents are charged with aggregate responsibility for all operations of the school district they oversee (Figure 1). Olivárez (2013) identified 10 critical functions of a school district, each of which incorporates one or more significant themes from the evolution of superintendent roles. Effective superintendents must learn to concurrently manage and support all of these functions (see Figure 1): (a) governance operations; (b) curriculum and instruction; (c) elementary and secondary campus operations; (d) instructional support services; (e) human resources; (f) administrative, business and finance operations; (g) facilities, planning, and physical plant services; (h) accountability, technology, and information management services; (i) internal and external communications; and (j) operational support systems such as safety, security, food services, and transportation (Olivárez, 2010).

The ability to incorporate a variety of leadership strategies and behaviors is a key determinant in a superintendent's ability to lead his or her organization (Olivárez, 2013). Yet, it is impossible for one person to know every aspect of the organization he or she serves (Ancona et al., 2007). A school superintendent must pay particular attention to the governing body charged with his or her hiring and firing: the board of trustees (Orr, 2006). The superintendent's skills must be many, varied, and comprehensive (Brunner & Björk, 2001).



**Figure 1. Functions of a School District, adapted from Olivárez (2010)**

Leadership, “the process of influencing others to understand and agree about what needs to be done and how to do it, and the process of facilitating individual and collective efforts to accomplish shared objectives,” (Yukl, 2012, p. 8) shapes the

efficacy of all organizations. Mintzberg's conceptual framework ascribed attributes of both leadership and management to effective leaders, recognizing that leaders of effective organizations meld craft, art, and science (Yukl, 2012). Kotter (1996) held that organizations need both strong leadership and strong management, and that the need is for people who can possess the ability to fulfill both roles. The impetus of leadership is power: positional power, which comes from the title and position the leader holds, and personal power, which comes from the relationships and connectedness the leader has developed with followers (Yukl, 2012). The evolution of the power structure of the superintendency is evident in its historical background. All of these factors combine to create the corporate culture, which largely defines not only what an organization is, but also how and how well it attains its goals.

Among the many functions of a school district that the superintendent oversees, perhaps the most ethereal yet critical is that of providing leadership: shaping the culture, attitudes, beliefs, vision, and direction of the employees and students he or she leads (Bjork & Gurley, 2005; Glass & Bjork, 2003; Glass & Franceschini, 2007; Hoyle, 2005). These attitudes and beliefs directly affect each of the functions of the school district and compel superintendents to become adept at effectively managing the political sphere. Superintendents must become adept at navigating the frequent "change in highly complex, politically charged, and often contentious systems if they are to survive and thrive in their role as superintendent they need to understand and be adept at the politics of these jobs" (Pardini & Lewis, 2013, p. 6).

The functions of the modern school system and its superintendent have roots in the evolution of the superintendent's role in American education. The contemporary superintendent must incorporate skills and paradigms from each of the main eras of the history of the superintendency and its varying incarnations as social, political, intellectual, business and managerial institutions. As Olivárez noted,

The demands impacting superintendents today are voluminous, including federal mandates...for teaching and learning; a constant public cry for transparency in all areas of decision making; policies dictating rigorous accountability at all levels of educational programming; business expectations for rapidly updated technological innovations; and advocacy cries for "evidence-based" instructional approaches with highly diverse student populations. (2013, p. 11)

Superintendents must assert the type of situational leadership they wish to deploy (Orr, 2006), while maintaining an agility in addressing the various forces, or frames, that come into play with their board of trustees, and all stakeholders (Bolman & Deal, 2008).

### **Barriers to Superintendent Longevity**

Many factors contribute to superintendent tenure. The many pressures of the position contribute to superintendents' perceptions of vulnerability; superintendents' professional aspirations or personal goals also contribute to high rates of superintendent mobility (Merrell, 1997). To the extent that a superintendent's tenure and ability to impact change are largely determined by maintaining a majority opinion of elected community volunteers; a positive working relationship with those individuals is a strong predictor of success (Glass & Franceschini, 2007; Jentz & Murphy, 2005). The relationship between superintendents and their boards of trustees is most closely akin to that of a corporate chief executive officer (Hodgkinson & Montenegro, 1999; Hoyle, 2005).

Superintendents are also accountable to other forces, such as special interest groups, teacher organizations, and political entities (Callahan, 1962; Eaton, 1990; Lutz & Iannaccone, 1986). In a climate of perpetual economic, political, cultural, and accountability change, the ability to provide stability to the organization is critical (Bolman & Deal, 2008). Conflict is inevitable, especially in such an environment of change (Dervarics & O'Brien, 2011). Examples abound of high-profile, innovative superintendents who part ways with their school districts in the face of public or political opposition, despite significant gains and reforms they have led: Seattle's Maria Goodloe-Johnson, Chicago Public Schools' Paul Vallas, Los Angeles Unified's David Brewer III, and Roger Cuevas of Miami Dade (Pascopella, 2011, p. 33). It appears that, once a relationship between a superintendent and a board becomes untenable, a leadership change is inevitable (Cooper, Fusarelli, & Carella, 2000). Further, the superintendent is vulnerable to outside influence as well, from special interest groups and when changes occur in the demography or values of the community he or she represents (Callahan, 1962; Eaton, 1990; Lutz & Iannaccone, 1986).

Eaton's cumulative theory (1990) identified the trend wherein superintendent vulnerability reaches beyond superintendent/board member relationships and extends to external special interest groups such as community members and teachers' associations. Further, Eaton identified years four through six as the most critical for superintendent vulnerability. Lutz and Iannaccone's dissatisfaction theory (1986) characterized community discontent, demographic changes, or values shifts and their impact on school board and superintendent stability. These theories comprise the broad categories for

etiology of superintendent turnover; the barriers to superintendent longevity can be further examined through subcategories.

**School board design.** The qualifications required to serve as a Texas trustee are minimal, and essentially aligned to the requirements to vote. In addition to being a qualified and registered voter, candidates must have resided in Texas for at least one year and in their election area for at least six months prior to the election (TEX ED. CODE ANN. § 141.001, 2007). Essentially, Texas' elected trustees are lay people, charged with working with the superintendent and each other, to

advocate for the high achievement of all district students; create and support connections with community organizations to provide community-wide support for the high achievement of all district students; provide educational leadership for the district, including leadership in developing the district vision statement and long-range educational plan; establish district-wide policies and annual goals that are tied directly to the district's vision statement and long-range educational plan; support the professional development of principals, teachers, and other staff; and periodically evaluate board and superintendent leadership, governance, and teamwork. (TEX ED. CODE ANN. § 11.1512, 2007)

They are held minimally accountable by those who elected them; rarely do community members attend school board meetings, and the voter turnout for board elections is consistently poor (Townley, 1994).

In Texas, superintendents identify strained relationships with the school board president, superintendent/school board communication and relations, and the ability to accomplish goals with the board as significant factors in their length of tenure (Byrd et al., 2006). The nature of school boards, how they are elected, and their qualifications to serve contribute significantly to this issue. There seems to be lack of congruence between the degree of voter and community interest in selecting trustees—whose

responsibilities are considerable—and the importance of the position (Townley, 1994). Given such a large scope of responsibility, and minimal accountability standards, it is easy to understand how governance boundaries can become blurred, vulnerable to external influence, and even personalized (Grady & Bryant, 1991). “A shared vision [is] key for the more successful urban school districts” (Pardini & Lewis, 2013, p. 8). Personalization and politicization can be highly destructive forces for school district governance, which can be mitigated by a common, driving vision.

**Political influence and governance.** The political frame for superintendents can wield undue influence (Bolman & Deal, 2008) and have a disproportionate impact on decision making for the district. “Lay school boards are not structurally suited to govern effectively in an increasingly divisive society facing unprecedented economic and social challenges” (Danzberger, 1994, p. 372). Ill-defined roles and competing political interests can impede the influence of both a board and a superintendent (Hill, Warner-King, Campbell, McElroy, & Munoz-Colson, 2002). The danger of allowing such agendas to determine school district policy and leadership is clear; Donald McAdams, a 10-year trustee for the Houston Independent School District, claimed, “the core issue in urban school reform is governance” (2000, p. 269). McAdams further asserted, “school reformers must design systems of governance that get politics out of schools” (p. 262). While we can certainly envision significant school board reform, and perhaps dream of the day when politics is removed from school district operations, reality demands that the superintendent acquire and deploy the skills most likely to lead to effective working relationships for the team of eight. Awareness of the challenges of those relationships is



critical to strategically responding when issues arise (Houston & Eadie, 2003). However, a positive mindset to working with the board and a commitment to building the board's governance capacity are essential to creating and sustaining an effective working relationship (Houston & Eadie, 2003), which ultimately impacts the operating efficacy of the district.

Researchers have investigated the governance function, itself, and its application to the effective operations of a school district (Allen & Mintrom, 2010; Eadie, 2005; Melton, 2009; Pardini & Lewis, 2013; Williams, 2008; Zlotkin, 1993). Still more studies described the relative lack of job security for school superintendents because of the instability and challenges inherent in board operations (Beach & Reinhartz, 1990; Cooper et al., 2000; Grady & Bryant, 1991). Merrell (1997) found that, while superintendents and their families experience many position-related pressures, a majority are able to manage those pressures, except in situations which are extremely volatile or political. Waggoner (1991) identified that the foundation for providing any of these requires a training plan and a concerted effort to develop the knowledge and skills of the entire team, including the superintendent. The need for a practitioner model for superintendent training is a significant factor in many studies (Olivárez, 2013; Orr, 2006; Pardini & Lewis, 2013; Petersen, 2005), in order to provide school district leaders with the essential skills to navigate the political arena, and to work effectively with their boards of trustees.

School boards are increasingly under fire for their “preoccupation with patronage and penchant for micromanagement” (Petersen & Fusarelli, 2001, p. 11). Danzberger

described the propensity for some school boards to fall prey to outside influence and to become “corrupting influences, themselves” (Danzberger, 1994, p.1). Some of the consistent themes in failed school board governance include the absence of bold leadership for educational reform, allowing special interest foci to bog down board action, overlooking the systemic big-picture by focusing on specific constituent concerns, and having a reactionary response model to issues (Danzberger, 1994). In El Paso alone, the efficacy and perceived failures of the El Paso ISD Board of Trustees have drawn the scrutiny not only of their constituents and local media, but also of the Commissioner of Education, the state legislature, and a wide media audience. Several bills adopted in the 2013 legislative session can be traced to the myriad scandals of El Paso ISD (Torres, 2012). School boards, especially in large urban school districts, are not only responsible for setting the operating policies for the district, they also have ultimate oversight over multimillion dollar budgets (Houston & Eadie, 2003). Perhaps most relevant to this study: they hire and fire the superintendent of schools, and in some districts approve all employee hiring and termination. The most successful districts have organizational structures supporting the superintendent in translating vision into reality, providing him or her with a relative degree of autonomy in hiring and moving principals, and the “latitude to make decisions” (Pardini & Lewis, 2013, p. 5).

**Role clarity.** In addition to the lack of formal prerequisites for service on a school board, role clarity presents a significant challenge for teams of eight. Eadie (2005) underscored governance as the primary and highest priority role for school boards, defining it as the mechanism for making policy. The Texas State Board of

Education (SBOE) provides a Framework for School Board Development for board members, essentially their job description.

To effectively meet the challenges of public education, school boards and superintendents must function together as a leadership team. Each leadership team must annually assess their development needs as a corporate body and individually to gain an understanding of the vision, structure, accountability, advocacy, and unity needed to provide educational programs and services that ensure the equity and excellence in performance of all students. (Rodriguez, 2013, p. 1)

Despite these efforts to provide guidance to board members, individually and as a body, the area of governance remains a delicate balancing act between governing and micromanaging (e.g., Cooper et al., 2000; Cuban, 1976; Dervarics & O'Brien, 2011). The overall operations of the district as an organization are wide ranging and, while governed to a degree by the board, the specifics of how the vision, mission, and goals are fulfilled lies in the leadership of the superintendent and his or her executive team. Yukl (2012) described attainment of effective leadership competencies as dependent on strategic training:

The extent to which leadership competencies are acquired and used depends on the type of developmental activities that occur (e.g., training, experiential learning, self-learning), facilitating conditions (e.g., boss support, learning environment), and qualities of the individual managers (flexible, pragmatic, learning-oriented). Training and development are more effective when they are mutually consistent, supported by a strong learning culture, and integrated with other human resource activities such as career counseling, staffing decisions, performance appraisal, and succession planning. (p. 402)

Role clarity has significant ripple effects not only on the relationship of individual trustees with the superintendent, but also on district operations and community perception.

Given the haphazard way school board duties have been defined, confusion of mission and priorities was almost inevitable. School boards were assigned duties from above, by legislatures that needed to off-load problems to some subordinate agency, and by courts needing to assign responsibility to administer the resolution of cases. No one was responsible for maintaining a clear mission or for fending off assignments that would diffuse school boards' effort and attention. (Hill et al., 2002, p. 5)

Danzberger (1994) identified lack of specific role identities as a significant causal factor in the one-third annual turnover rate for school trustees. School board turnover frequently leads to superintendent turnover, as community and political agendas demand change (Cooper et al., 2000). School boards must fully comprehend their roles and limitations, as well as those for the superintendent.

**Relationships.** Failed relationships are among the most commonly cited barriers for school superintendents' leadership (Alsbury, 2003; Byrd et al., 2006; Danzberger, 1994; Glass & Franceschini, 2007; Grady & Bryant, 1991; Hutchinson, 2010; Kowalski et al., 2011; Natkin et al., 2002; Petersen, 2005). It is apparent that, as with any corporation, a productive working relationship between the CEO and the governing board is non-negotiable, as is the trust and confidence of the community he or she serves (Callahan, 1962; Eaton, 1990; Lutz & Iannaccone, 1986). Callahan's vulnerability theory (Callahan, 1962) posited that the longevity of a superintendent is directly related to his or her ability to remain aligned to the school board's decisions. Superintendents who are unable to maintain that alignment become vulnerable, which may decrease his or her tenure. In reviewing the research on superintendent tenure, multiple studies focused on describing the problems that lead to superintendent turnover as illustrative of board dysfunction (Byrd et al., 2006; Casserly, 2010; Glass & Franceschini, 2007;

Kowalski et al., 2011; Petersen, 2005; White, 2007). While those studies consistently spoke of the need for role clarity, communication, focus, and trust, there is little data on precisely what mechanisms can facilitate his or her attainment (Allen, 2008; Beach & Reinhartz, 1990; Brunner & Björk, 2001; Cooper et al., 2000; Eadie, 2005; Houston & Eadie, 2003; Houston, 2001; McAdams, 2006).

School superintendents are expected to be educational experts who have the skills and abilities to successfully manage all 10 functions of a school district. School boards are comprised of laypersons with minimal knowledge and experience of the school system they were elected to govern (Eadie, 2005). Houston and Eadie (2003) pointed out that the attributes traditionally leading teachers on the path to the superintendency do not prepare them to deal with the intricacies of school board relationships. Eadie chronicled that

[superintendents] can move step-by-step from the classroom through various administrative positions, eventually making it to the top spot in their district without acquiring the knowledge and skills that will ensure a strong board-superintendent strategic leadership team...knowing virtually nothing about how to go about building a strong working relationship with their board (2005, p. viii)

Eadie asserted that the most effective school boards are those that nurture a school board-superintendent-community partnership.

Goodman and Fulbright (1999) listed 10 actions superintendents can take to create and to sustain an effective team of eight. Their third recommendation was for the team to nurture mutual respect and support. Their sixth, was for the superintendent to view each member as a learner and to make time for that developmental process. They described the agile superintendent as a “super coach” of the team. Viewing the board as

a sports team, with the superintendent as coach is a powerful metaphor. Coaches utilize their players' strengths and work to develop their weaknesses. They encourage but set clear boundaries. They aggressively address conflict and weed out any factor that potentially can threaten the team's mission. Every coach has a playbook and every player learns it inside and out (Goodman & Fulbright, 1999). In short, the most highly successful school districts are governed by boards which consistently:

- set goals and monitor progress;
- use data to make decisions about students, budgets, and schools;
- know the portrait of their district—what is working as well as what is not working, and where; and
- are driven by a solid commitment to student success, and support this through developing strong relationships with teachers, students, administrators, and their superintendent. (Dervarics & O'Brien, 2011)

Each of these practices serves to cultivate positive relationships with the board, and by extension, to the stakeholders of the district. Communication is an essential factor in sustaining those working relationships.

**Communication.** The ability to share and to receive information facilitates trust production. Many theories address the role of communication in a school district. Clear and effective communication reduces risk, provides focus, and enhances perceptions of a leader's skills (Bolman & Deal, 2011; Yukl, 2012). Communication failures are often cited as reasons for shortened school administrator tenure (Davis, 1998). Superintendent evaluations focus heavily on communication (Beverage, 2003), while Hatrick specified

“frequent, honest communication” as a critical ingredient in the “formula for a successful superintendency” (2010, p. 41). Darling-Hammond observed that “schools largely function now by submerging talk about those things that are potentially most controversial and potentially most important” (2001, p. 23). The importance of intentional communication with stakeholders has benefits for leadership management, as well. “The superintendent controls the bureaucracy by allowing for broader, more thoughtful communication among those within and without the school system” (Carter & Cunningham, 1997, p. 77).

The evolution of the role of the superintendent parallels a concurrent transformation of the desired communication model. In the late 19th century, as leaders of classroom instruction, superintendents’ communication mission was to direct, inspire, instruct, advise, and train teachers (Kowalski, 2005). In the early part of the 20th century, school leaders were trained to communicate for efficiency, as opposed to efficacy, as they led scientifically. “Superintendents emulating corporate managers often treated subordinates, as well as board members in an impersonal manner, convinced they should control information” (Kowalski, 2013, p. 144). The term “authoritarian” described this period, including the superintendents’ communications, which tended to be top-down and hierarchical structures, at the center of which was the superintendent (Bjork & Keedy, 2005).

The 21st-century concept of superintendent as communicator focuses on relationships and two-way communication (Kowalski, 2013). “The best school communications are planned; the best plans rely on research, analysis, smart

implementation, evaluation, and revision” (Gunther, McGowan, & Donegan, 2011, p. 97). The most frequently cited mechanisms for communication standards included structures where the superintendent: (1) employs a wide range of communication models, including phone calls, face to face talks, texts, emails, weekly updates, board packets, and formal reports, (2) provides a calendar of school events for the coming week, (3) communicates by email or phone on any issues that trustees need to know about and that cannot wait until Friday’s message, (4) communicates proactively, accurately, early and often, (5) never allows a situation to occur in which the board is surprised, (6) makes every attempt to head off potential problems, (7) always tells the truth; even if something went wrong, apologizes and moves on, (8) listens carefully; asks clarifying questions, and (9) facilitates two-way communication by soliciting information from trustees on the input they are receiving from his or her community (Voltz, 2012).

As superintendents refine their skills as communicators, a blended focus on extending communication to the larger community seems necessary (Byrd et al., 2006), as does an in-depth assessment of successful practices. Literature on the most effective means of establishing productive communication models between the board and superintendent abounds, yet continues to perpetuate the concept of superintendent as artful conductor of information and dialogue, using communication as a mechanism. Communication is one of the most powerful mechanisms for accomplishing these goals. “The superintendent controls the bureaucracy by allowing for broader, more thoughtful communication among those within and without the school system” (Carter &



Cunningham, 1997, p. 77). Further, establishing effective mechanisms of communication with the board, the community, and with external organizations, reduces risk, provides focus, and enhances perceptions of a leader's skills (Bolman & Deal, 2011; Teitel, 2005; Yukl, 2012). Hatrick (2010) specified "frequent, honest communication" as a critical ingredient in the "formula for a successful superintendency" (p. 41).

**Superintendent preparation programs.** The definition of "success" for superintendents has changed and evolved as the role of the superintendent has changed. No longer can a superintendent succeed by merely being an effective manager of the "B's of district leadership: buildings, buses, books, budgets and bonds" (Pardini & Lewis, 2013, p. 5). While these areas remain essential functions of a school district, the depth and complexity of the contemporary superintendent requires attention to the areas of communication Kowalski et al. described (2011), and which Pardini and Lewis (2013) referred to as the C's: "things like connection, communication, collaboration, community building, child advocacy, and curricular choices that lead to academic progress for all children" (2013, p. 6). Superintendent preparation models which rely more on theory than on practice fail to provide aspiring school district leaders with the essential skills to succeed in this position (Blount, 1998; Kowalski et al., 2011; Olivárez, 2013; Orr, 2006). Balance appears essential.

Teitel (2005) found that aspiring superintendents in training programs desire the opportunity to develop respect and to build relationships with mentors; to learn about their own leadership and to learn from other leaders; and to gain practical ideas and

opportunities to apply learning in their own districts. Glass (2006) advocated that superintendent training programs should focus on five specific areas: (1) fiscal, (2) personnel, (3) support services, (4) facilities, and (5) student services, as well as alignment among university programs, state agencies, school boards, and professional associations. Glass (2006) further emphasized that the aspiring superintendent must receive training in the essential operations of a school district, as well as to develop the ability to hire the right people for the right jobs—“getting the right people on the bus and the wrong people off” (Collins, 2011, p. 41).

Some non-university programs also have significant success records. The Broad Superintendents’ Academy incorporates many of these focus areas, utilizing a seminar approach and courting non-educators, providing alumni support to new superintendents during their first 90 days, and maintaining a practitioner-based approach to school district leadership.

In each academy cohort, participants’ diverse professional backgrounds create rich learning experiences and allow for a deep cross-fertilization of ideas. Although academy fellows learn from the urban superintendents, school board presidents, union leaders, leading education practitioners, researchers, corporate CEOs and high-level government officials who are speakers and faculty members, they most often learn even more from one other. (Quinn, 2007, p. 56)

These models are designed to nurture networking, scholarly pursuit, mentoring, and development of entry plans and visioning. They appear to be the most successful in producing superintendents with “well-honed leadership skills to meet today’s complex educational challenges” (Olivárez, 2013, p. 14). Attention to broad-based relationships, however, remains a largely untapped area for leadership development. Confirming the significance of these theories, various research and anecdotal data identify and illustrate

the complex factors influencing superintendent longevity (Carver, 2006; Eadie, 2005; Smoley, 1999; Williams, 2008).

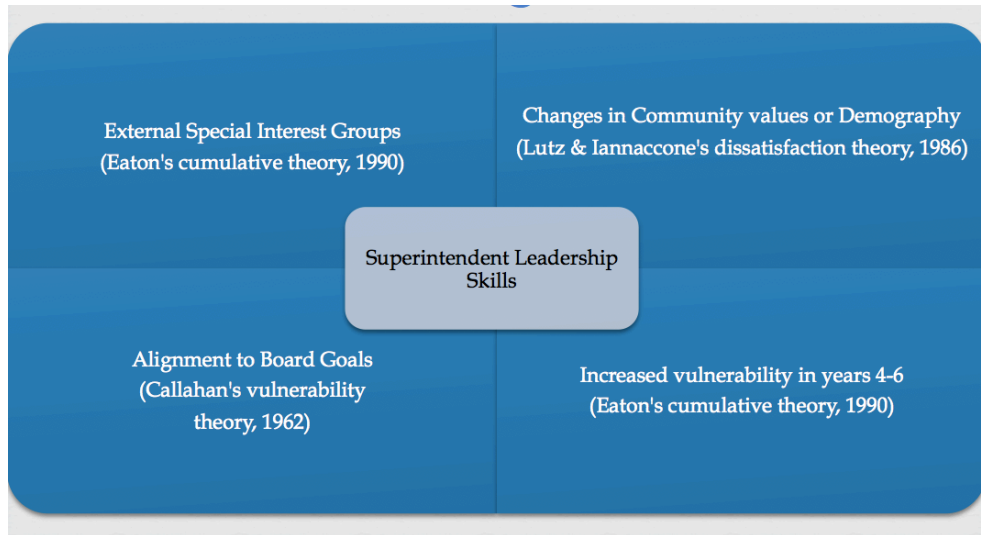
**Leadership actions.** The literature suggested that the nature and quality of a superintendent's leadership actions with his or her board of trustees, as well as the skill and awareness with which the superintendent relates to special interest groups and the community as a whole are predictive of his or her longevity in the position (Allen, 2008; Callahan, 1962; Eaton, 1990; Lutz & Iannaccone, 1986). Specific leadership skills are essential to successfully navigate each of these areas, all of which influence superintendent longevity. In addition to categorizing broad themes to explain superintendent turnover, there remains a substantive need to understand and to identify strategies superintendents can employ to nurture and to strengthen relationships with the board of trustees (Callahan, 1962), with various external organizations (Eaton, 1990), and with the greater community, as a whole (Lutz & Iannaccone, 1986). Managing spheres of influence are essential to forming internal, external, and school board relationships to maximize effective leadership (Allen, 2008; Greenleaf et al., 2002; Yukl, 2012). This study sheds light on the type of training aspiring superintendents in doctoral programs should receive. As superintendents refine their skills at leveraging influence for leadership (Yukl, 2012), specific study on the leadership and communication actions, which translate theory into action, appears necessary.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The American superintendency faces many challenges, including a national concern of a demonstrated shortage of qualified school superintendents in the United

States (Glass & Bjork, 2003). In addition to the shortage, American public education is beset by numerous constraints. In a century in which education is guided by federal mandates to improve outcomes for all learners, and is limited by ever-mounting fiscal constraints, superintendent stability is critical to responding to national and global achievement gaps (Hill et al., 2002; Kowalski et al., 2011; Waters & Marzano, 2006). The ability of a superintendent and his or her board of trustees to provide organizational stability, especially during times of perpetual change, is essential to maintaining successful school districts (Bolman & Deal, 2010; Dervarics & O'Brien, 2011). Superintendents' success in creating and sustaining effective working relationships with their various constituencies is predictive of longevity for school leaders (Byrd et al., 2006; Kowalski et al., 2011; Petersen, 2005).

The literature suggested that the nature and quality of a superintendent's leadership actions with his or her board of trustees, as well as the skill and awareness with which the superintendent relates to special interest groups and the community as a whole, are predictive of longevity in the position. Specific leadership skills are essential to successfully navigate each of these four areas, all of which influence superintendent longevity. The political influence of external special interest groups within the community, as well as alignment to the goals and vision of the board pose significant challenges to superintendents' ability to serve in a district for more than four years.



**Figure 2. Conceptual Framework for Superintendent Longevity**

The conceptual framework presented reflects the nexus of influence of these four areas, and represents the core influence of the superintendent's leadership skills.

**Summary**

The American superintendency is challenging and complex, facing many barriers, including a national concern that there is a demonstrated shortage of qualified school superintendents. The review of literature illustrated the evolution of the superintendency, and the multiple internal and external issues that the contemporary superintendent must navigate. Increasing demands for transparency, accountability, and stringent financial constraints compel superintendents to find ways to work with their many stakeholders in a spirit of collaboration, and focused on a common vision of student success. While many studies addressed reasons for short superintendent tenure, and while others explored best communication practices for school boards and superintendents, there are few studies that addressed specifics of effective leadership

actions and structures from practitioners' perspectives. Superintendents of public schools must utilize their influence and power with their boards of trustees, as well as with their various constituencies. The ability to do so influences the superintendent's longevity in a school district, which in turn has an impact on student achievement. The review of literature revealed a lack of research regarding the leadership strategies that superintendents utilize to successfully transcend internal and external threats to their tenure. This chapter reviewed the evolution of the contemporary superintendent, barriers to superintendent longevity, and provided a conceptual framework of the essential quadrants that superintendent leadership must navigate. In addition, a literature-based conceptual framework for superintendent longevity was presented.

This study helps to fill that gap in the literature, builds on prior research recommendations, and seeks to deepen an understanding of the successful practices that long-serving superintendents utilize to maintain longevity in their position. This study examines how superintendents perceive their own leadership activities as they relate to vulnerability, dissatisfaction, and cumulative theories, with a goal of increasing superintendent tenure.

## **Chapter Three: Methodology and Procedures**

### **Introduction**

This chapter describes the methodology and study design utilized to collect and analyze the data and to interpret the findings. For this study, the reflections of long-serving superintendents on the behaviors and structures they believe have most influenced their longevity were examined. This study collected data by interviewing six long-serving superintendents of academically successful school districts. Data were sorted based on start codes developed from the literature-supported conceptual framework. After analyzing the data and identifying emergent themes, the data were interpreted, synthesized, reported, and discussed. The specific procedures of the study and philosophical background are summarized in this chapter.

### **Research Questions**

The following questions about superintendents with longer-than-average tenure in their position in an academically high-achieving school district guided this study:

1. How do superintendents maintain alignment with their boards of trustees?
2. How do superintendents cultivate relationships with external and internal special interest groups?
3. How do superintendents navigate connectivity with their community?

To answer these questions, a qualitative research design was used.

A general discussion of qualitative methodology is followed by a more detailed review of the study format. Building on the methodology, the chapter continues by establishing the setting, participants, researcher, process, credibility, reliability,

transferability, dependability, and confirmability. What follows provides the mechanism for connecting the study method to its philosophical roots.

### **Choice of Methodology**

Qualitative research meets the following essential characteristics:

1. It focuses on meaning, understanding, and process.
2. It uses a purposeful sample.
3. Data collection is conducted via interviews, observations, and documents.
4. Data analysis is inductive and comparative.
5. Findings are richly descriptive and presented as themes/ categories.

(Merriam, 2009, p. 38)

In addition to these attributes, qualitative research considers the importance of context in how participants in a study “create and give meaning to social experience” (Hays & Singh, 2011, p. 6). It also considers the multiple ways in which participants may fulfill multiple roles, as individuals, but may also be “conceptualized as groups, families, partnerships, and communities” (p. 7). Qualitative samples are not usually randomized, but rather are purposeful, small, and specific (Merriam, 2009). Data are collected through interviews, archival data, observations, or documents and have many types, of which the phenomenological study is the universal tradition (Hays & Singh, 2011).

Qualitative research is one of the more commonly utilized forms of study by social science researchers, and phenomenological methods are highly prevalent in educational research (Merriam, 2009). Phenomenological study is most applicable to research seeking to answer *how* and *why* questions about phenomena within a bounded



system (Hays & Singh, 2011). Phenomenological study design relies on interpretation and can be further described by its unique features:

1. Particularistic – “focus on a particular situation, event, program, or phenomenon” (Merriam, 2009, p. 43).
2. Descriptive – the product is a “rich, thick description of the phenomenon under study” (Merriam, 2009, p. 43).
3. Heuristic – the study “illuminates the reader’s understanding of the phenomenon under study” (Merriam, 2009, p. 44).

Phenomenological studies are separate from other qualitative traditions because they are “researched in depth and the data are delineated by time period, activity, and place, using multiple data sources and methods” (Hays & Singh, p. 417). Phenomenological studies have varying intentions: descriptive, interpretive, or evaluative (Merriam, 2009). This study utilized a descriptive phenomenological model because it sought to provide an account of the structures and actions that school superintendents believe to enable them to overcome barriers to longevity described by cumulative theory (Callahan, 1962), vulnerability theory (Eaton, 1990), and dissatisfaction theory (Lutz and Iannaccone, 1986). It did not aim to explain or to judge (evaluative study), or to develop concepts or challenge theories already in existence (interpretive study) (Merriam, 2009). This summary of qualitative methodology in general, and phenomenological study design in particular, establishes the foundation to guide the research. The balance of this chapter outlines the particulars of the study.

**Participants.** Selection of the participants for this study was purposeful, convenient, and nonrandom. Participants were bound, as specifically chosen school superintendents as a stratified, purposeful sample (Hays & Singh, 2011). The selected superintendents had served at least six years in an academically successful school district in Texas.

**Sample.** The purposeful selection of the superintendents was done according to two major criteria. First, the superintendent had to have served at least six years in the same school district. This criterion presumed that long-serving superintendents have established mechanisms and positive relationships with their boards of trustees, their larger community, and with special interest groups. It also provided a benchmark for exploring Eaton's cumulative theory (1962), with respect to increased job vulnerability in years 4-6. The second criterion was that the school district must be an academically successful Texas school district. This acknowledged the challenge of maintaining superintendent longevity, as well as the value of interviewing successful superintendents. Together, both criteria were designed to identify a sample that provided for an in-depth study of the strategies, which superintendents identify as supporting them to address the challenges associated with cumulative theory (Eaton, 1962), vulnerability theory (Callahan, 1990), and dissatisfaction theory (Lutz & Iannaccone, 1986).

**Data collection.** A hallmark of qualitative study is the use of multiple sources of data, which also serves to increase the credibility of the data obtained (Hays & Singh, 2011). Potential sources of data include interviews, artifacts, review of documentation, participant observation, archival records, or direct observations (Merriam, 2009). For the

purpose of this study, three of these sources were utilized: interviews, archival documents, and direct observation.

**Interviews.** The interviews were conducted at a time and place convenient to the study participants. Each participant was interviewed twice, with the interviews being scheduled for approximately one hour each. Six superintendents were interviewed. The first round of interviews focused on the research questions and followed the interview protocol (Appendix C). The second interview allowed time for participants to reflect, provided an opportunity for clarification of information shared in the first interview, and allowed participants to provide greater detail on many things they shared in the first interview. The researcher compiled the interview results, conducted a review of relevant documents, and maintained a reflective journal throughout the process. The information obtained from these activities served as the basis for the second round of interviews, which clarified themes and concepts.

**Documents.** Archival documents related to the research questions was obtained and analyzed. If documents could not be provided as originals, copies were requested. These data helped to analyze structural practices of the research study participants. Organizational structures provide insight into these areas of implementation. Specific examples of structures and evidence of their implementation were examined and analyzed using the coding theme applied to the interviews.

Yin identified five essential skills that the researcher must cultivate:

- ask good questions and interpret the answers;
- be a good listener and not limited by personal preconceptions or beliefs;

- be adaptive and flexible, and so able to respond to new situations as opportunities, not threats;
- have a firm grasp of the issues being studied; and
- be unbiased by preconceived notions—and so be sensitive and responsive to evidence that may contradict the established theory. (2009, p. 69)

Together, the interviews and document reviews increased research validity (discussed in detail in another section of this chapter) and provided information needed to develop a thick and rich description based on the data analysis.

**Data analysis.** Each research project has its own context and perspective. Four strategies for data analysis include “relying on theoretical propositions, developing case descriptions, using both quantitative and qualitative data, and examining rival explanations” (Yin, 2009, p. 126). This analysis of the data applied the key principles of qualitative research:

1. Analysis occurs throughout the data collection.
2. The analysis is systematic and thorough, while flexible.
3. Analysis provides accountability because it creates reflective process notes.
4. The process begins with the full body of data and then moves to create smaller units of meaning.
5. The data process is inductive.
6. The analytic process builds and refines categories, relationships, and patterns.
7. The analytic codes are flexible and may be modified.
8. The data analysis relies on participant corroboration.

9. The results of the analysis describe ideas based on a synthesis of data interpretation. (Mertens, 2009)

***Initial analysis.*** Round one of the analysis relied on a priori codes—broad categories of codes that were expanded as the data were reviewed and re-analyzed (Creswell, 2012, p. 184). These codes were derived from the theoretical framework developed from the literature (Merriam, 2009). The data were analyzed using the computer program, Dedoose, which allowed the researcher to electronically code interview transcripts, documents, and field notes. The researcher also made memos and side notes within the program, which were used to identify similarities, themes, differences, and patterns (Hays & Singh, 2011). These findings were discussed with peers to encourage the researcher to confront personal biases and to guide additional analysis. The data were then sorted to identify themes and to develop emergent codes.

***Second analysis.*** Using the electronic coding strategies from round one, the a priori and emergent codes were used to analyze the data from the second round of data collection. Peer debriefing again occurred. Analysis combined codes to develop broad themes. Findings were then analyzed through the filter of the theoretical framework, with peer input, and conclusions about superintendents' leadership practices were developed.

### **Measures of Trustworthiness and Validity**

Essential to the design of this study's data collection and analysis was the intentional development of structures to meet demands of validity and trustworthiness. Such measures included peer review and debriefing, triangulation of data, clarifying

researcher bias, member checking, and rich, thick description (Creswell, 2012). The following summarizes how this study met the standards for credibility, reliability, and confirmability.

**Triangulation of data.** Triangulation is the process of utilizing multiple and varied sources, methods, and theories to corroborate evidence. “Typically, this process involves corroborating evidence from different sources to shed light on a theme or perspective” (Creswell, p. 251). This demands at least three sources of data be analyzed, to check for consistency of evidence (Mertens, 2009). The three sources of data for this study were the interviews, a reflective journal, and the archival documents.

**Peer review and debriefing.** Peer debriefing “provides an external check of the research process” (Creswell, p. 251). Peer debriefing was scheduled following both rounds of interviews, and collection of archival documents.

**Clarifying researcher bias.** The researcher must “comment on past experiences, biases, prejudices, and orientations that have likely shaped the interpretation and approach to the study” (Creswell, p. 251). This commentary is included in the analysis of the data, so that the reader fully understands the researcher’s perspective and any biases that may have impacted the study outcomes.

**Participant checking.** In participant checking, the researcher solicits the participants’ perspectives on the accuracy of the findings and interpretations of the results (Creswell, 2012; Geertz, 1977). This study conducted participant checks during and after the interviews.

**Rich, thick description.** Rich, thick descriptions are a mechanism to enable readers to make judgments about the transferability of the research because of shared characteristics (Mertens, 2009). This study describes, in detail, the context of the participants and the setting under review.

**Reliability.** The reliability of qualitative research is enhanced in many ways. This study used detailed field notes, high quality digital recording, and professional transcription of interviews (Creswell, 2012). In addition, multiple coders were utilized, to monitor the stability of the responses to more than one coder. In that process, second coders spot-coded interviews, and coding was compared. Resultant inter-rater reliability was very high.

**Confirmability.** Qualitative researchers define confirmability as when “the data and their interpretation are not figments of the researcher’s imagination. Qualitative data can be tracked to their source, and the logic used to interpret the data should be made explicit” (Mertens, p. 260). This study utilized peer review of field notes, interview transcripts, and documents obtained through the data collection to verify that the research conclusions were supported by the data.

### **Limitations of the Study**

**Participants.** One limitation of this study was that it used a sample of six Texas public school superintendents. Consequently, it is not generalizable to other school districts in Texas or other states. The findings, however, can provide a basis for further research into the development of effective leadership practices for superintendents.

**Researcher's positionality.** This research study was also due to the bias of the researcher, an aspiring school superintendent with a wide work history in school districts across west and south-central Texas. Although concerted efforts were made to limit bias of the researcher, it may have had some impact on data collection and interpretation. In addition, being an aspiring superintendent interviewing a successful superintendent may lead to responses constructed as mentoring rather than anecdotal and self-perception. The researcher made efforts to accurately report the results through the words of those interviewed.

The researcher conducting this study is an educator with 28 years of experience. During her career, she has been an elementary and high school teacher, elementary and high school assistant principal and principal, an executive director of human resources and administrative services, and an area superintendent in a large urban school district. She is a doctoral student at the University of Texas at Austin, and as such her beliefs about the superintendency, leadership, and utilization of influence have been significantly shaped by her work experience and the knowledge gained at the University of Texas.

The researcher secured approval of the study design and measures of confidentiality through the University of Texas at Austin Institutional Review Board (Appendix A). Concerted steps were taken to assure anonymity of the participants, due to the small sample size. A verbal waiver of consent (Appendix B) was used as a written consent form would be the only document linking the participants to the research. Interview participants were assigned a code number to remove all identifying



information. The research documentation was maintained \at the researcher's own home in a secured file.

Using a priori codes developed from the review of literature as well as codes emerging from the analysis, the researcher followed a line of inquiry that guided participants to examine their perceptions regarding leadership structures and actions they believe contributed to their longevity. Because the researcher had limited relationships with the participants in the study, the researcher's role may best be described as that of colleague. The resultant data were organized to provide the understandings of the research questions.

### **Summary**

This chapter described the methodology used to study the leadership actions and structures that long-serving superintendents in academically successful Texas school districts believe supported their longevity. A phenomenological study was designed to provide the researcher with detailed data. The researcher conducted two interviews with six long-serving superintendents of academically successful school districts in Texas. Additional data were obtained through a review of documents, and a reflective research journal. A literature-based analytic framework guided the data analysis. This chapter also described the methods of data collection, purposeful sampling, criteria for participants, and efforts to maximize the trustworthiness of the study. The findings of this study may provide information to aspiring or currently serving superintendents, seeking to increase their longevity and in so doing, provide organizational stability and increased student achievement. The findings are discussed in detail in Chapter Four.

## **Chapter Four: Results**

The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of long-serving superintendents in academically high-performing Texas public school districts, regarding factors that contributed to their positional longevity. To gain a deeper understanding of superintendents' leadership actions and structures, the following questions guided this study:

1. How do superintendents maintain alignment with their boards of trustees?
2. How do superintendents cultivate relationships with external and internal special interest groups?
3. How do superintendents navigate connectivity with their community?

To address these questions, data were gathered through qualitative methods via interviews, review of archival documents, and reflective journaling.

This chapter provides a composite demographic summary of the participants' experiences and educational backgrounds as well as a summary of each participant. It then discusses the reflections of the superintendents involved in the research study, relevant to each research question, on their leadership practices and actions with trustees, internal constituencies, and external interest groups. Based on an analysis of participants' responses, themes that emerged from the data are presented and discussed.

### **Demographic Summary of Participants**

Responses to demographic questions are found in Tables 1-3. IRB regulations specify that participants must be de-identified and unidentifiable. Due to the small sample size, some demographic data were disguised to protect anonymity. Thus, only

two categories were utilized within each table. In terms of highest degree attained, a majority (83%) of participants held a doctorate degree. With respect to the number of superintendencies held, three (50%) of the participants held only one, while the remaining three (50%) held two or more superintendencies. In terms of positional longevity, 100% of participants served more than the six-year minimum specified in the study parameters. Fifty percent of the participants served more than six, but less than 10 years with one district, while the remaining 50% served 11 or more years with the same district.

**Table 1**

***Participant Demographics***

| <b>Highest Degree</b>                   | <b>Frequency (n)</b> | <b>Percent of Sample (%)</b> |
|---|----------------------|------------------------------|
| Doctorate                               | 5                    | 83.33                        |
| Other Graduate degree                   | 1                    | 16.67                        |
| <b>Number of Superintendencies Held</b> |                      |                              |
| 1                                       | 3                    | 50                           |
| 2 +                                     | 3                    | 50                           |
| <b>Years with Long-Serving Dist.</b>    | <b>Frequency (n)</b> | <b>Percent of Sample (%)</b> |
| 6-10                                    | 3                    | 50                           |
| 11 +                                    | 3                    | 50                           |
| <b>Total Years as Superintendent</b>    |                      |                              |
| 6-11                                    | 3                    | 50                           |
| 12 +                                    | 3                    | 50                           |

**Professional experience.** Participant responses to years of experience prior to assuming the superintendency are reported in Table 2. Participants were evenly distributed in their service as assistant principals. Fifty percent were assistant principals for four or more years, and the other 50% served in that capacity for three or fewer years. Fifty percent held a campus level principalship for two or fewer years. The

balance served as campus principals for three or more years. Participants, in general, worked more years in a central office administrative capacity than they did campus-level administrative positions. Fifty percent spent three to eight years in district-level administrative roles. The other 50% accrued nine or more years of central office administration experience. Participants spent significantly less time in the classroom as teachers, than they did as administrators. Four (66.7%) taught for five or fewer years. The remaining taught for six or more years.

**Table 2**

*Professional Experience of Participants*

| <b>Years Administrative Experience</b>            |   |       |
|---|---|-------|
| <b>Assistant Principal</b>                        |   |       |
| 0-3   | 3 | 50    |
| 4 +   | 3 | 50    |
| <b>Principal</b>                                  |   |       |
| 0-2   | 3 | 50    |
| 3 +   | 3 | 50    |
| <b>Central Office (excluding superintendency)</b> |   |       |
| 3-8   | 3 | 50    |
| 9 +   | 3 | 50    |
| <b>Years Classroom Teaching Experience</b>        |   |       |
| 0-5   | 4 | 66.67 |
| 6- +  | 2 | 33.33 |

Responses to questions about the demographics of the districts they led for six or more years and the structure of the school boards for whom they worked, are provided in Table 3. For superintendents who held multiple long-tenure superintendencies, the most recent position was used. Three (50%) participants' districts had fewer than 20,000 students. The remaining three (50%) were in districts larger than 20,000 students. All

participants led school districts that were rated recognized or exemplary by the Texas Education Agency, under the accountability system in place between 2004 and 2011. A majority (66.7%) of participants' districts were rated as exemplary, while one-third (33.3%) were rated as recognized. A significant majority of participants' trustees (83.3%) were elected at-large, while one superintendent's district (16.7%) utilized a single-member district electoral model. Over their tenure in the district in which they served longest, two-thirds of participants (66.7%) experienced relatively minimal trustee turnover, and served with between 10 and 15 different trustees. The balance (33.33%) had 16 or more trustees over the course of their tenure with the same school district.

**Table 3**

*District Demographics*

|  |   |       |
|--|---|-------|
| <b>District Enrollment</b>                 |   |       |
| 100 – 19,999                               | 3 | 50    |
| 20,000 +                                   | 3 | 50    |
| <b>District Ratings</b>                    |   |       |
| Recognized                                 | 2 | 33.33 |
| Exemplary                                  | 4 | 66.67 |
| <b>Board Members Elected</b>               |   |       |
| At Large                                   | 5 | 83.33 |
| By District                                | 1 | 16.67 |
| <b>Number of Board Members Served With</b> |   |       |
| 10-15                                      | 4 | 66.67 |
| 16 +                                       | 2 | 33.33 |

In addition to data about education, work experience, and career trajectories, interviews were also conducted with participants to provide individual-level data and robust descriptions of their experiences. What follows is an introduction of each of the interviewees, whose experiences and leadership actions are explored in greater detail

later in this chapter. Pseudonyms were utilized to de-identify the participants. Osborne has been superintendent for at least 10 years. Bonds has held two superintendencies, the longest for more than 10 years. Powell has held three superintendent positions of which two were for more than six years. Bennett has been a superintendent for more than 10 years. Ellis has been a superintendent for over 20 years. Allen spent nearly 10 years as superintendent.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis for this study began with the initial data collection through the interview process. Interview transcripts were coded using prefigured (a priori) categories and emergent categories. The a priori codes were developed from the literature and were based on the theoretical framework for this study. “Prefigured codes [a priori codes] or categories often limit the analysis to the prefigured codes rather than opening up the codes to reflect the views of participants in a traditional qualitative way” (Creswell, 2008, p. 152). Therefore, additional codes were added to the a priori coding structure as they emerged during the analysis of interviews and archival documents.

Archival documents such as district board operating procedures and communication documents were gathered and de-identified. These were coded using the same coding process applied to the interview transcripts. Reflections and the evolution of coding themes were logged in a research journal.

Three types of coding were applied during data analysis: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. Throughout the process, the literature-based conceptual framework guided the data analysis. Through open coding, an initial analysis was done,

providing a detailed review of the data. Axial coding, which narrowed the open codes and highlighted relationships within the open coding, facilitated the consolidation of initial and emergent open codes in a cohesive, focused manner (Hays & Singh, 2011). Finally, selective coding was applied to provide even deeper specificity to the axial coding. Selective coding, per Hays and Singh (2011), is the most complex type of code and identifies patterns, sequences, and processes within the axial codes. These three coding techniques were utilized together to analyze the data process. Further analysis combined categorical trends and collapsed them into broad themes. The findings were then analyzed through the filter of the theoretical framework, and conclusions about superintendents' leadership practices were developed.

Sixty-one a priori codes were used in the initial coding process. Sixty-five emergent, open codes were added, based on the participants' responses and information from archival document coding. Thirty axial, compressed codes were synthesized from the coding results. Key words were identified and ultimately facilitated the identification of the final nine themes. Table 4 illustrates the a priori, open, and axial codes used in the study, as well as the corresponding themes. To validate this table, the researcher developed a query to determine the most frequently used words in the interviews (Table 5).

**Table 4**

***Coding Process***

| <b>A priori codes (total = 61)</b>   | <b>Emergent, open codes (total = 65)</b>  | <b>Axial, compressed codes (total = 30)</b>  | <b>Corresponding themes</b>   |
|--|---|--|---|
| <b>Dissatisfaction signs (n = 7)</b><br>Anger<br>Posse<br>Change<br>Criticism<br>Board turnover<br>Blogs/social media<br>Media   | <b>Dissatisfaction signs (n = 4)</b><br>In trouble<br>Mistrust<br>Danger<br>Conflict  | <b>Dissatisfaction signs (n = 2)</b><br>Political Frame<br>Awareness   | <b>Communication</b>  |
| <b>Awareness Strategies (n = 4)</b><br>Ear to the ground<br>Visibility<br>Community engage<br>Join groups  | <b>Awareness Strategies (n = 2)</b><br>Presentations<br>Active listening  | <b>Awareness Strategies (n = 2)</b><br>Listen<br>Be involved, visible, accessible  | <b>Communication</b><br><b>Visibility</b>   |
| <b>Board Alignment (n = 4)</b><br>Clear roles<br>Training<br>Team building<br>Relationships  | <b>Board Alignment (n = 6)</b><br>Seek common ground<br>Communicate<br>No surprises<br>Audits<br>Set boundaries<br>Respect  | <b>Board Alignment (n = 4)</b><br>Build teams<br>Form relationships<br>Communicate honestly<br>Seek common ground<br>Student focus | <b>Team building/relationships</b><br><b>Communication</b><br><b>Seek common ground</b> |
| <b>Alignment Strategies (n = 11)</b><br>Packets<br>Calls<br>Texts<br>Meetings<br>Work sessions<br>Small group discussions<br>Retreats<br>PD<br>Honesty<br>Strategic planning<br>Goal setting | <b>Alignment Strategies (n = 18)</b><br>Data<br>Transparency<br>Flood with info<br>Communicate<br>Vision, mission<br>Explain decisions<br>Get to know trustees<br>Give talking points<br>Monitor pulse<br>Talk to president<br>Chunk big info<br>Regroup<br>Listen<br>Email<br>Talk weekly<br>Info systems<br>Build trust<br>Operating procedures | <b>Alignment Strategies (n = 4)</b><br>Strategically plan<br>Set goals<br>Board operating procedures<br>Honestly communicate       | <b>Strategic plan/goals</b><br><b>Communication</b><br><b>Team building/relation.</b>   |



**Table 4, cont.**

|   |  |   |   |
|---|--|---|---|
| <b>Persistence Strategies (n = 10)</b><br>Resilience<br>Energy Integrity<br>Use data<br>Explain decisions<br>Transparency<br>Honesty<br>Build trust<br>Form relationships<br>Involve stakeholders | <b>Persistence Strategies (n = 16)</b><br>Support system<br>Respect<br>Reputation<br>Balance<br>Courage<br>Apologize<br>Take action<br>Accept responsibility<br>Communicate<br>Avoid needless conflict<br>Mediate, seek solutions<br>Protect from media<br>Above fray<br>Choose battles<br>Love job<br>Good health | <b>Persistence Strategies (n = 7)</b><br>Maintain health<br>Find balance<br>Communication<br>Relationships<br>Involve Stakeholders<br>Courage/perseverance<br>Visibility Accessibility<br>Involvement | <b>Visibility/Accessibility/Involvement</b><br><b>Courage/Perseverance</b><br><b>Communication</b><br><b>Build teams/relation. Stakeholders</b><br><b>Energy/balance/health</b> |
| <b>Stakeholder Involvement (n = 4)</b><br>Committees<br>Communication<br>Use experts<br>Accurate information  | <b>Stakeholder Involvement (n = 5)</b><br>Stakeholder input<br>Clear values<br>Student focus<br>Media<br>Political frame   | <b>Stakeholder Involvement (n = 5)</b><br>Stakeholders<br>Seek common ground<br>Student focus   | <b>Involve Stakeholders</b><br><b>Communication</b><br><b>Common ground</b>   |
| <b>Outreach Strategies (n = 5)</b><br>Newsletters<br>Media<br>Visibility<br>Involvement<br>Personal communication   | <b>Outreach Strategies (n = 4)</b><br>Accessibility<br>Follow through<br>Student focus<br>“Their” schools  | <b>Outreach Strategies (n = 3)</b><br>Communication<br>Visibility, Accessibility<br>Student focus   | <b>Visibility/Access./Inv. Communication</b><br><b>Student focus</b>  |
| <b>Types interactions (n = 4)</b><br>Focus groups<br>Community meetings<br>Personal meetings<br>Q&A   | <b>Types interactions (n = 3)</b><br>Cheerleader<br>Standing committees<br>Presentations   | <b>Types interactions (n = 1)</b><br>Stakeholders   | <b>Visibility/Access./Inv. Communication</b>  |
| <b>Intensity of Contact (n = 4)</b><br>Impersonal<br>Brief<br>Extended<br>Regularly scheduled   | <b>Intensity of Contact (n = 2)</b><br>Personal<br>Impromptu   | <b>Intensity of Contact (n = 1)</b><br>Varying modes  | <b>Communication</b>  |
| <b>Groups (n = 9)</b><br>Interest<br>PTA<br>Rotary<br>City Council<br>Chamber of Commerce<br>Ministers<br>Realtors<br>Legislators<br>Teacher associations   | <b>Groups (n = 5)</b><br>Neighborhood<br>Student<br>Administrator<br>Bond<br>Watchdog  | <b>Groups (n = 2)</b><br>Internal and external stakeholders   | <b>Visibility/Access./Inv. Communication</b><br><b>Involve Stakeholders</b>   |
| <b>Total code occurrences</b>   |  |   | <b>4442</b>   |

The nine themes, and the corresponding number of coded references for each theme are provided in Table 5. The themes are sorted from largest to smallest, in the *Totals by Theme* column, to illustrate the hierarchy of the most dominant themes discussed by the participants. Table 6 contains the codes associated with each theme.

**Table 5**

***Coded References by Theme***

| <b>Themes</b>                            | <b>Totals by Theme</b> |
|--|------------------------|
| Communicate honestly                     | 882                    |
| Build teams, form relationships          | 868                    |
| Involve stakeholders, use experts        | 686                    |
| Be visible, involved, accessible         | 491                    |
| Persevere, have courage                  | 454                    |
| Strategically plan, set goals            | 427                    |
| Seek common ground and understanding     | 371                    |
| Maintain student focus                   | 172                    |
| Sustain personal energy, balance, health | 91                     |
| <b>Totals</b>                            | <b>4442</b>            |

The theme rankings of Tables 4 and 5 were then compared to confirm the validity of themes and to identify anomalies within the data. The tables indicate that the three most prevalent themes across all interviews were (1) honest communication, (2) team building and formation of relationships, and (3) stakeholder involvement. Figure 3 presents a word cloud that graphically represents the frequency of all a priori and emergent codes, generated from coding frequencies.



**Table 6*****Keywords and Phrases Sorted by Theme***

| <b>Broad Themes</b>                  | <b>Key Words</b>  | <b>Totals</b> |
|--------------------------------------|---|---------------|
| Communicate honestly                 | Listen, communicate, talk, honesty, integrity, trust, truthful, discuss, over-communicate, information, text, call, email, weekly packets, newsletters, media, presentations, meetings, provide information, build trust, talk to weekly, transparency  | 882           |
| Build teams, form relationships      | Team building, relationships, training, board workshops, connections, friends, respect, partnerships, learn motivation of others, avoid unneeded conflict, choose battles, clear roles, operating procedures, relationships, no surprises, boundaries, regroup, listen, information systems   | 868           |
| Involve stakeholders, use experts    | Experts, data, stakeholders, input, discussion, focus groups, community, engagement, discussion, meetings, accurate data, committees, input, Q&A sessions, political frame, awareness, their schools, accurate information, PTA, Rotary, Chamber of Commerce, tchr. association, neighborhood | 686           |
| Be visible, involved, and accessible | Visibility, community involvement, participation in events, open door, available, accessible, join groups, ear to the ground, active listening, varying length conversations, communicate, listen, not about you, energy, transparency  | 491           |
| Persevere, have courage              | Courage, resilience, weather storm, persevere, hang on, support structures, take action, follow through, accept responsibility, love job, energy, resilience, integrity, apologize, explain decisions   | 454           |
| Strategically plan and set goals     | Strategic plan, goals, vision, mission, values, focus, long range, short term, alignment, use data, audits, use experts,  | 427           |
| Seek common ground and understanding | Mediate, find common ground, make concessions, seek understanding, move to center, explain, get to know trustees, integrity, listen, build trust, respect   | 371           |
| Maintain student focus               | Students, kids, priority, focus, reputation, clear values, communication, student input,  | 172           |
| Balance                              | Health, energy, balance, support system   | 91            |
| <b>Totals</b>                        |   | <b>4442</b>   |

## Themes

Together, the superintendents who participated in this study held 10 superintendencies, and have spent 79 years leading some of the most academically successful school districts in the state of Texas. Their instructional and administrative experiences span all levels of PK-12 schools. The demographics of the districts they led vary widely with respect to size. However, there was marked overlap of the structures and actions they believe to have positively contributed to their longevity with the school districts in which they served as superintendents. This section presents the nine themes relevant to actions and structures the participants believed to have the most impact on their longevity.

**Leadership actions and structures.** Multiple actions were mentioned by all participants as essential to maintaining longevity in their positions as superintendents: seek common ground and understanding; maintain personal energy, balance, and health; engage in honest communication; involve stakeholders, use experts; keep student focus; persevere and have courage; establish procedures and clear roles; create a strategic plan and establish goals; build teams and form relationships; and be visible, involved in the community, and accessible. Superintendent Ellis captured actions in the following way,

I think superintendents who have been successful are people who have the knowledge base and understanding of what the superintendency is, but they also have the personal skills, the communication skills, [and] the human relation skills...necessary to apply their knowledge in a practitioner setting.

Throughout the study analysis, major themes emerged regarding the most critical practices that superintendents must deploy in order to be effective and to maintain

positional longevity. Following, presented in order of coding frequency are those themes (see Tables 4, 5, and 6).

***Honest communication.*** Communication with trustees, the community, and both internal and external constituencies, including students, was the mechanism most often cited by participants. The importance of communicating with these key groups lies in the facilitation of trust. Ellis described the importance of communication by stating, “When you’re talking about leadership strategies, again, I think it has to do primarily with communication and just being forthright with people about what you want to do.”

Superintendent Allen specified,

In the real estate world, it’s location, location, location. In the leadership world it’s communication, communication, communication. I believe that from my heart, and just really, particularly, when you are a public servant, when you are at the public’s will and they’ve got to have confidence in you, and trust you, especially highly, that you owe them full communication and honesty.

The importance of communication lies not only in cultivating trust, but also in the power to prevent conflict and mistrust. Allen explained the need for creating a climate of respect and trust,

[I] promised my board, the staff, and the community there would be no surprises from me, as long as there were no surprises from them. I think that built a tremendous amount of respect and trust and anticipation of a real good, open, two-way flow of communication from the get-go. That communication still goes on to this very day. It’s amazing.

Ellis also identified communication as a significant factor in superintendents’ professional success.

I think the success of today’s superintendency and as a matter of fact, there’s some research out there that even says this, that...superintendents who are successful are those that can best communicate with everyone. I think that’s one

of the reasons I experienced success in the superintendency. I was a pretty good communicator.

The manner in which participant superintendents used that communication on the job is described below.

*Communication with trustees.* It is essential that the board of trustees receive information in a timely, equitable, and transparent manner. Bonds shared, “It’s easier to deal with a thousand and one questions than with suspicion.”

Allen advocated for providing the board with ready information as a means to help “tremendously, that they had all the information—they actually had too much. I just flooded them with information. They would say, ‘this is overwhelming,’ and I would say, ‘well, do you want to know or not know?’”

Providing the board with information in a variety of formats is also important. “I think that’s so important to communicate in various ways with your board,” explained Ellis. That communication must be equitable, with each trustee receiving the same information.

“I tried to keep all board members informed on the same level.” Powell specified. “I try to treat them all the same. If I give one information, other than the president, then I give everyone else the same information.”

Among the ways of communicating with trustees includes frequency or “over-communication” as Osborne referred to it.

“At least once a week, they’ll hear something from me, and sometimes more often than that,” explained Ellis. There are many ways to connect with the board. “That means phone calls, that means personal visits, that means communicating by email—a lot

of different ways. Keeping the board very well informed about what's going on, I think this is important.”

For Bonds,

There are some that I talk to a lot on the phone. Drown your board in information. A lot of superintendents make this mistake of not wanting the board to know anything, or thinking they should wait. The more information they have, and the sooner, the better.

Bennett concurred, “There's a lot of communication. There's a lot more than they can read, to be honest with you.”

Multiple communication modalities are critical to providing effective and timely communication to trustees, both individually and collectively. Powell summarized this area, “I do think communication is important. In fact, communication is essential.”

For Osborne,

I think the job of the superintendent is to make sure that they are getting as much information as they can to give them the word, the talking point, the phraseologies in the district or stance on an issue, so that they are not at a loss to answer community questions.

In the event of an emergency situation, failing to timely inform the board of trustees about the situation can be as destructive as the incident. Having a predetermined method of disseminating information to trustees is necessary. Bennett utilized the following strategy:

If there's any kind of an emergency, any kind where the press, the TV stations, or something like that are coming out, then we divide and conquer. I make sure the board members get called right away. We have a blast, a little email blast, or I'll text them to say the press is here, will call you later tonight, or it's about this, please check email.



Powell also emphasized the importance of delivering sensitive information in the most personal way possible, given time constraints.

If we had something going on, board agendas, board issues, issues with the community, maybe we even had, heaven forbid, somebody shot, and we did have, while I was there. Well then, I am going to let them know all about that. I'm probably going to send them a text and then follow up with a call.

Equally important is tailoring communication to meet the needs and perspectives of each trustee. In order to do so, a superintendent must make time on the front end to fully learn who each trustee is. Osborne explained,

It's my job to know all seven of them and to be able to anticipate what questions they're going to ask, anticipate what data they're going to need to help them do their job, and just to know as much as you can about how they think, so that if you can give them their needs then they'll be able to make decisions. They will be more comfortable about those decisions. If they're constantly trying to get the information they feel they need, everyone's ability to do their job is undermined.

Providing trustees with the information they need, or believe they need, is essential, and there are myriad strategies to accomplish this objective. Osborne expanded on this theme,

As a superintendent, it's my job to know that this board member has this [issue or concern] that is really important to them, and this board member has that [issue or concern]. How you bring their interests into the discussion and information you give them is important. The board has a variety of perspectives, and you must give them what they need to meet that perspective. If you don't you get an antagonist[ic trustee].

Preparation is a key strategy often cited by participant superintendents, such as Osborne.

We also prepare for board meetings with asking what is this board member going to ask? How do you think this one will act? Do we have four votes on this? These are the kinds of things we do so that we can help them do their job and help us do ours. This helps us all move the district forward.

“Friday letters” or packets were mentioned by a majority of participants, as were presentations, board workshops, and methods for providing information in manageable segments. Osborne implemented such a model.

We have a theory. Anything related to salaries or compensation, insurance, whatever, we bring those to them in small sections and they talk about it and then we start putting them together towards the end of the budget process and put the pieces together for them. If they say we are going to have a 1% salary increase, then we tell them it’s going to increase the budget this much, and they vote on it.

Bennett provided information each week from the office of the superintendent.

“That’s not personal communication from me. It’s loaded onto their BoardDocs. Some of it is mailed home to them, depending on what it is. More is better.”

Allen emphasized the need to devise an appropriate communication protocol and personally helped to create the structures for regular board communication:

It was based on the board’s needs. I let them help me develop the format for the weekend memo, and some wanted a hot topics section, which told me they weren’t going to read the rest of it, and that’s ok. It’s what they need. They wanted a schedule of what important things were going on by the month, by the week. So if any parent said, I heard they were doing Jump Rope for Heart at elementary B, they could say they sure are, and they are also doing it at elementary DEF.

*Communication with internal and external interest groups.* All superintendents specified ways in which they purposefully communicated with their internal interest groups, such as teachers, teacher associations, district employees, and their own senior staff. Communication, according to the participants, must include all stakeholders, as Allen explained:

I think the other real key to my longevity was very open lines of communication with my internal and external public—24/7, 365. You have to be out there, promoting the good things that are happening, bombarding people with facts, data, good news, so when there’s bad news they’re ready for it. Nothing is

perfect. Bad will happen. When it does, you have built that rapport and pride and trust in the district.

External factions were also important. Every participant acknowledged the need for some form of “key communicator” group that accessed and involved community stakeholders in a regularly scheduled conversational meeting with the superintendent.

Ellis would

...meet with teachers’ associations and talk to them. I would go to Chamber of Commerce meetings. I’d speak at Rotary clubs. Wherever two or more are gathered in the name of the district, I am there to listen and talk.

Bennett agreed, with this perspective, and explained,

We are in a trust position and I want everyone to know that I realize we are dealing with other people’s children and other people’s money. The schools really belong to them, so we have to be responsive to our community. To do that, we have to communicate with them.

Powell explained,

We were always talking about how we would communicate better with people and how to reach out to the public and talk with them, and how to deal with everything from overcrowded schools to building new schools, to whatever the case may be. In so many ways, communication is key.

Bonds acknowledged the need to reach a wide audience on a personal level.

You try to meet with them. In fact, it was real interesting. I started meetings with everybody at least once a month, me and them. What do you want to talk about? What are your questions? What can I clear up?

Similarly, Ellis utilized structures to personalize contacts with staff.

I had 7,000 employees. I didn’t know every one of them, but they knew me because I personally reached out to them. I talked to everyone. I went to ball games. I was in the schools. I talked to the cafeteria staff and the custodial staff. I talked to all of them. Every Monday morning, everybody in the district got a message from me, and it was personal. I wrote it, nobody else. Sometimes I would put what I had done over the weekend...and would mention my family, my wife, going to [a big] football game. Things like that.

Bennett found it easiest to communicate with teachers: “That’s been a real easy one. I think it’s just because I value what they do so much and work hard to make sure they get what they need and to know what that need is.”

Leading a school district is not without its challenges. When difficulties arose in the district, the need for meticulous communication did as well. Powell explained,

When you’ve got people who are opposed to you and are looking for salt at every circle, it really does heighten, I think, your attention not only to details, which is probably not a bad thing at all, but it also makes you communicate that much harder [with] the people who really want to hear what the truth is and what the facts are.

Honesty is important, in trying to seek solutions, as Allen detailed,

As long as you’re honest with them, and you make them feel valued, bring them into the process, because they’re either part of the solution or they are the problem. Either way, you have to make them part of the solution.

Bonds had a similar perspective regarding responding to community conflict.

“Talk. When they call, you talk to them. You tell them the truth, and you tell them what you legally can tell them.”

Ellis identified that conflict is inevitable when dealing with people who have diverse perspectives, and those disagreements should not be ignored.

How you bridge those conflicts with groups is to hit it head on. I would go out, I would speak to them. I would explain my position and I would give them the reasons why I was recommending certain things, or were doing certain things. I was very forthright.

Communication does not automatically solve all issues and assure stakeholder buy-in.

However, dialogue is essential to finding a solution. Ellis further explained this challenge,

Of course, you are not going to treat every group the same way, and you're not going to do the same things with every group that you do with others. I think you have to look at what group you're working with, and what the issue is. There were times I had to come down and just say, this is what we're going to do. You may not like it, but this is what we are going to do and here's why.

All participants identified critical, candid, and sincere conversations with both internal and external groups as a non-negotiable practice for superintendents who seek to maintain alignment with their boards of trustees, as well as with their greater community. In addition to engendering trust, communication is essential to nurturing relationship development.

**Relationships and team building.** Participants' responses underscored the connection between the action of communication and the outcome of relationship development, thus leading to the identification of this nexus as a meta-theme.

Communication was one of the primary mechanisms mentioned for developing and maintaining those relationships, particularly with members of the board of trustees. Participant responses also specified that relationships with the media, the community, and various stakeholders could not be overlooked. "The superintendency is really all about working with people daily...and getting that vision to be the central focus. To do that, you have to have a relationship that you can build on and work from to meet district goals" summarized Bennett.

Powell expressed the theme in starker terms,

So often, superintendents lose their jobs because of their inability to build relationships with people—whether it be [with] the board or whether it be [with] the people who work in the district, their fellow administrators, or the community. They overlook one or more groups.

For Osborne, “the most important skill I have needed is the ability to get along with people. Learning how to get along and work with different people.” Relationships, despite being critical, are not a magic bullet.

Powell explained,

...the mere fact of listening to people and getting along with people and working through solving problems, and just dealing with the daily tasks of the superintendents, you think, “well I think I can do all those things.” But the fact of the matter is that it is far more complex than that in the relationships and its inter-relationships and the complex political relationship. But to ignore those relationships is a death knell.

Clearly, the need to successfully form and to sustain those relationships is essential to positional longevity and success. Relationships must be honest in order to have the desired result. Bennett cited the need for being candid.

You do own up to mistakes, to visions you wish you could have had a do-over on. I think you own up to those and you explain why you made that decision but now, you might do it differently, if it ended up being a mistake. You just have to be honest with them. You have to show them respect and trust, as well. It’s part of building the team of eight and for building a base with your community.

Similarly, Allen emphasized this need. “I was a very upfront person [during my superintendency]. I didn’t speak out of both sides of my mouth. When I said something, I meant it. I was extremely candid.”

Powell stated that you must be “honest with all of them [groups and trustees].”

Bonds was very direct about the need for honesty and transparency.

One, you don’t ever fail to tell them the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. I put that under number one. You have got to be totally honest with them, because being in the job you’re in, there’s a certain level of suspicion anyway. You never cover up. Never. Ever.

The degree of integrity and honesty that superintendents display sets the tone for the quality of their relationships with their boards and their communities.

A superintendent's relationship with his or her board of trustees is of primary importance. "Never forget that the superintendent is the only employee the board has," specified Allen.

"They [board members] have a personality, individually, and then the board has a personality, collectively," said Osborne.

Ellis explained,

You have to have the kind of personality that allows you to work with seven different people who might have seven different agendas, and to bring that group together to work together. You must have the ability to work with the board. If you can't work with your board, you aren't going to stay there long.

The mechanics of forming those relationships did not vary among the participants.

Team building was consistently identified as the requisite process for developing a team of eight mindset and functionality. Allen reflected, "I had great, great board members. We really spent a lot of time on quality board training, and this was before team-building was required."

Ellis treated his board as colleagues, and more, even going so far as to consider them as friends.

I think you count board members as much as you can as friends, and you treat them as such. You treat them with respect. You treat them with honor and dignity. You treat them the way you would want to be treated. If you do that, then I think they respond in kind.

The superintendents achieved team building in a variety of ways. Some participants utilized training opportunities such as board retreats, state-sponsored annual training

conferences, and board meeting workshops. Others hired professional trainers through external professional organizations, to accomplish this goal. According to Allen, “Helping them to develop as a team of eight always, always, always...which is why I brought in outside trainers, to make sure we were on target.”

Bonds also said, “we brought in TASB and had board team training to get everyone on the same page.”

Allen expanded on this practice,

Bringing the board to the table to look at areas [where] all they had been able to do before was fight and argue about...was absolutely essential. I brought in these highly respected professionals to train [us] and work on team building. They are very direct with the board, as am I. We spent time in a retreat, served a very nice meal, and I had the best of the best trainers and all we did for two days was work on being a team.

A positive culture is essential to the operation of the district. Ellis summarized this concept by saying, “By building a culture where we are family, we are after the same thing, we want to seek the same kind of success and so forth, then that helps people build that personal trust.”

There are many ways in which each superintendent articulated the importance of forming relationships with stakeholders. Allen identified the need for “building trust and driving out fear. I couldn’t do anything until I drove out fear and built trust. They may feel they know [who you are], but you have to prove yourself.”

For Bennett,

They’ve got to like you and to trust you. They’ve got to feel they know you as a person and think you’re a good person working in the best interests of their kids or their community. They can’t think, yes, on paper, she’s [or he’s] a good superintendent. Or yes, technically he’s [or she’s] doing everything fine and the



district is running like clockwork. They're paying you and they feel like they own part of you, and in a way they do.

Ellis viewed personal power as key in forming relationships with stakeholders, "What's personal is the relationship you have with staff and teachers and community and students. Everything you build as an individual about how people view you as a person and as a superintendent."

Bonds focused on the need to

...cultivate those relationships by getting to know them and them knowing that you are really trying to work in the best interest of the school district, and that you'll tell them why. You don't ever say, "Because I said so."

For Allen, "the honesty, the integrity, the candor with which you speak, the legitimacy with which you speak, and the fact that you can back things up with data will make or break you." In doing this, the superintendent can reinforce the culture and the trust that he or she has worked hard to create.

***Clearly defined roles and procedures.*** The superintendents identified the benefit of clear role boundaries for the board of trustees and the superintendent. Role clarity prevents governance issues and cultivates a positive working relationship with the team of eight. All participants mentioned the need to establish clear boundaries and to define respective parameters with their boards of trustees. Further, participants discussed the power of clearly stated goals: board/superintendent goals, strategic plan goals, and short-term goals. A critical aspect of this is setting goals that the board wishes the superintendent to implement. Ellis emphasized, "I made the point to the board all the time that they were board/superintendent goals, they were not superintendent goals alone. They had just as much responsibility for achieving them as I did."

Bennett explained,

I would meet each year with the board. In addition to what we already had as a strategic plan that we developed, I would sit with them and develop our mutual goals that the board felt we should accomplish together. Maybe it was very much tied to the strategic plan, but we focused more on the goals we would meet as a team of eight.

In addition to setting goals and objectives, Powell articulated, “I always tell young superintendents that they need to have a set of board operating procedures in place that are voted on by the board. This means the board has to vote on how they act.”

Osborne referenced these procedures as well. “If I have a board member who is expecting too much, wants individual information, or special treatment, those board operating procedures are really important.”

Allen also emphasized the need for board procedures, as well as training for the team of eight. Then, as issues arise, concerns and problems can be addressed in a way that respects all trustees while resolving conflict.

They have to know what’s wrong. There has to be protocol, and written board procedures that they all developed together and agreed to—and training, training, training. If you don’t do that then things fall apart. You are no longer a team, and the district suffers.

A review of archival documents reflected that, while all six districts had formal board operating procedures, only two of the districts posted theirs online. All were available upon request, and addressed agenda development, board member roles and conduct, governance issues, communication, training, and travel. All six districts’ websites provided clear and readily accessible information on the board, their code of ethics, their standards of behavior, their goals and their functions.

Having clearly defined roles from the outset prevents misunderstandings and provides resolution when issues arise. It must be done from the beginning of the relationship with the superintendent and the board, and revisited consistently. Osborne advised, “they’re very aware and we keep discussing the division between board responsibility and superintendent responsibility.”

Failure to do so can have dire consequences, as Bonds cautioned. “If you’re in a situation where you’ve got to say to the board, legally I have this authority and you don’t, you’d better update your resume quickly, because you’re not going to be there long.”

Powell explained that,

Boards in many places want to really serve as a superintendent. If there’s anything you ought to be able to get from any of the people you talk to, is having a clear identification of what your job is as superintendent, and what their job is as the board.

Allen also assured that the board of trustees knew where their jobs ended and the superintendent’s began.

I’m the only employee you need to talk about. If you don’t like something the head football coach is doing or the high school principal, you tell your employee, the superintendent, and she [or he] will deal with it. You don’t hire; you don’t fire. That’s not your role. You do set salaries, but you approve what I send to you...it was a big, big paradigm shift for my board. When you do it in the right way, when you are so transparent, so honest, and so sincere, and everything is data-driven and you prove that to them over and over, it works.

Bennett recognized that role clarity extends in both directions. “You guide board members to make good policy, and then it’s your job to implement it and make it work. You have to have a vision, but you also have to realize that you’re not the policy maker.”

Similarly, Ellis iterated, “I understood that the board was the boss and I was not the boss and that I had to fulfill their policies and wishes and desires if I expected to continue.”

**Visibility, community involvement, and accessibility.** The need to be highly visible and well-connected to district and community events and leaders was emphasized by all six superintendents, as a means of reinforcing and establishing relationships, as well as a way to foster communication. The participants consistently identified essential areas of visibility that they believed sustained their tenure. Participants specified that visibility was essential across multiple venues, with all stakeholder groups, and should occur in a manner that renders the superintendent accessible to his or her constituents. The pattern of visibility identified by superintendents mirrored the mosaic of communication that emerged from the analysis.

***District visibility.*** That connectivity extends beyond the superintendent, to campus administration. As Osborne explained, “staying close to the leadership of the school and setting an expectation that they are in tune with their community is important.”

Ellis captured the motif simply, “wherever two or more are gathered in the name of the district, I am there.”

Likewise, Allen explained,

I was so highly visible in all the extra curricular activities, and all the events on campuses where parents are attending. And I mean high visibility, not hiding in a corner somewhere, but out in the middle of them. Here I am, you want to talk. I am here to listen.

That ready accessibility was a common theme in the participants' responses. Visibility goes far deeper than just superficial presence, as Osborne clarified.

Being visible and being out there is important. In the school district I am in, we are a part of a larger educational community. We are part of a large metropolitan community. We cannot sit and isolate ourselves. We can't afford to do that. Our kids need those relationships.

Bennett explained,

I try to go to as many events as I possibly can, not just to value kids but also to value what the teachers, the coaches, the sponsors, all do. It's also for parents to see that you care, and that you're out there by going to all these different things. They know you don't have to, that you've been at work all day, but you are there to support them. I think that visibility helps in many ways.

Ellis believes "it is spending a tremendous amount of time with people, talking to people, communicating with them, letting them get to know you personally, who you are."

Having an ear to the ground, and being in personal contact with parents and students is essential to the superintendents interviewed, such as Powell.

You have to remember that these parents who are attending their child's event are not the same parents that were there 10 years ago or even five years ago, so you have to make that kind of investment. They have to see that you're really caring about their kids, and about the school, and the jobs that we're doing for the kids because it's a new set of parents. It's constantly a new set of parents. It doesn't really matter that their friend next door said you were at everything when our kids were there. If you are not at everything now, it doesn't matter what you did in the past.

Ellis concurred, viewing attendance at events as an opportunity to garner trust:

When the community sees you out there and when I go to so many school events and do so much outreach, that along with written communication and direct communication like conversations and things like that, they all work together to build trust.

Powell prioritized time by handling items, such as mail, after work and events were over.

I just felt like as big as our district was, there were people and things going on that I needed to spend my time with, not looking at mail. I can do that at night. Being involved in all this stuff that is going on, definitely being interested and showing that interest, taking the time to meet with people when they want to meet with you, and to sit down and visit with them. That is much more of a priority. You have to set up lines of communication with the mamas and the daddies and the grandparents, and the easiest way to do that is to be present and available at all the events.

***Community visibility.*** Active involvement in community organizations was frequently mentioned as one strategy to maintain visibility. Osborne said, “I am a joiner. I belong to everything. I belong to Rotary. I belong to both Chambers of Commerce. I meet with the teachers’ groups. I think that face-to-face, people interaction is our business.”

“I developed key communicator groups, which had never been done before,” Allen explained.

My favorite group that took more of my time than anything else was the Neighborhood Ambassadors. I had one from every neighborhood, and there were a lot. I’m going to say I eventually narrowed it down to 10. I would go into these little neighborhoods once every couple of months and we would have a coffee in that home, and that ambassador invited all their friends, and we just talked.

Bonds emphasized,

You’ve got to want to be with them and talk with them and meet with them and listen to how your decisions impact the Chamber or the teacher groups and paraprofessionals, etc. Everything you do affects them. They’re counting on you to make the right decision, every time. This is your job but it’s their life.

Bonds also advised, “you go to those meetings. You get to know the groups...you don’t go enough, you’re in an ivory tower. You go too much, you can’t do your job. There has to be balance.”

Similarly, Bennett advocated for knowing “who you have to know; who is who in the community, and which things you need to attend, which people you need to know. I was very cognizant of that early on and maintained that awareness.”

The media is one of the groups that the superintendents identified as crucial to cultivating relationships and utilizing them as a mechanism for engaging their constituents and for disseminating information that the public needed. Bonds described the strategy:

When they really want to talk and they say they prefer to talk to the superintendent, you talk to them. After board meetings, they hang around and they’ll ask for a comment. I always, always, give a comment and an interview. I do editorials. They want to do an interview, I go to them, just because I want to build that relationship.

Ellis offered the perspective of needing to work with competing interest groups or potentially hostile media outlets in an equitable manner, particularly when their viewpoints lie in direct contrast to those of the district or the superintendent. The media, for Ellis, was a tool to be used to be visible and to convey the message of the district.

I even went on radio on some of those very conservative talk shows with people, and built relationships with some of them. Generally, I was not on the same page as they were, but I think again accessibility to the media is a big issue, and being open. It all comes back again and again that you must be available to your people.

Visibility can be attained through more avenues than attending district events, being in the media limelight, or having an open door policy. Allen, for example,

explained a mobility model where the message was taken directly to the people who needed to hear it.

I went anywhere and everywhere getting people talking about the changes and challenges we were facing as a district. We talked about programs and the fast growth track we were in. I talked about changes in state funding formulae, federal and state mandates, and I just put my show on the road. We had a canned Power Point that was very upbeat, very positive, showcasing the great things our teachers and students were doing, but also being very honest and forthcoming about the challenges ahead.

Just as the mechanisms for being active and involved in the community and for being visible to their constituents vary, so must superintendents develop a wide repertoire of ways to maintain their visibility. Time brings change; superintendents reported changes over time in the ways in which they maintained their visibility such as changes that come with demographic shifts, growth, or declining enrollment. Many times, those changes are politically driven, coming from community dissatisfaction. For example, for Powell,

The job changed, it did change. It changed from a job where I spent some of my time with schools, some of my time with the board, and some of my time with the business and building aspect—those kinds of things. But I found myself the last couple of years spending far more time with the politics of the job than I wanted to spend and needing to find ways to refocus that.

Some changes naturally stem from the rapidly expanding technologies of the 21st century. Superintendents must expand their repertoire to remain current with those avenues of connecting with their greater community. Bonds, for example, emphasized the need to utilize social media and to grow with the times:

We have tweets and Facebook and a webpage. We even have text blasts to anyone who signs up. We have *In the Know* and *Rumors/Facts*. We have kudos and we still have a good newspaper that I work with closely to do editorials and to showcase our kids' accomplishments.



Osborne, similarly, identified the parallel between drowning the board in information and being very open with the community. “You can’t ever be too visible, too accessible, too involved, or give them too much information.”

Bennett concurred, identifying visibility as a way to reinforce trust, to create opportunity for communication, and to “keep an ear to the ground in the community, so that we can be aware and responsive to shifts in the community’s concerns or perceptions. The superintendent is the single most visible public face of the district.” The analysis clearly pinpointed that long-serving superintendents utilize high levels of community involvement as their entre to informal and formal conversations, to deliver the district’s message to the widest group possible, and to maintain a timely awareness of the current mood and concerns of the taxpaying, voting public.

**Seek common ground.** Operating from a common vision or place of mutual understanding fuels the work of the district. Even when team building has been implemented, disagreements will occur. Seeking common ground when this happens is a valuable, time-intensive investment. Ellis “tried to take what the different factions were talking about and [tried] to bring their ideas together to try to develop some kind of consensus, and that takes a lot of time.”

Osborne emphasized the need to be able to “mediate and manage group problems.”

For Powell, “it’s the ability to relate to and to understand how people feel and to try to broker decisions that are in the best interest of all concerned.”

Bringing in experts on the issue is one such strategy, as Superintendent Bennett explained,

There's only been once that I felt like I wasn't in line with their vision...they saw something differently than I did, and the administration did. I suggested a workshop on it, and I invited our principals in to explain the real situation that they encounter with our board, and our board really appreciated it. We all ended up on the same page in terms of how we were going to handle some things.

It is essential to believe in the possibility of finding common ground. Osborne has “a strong belief that there is always a solution. It may not be either side's preferred solution, but I do believe there is always a solution as long as you can sit and talk things through and listen.”

Ellis said,

I would try to explain all the alternatives and options that we might have, and why one group might feel one way and another might feel another way. Neither group might be right or wrong, but if we couldn't agree, then we needed to bring it to some point that we **could** agree on.

Bennett emphasized the need to have an “understanding that we are all on the same page. We want to accomplish the same goals. We may not agree on how to get there, but we do have to work together and reach consensus.” It is not merely the trustees who must move to middle ground. As a team of eight, the superintendent must be willing to make concessions, as well.

Ellis discussed the importance for the board to see those concessions.

The superintendent has to be someone who gives in this process, so they could see how far I've come in making the recommendation from where I originally stood. I would say, let's put it to the vote...we might still have a 5-2 on a really hot issue, but I wanted them to understand that being united in a vote in public is important to the community, so they can buy into what we are doing.

That buy-in makes the work of the district much easier to accomplish, and reinforces trusting relationships with all stakeholders.

**Strategic planning and goal setting.** In education, beginning with the end in mind is a fundamental guideline for all work, whether it is instructional planning, curriculum design, or working with the board of trustees. Participants acknowledged the need to align vision, goals, and mission through strategic planning and goal setting activities. These activities are one more mechanism for soliciting and acknowledging community input as well as for communicating the direction the district is going. Powell utilized them in every domain. “You need to have strategic plans in place. Strategic plans for facilities, strategic plans for curriculum and instruction. They need plans for the things that are important to them in the district.”

Just having the plans is not enough. Osborne specified, “keep them in the forefront of their minds, what they said they wanted as a board and a community, and the goals of the district. It’s paramount.”

Crafting that plan must involve stakeholders and be a tool in the hands of the staff. Ellis described the procedure used in the district,

We had a large number of community members in strategic planning and ultimately the board approved that plan and we kept that plan as a viable tool. It worked well as the staff and I would report back to the board every quarter about where we were with that plan. It drove our work.

Similarly, Allen “had a plan of action and I said I will come back to you regularly and I will report our progress and how we are implementing it.”

Strategic planning is also a tool for working with the board of trustees. Osborne emphasized that

...it's important that as the leader you continue to remind them and take them all the way back on these goals. This is how the goal is played out in the decision or in the answer to a problem, or in this budget recommendation.

Allen collaboratively created both long-term and short-term plans. "I had long-[range] and short-range plans to make many, many improvements in every area that needed improvement. I said it must be developed collaboratively. I used student input, parent input, staff and community input."

These plans allowed the superintendent to keep the focus and vision at the forefront. Osborne elaborated:

Maintaining alignment, goals, and the direction of the district is the responsibility of the superintendent. That is very critical. What you are doing and where you are going is so important to making sure that the board is supportive of the vision and mission and direction and goals of the school district. Then as you make decisions, it is based on needs and plans.

Allen captured the need for the superintendent to facilitate goal setting in this way,

[I]f you keep on doing the same old things the same old way, you keep getting the same old results, and I don't think that's what you want. I think you want a better school district, and to restore the pride. Together, we're going to restore pride, we're going to be a number one recruiter, we're going to improve our facilities, we're going to improve our salaries, and you know, it becomes a very exciting time, and everybody wants on board.

**Keep student focus.** Superintendents make many decisions each day, in the course of their jobs. Maintaining perspective is paramount. Superintendent Powell emphasized it in this way,

It's not about me and never was about me. That whole job, I just really didn't see myself as anybody other than one more person in the district. But by the same token, I also understood that there were times that the superintendent has to make decisions and has to stand up for and take the lead. When that happens, it has to be all about the kids.

Superintendent Ellis echoed this, saying,

I was the superintendent, and so I had to make these kinds of decisions, and I was the educator and I felt like what we needed to do was in the best interest of our teachers and kids and so forth. I would always communicate to the board what the issue was and make it very clear where I stood on the issue, which is for kids. Now, that may be opposed to one faction or two factions...[within] the board...but I would always tell them why I was taking the position I took and they always knew where I was going to come down as far as that position was concerned. If we aren't here for kids we are here for the wrong reasons. It should never be about you.

Similarly, Bennett explained, "I am the person that has to make this decision and I have to make a decision that's best for kids, and best for the school, and best for the faculty."

Ellis also iterated, "I was a superintendent, I had to make these kinds of decisions, and I was the educator and I felt like what we needed to do was in the best interest of our teachers and kids and so forth."

Bonds had a similar perspective,

If you want to make a difference and impact a community and move a community and parents and kids forward, and give kids the opportunities they may not have had if you had not been there to put in programs, there's no better job. The minute you lose sight of those kids, the ones you're here for, you need to step aside.

For Powell, work with the trustees was made easier because of shared perspectives.

I fortunately had board members who had what I felt like were very similar feelings for education for all kids and treating people like they needed to be treated and making decisions based on what was in the best interest of people and students.

Focus, commitment, and a clear vision of where the district is going and how it will get there were alignment measures consistently addressed by the participants.

Bennett summarized this theme, “always, always, keep what’s best for kids at heart.”

**Involve stakeholders, use experts.** Participants reported a respect for stakeholders that manifested as a commitment to involving them in decisions that impacted them. Superintendent Osborne, for example, discussed the response to a campus renovation that became a community hot-topic, explaining how involving factions directly can turn a negative situation into a positive one.

What I did is I put together, I said, “Since you’re willing to work on this issue of design, concept design, for the school, put your name on a piece of paper.” We had probably 16 people or whatever and I hired an architect, I hired a facilitator and we had probably four to six meetings. The parents started meeting themselves and, ultimately, came up with the parameters for a redesign of that school. I didn’t attend any of those meetings because it isn’t my school. It’s their school. They probably worked for four to six months and now that design is going into our facilities master plan and I’ve got some of the best advocates for the school.

Allen also identified increased contact with constituencies as an essential means to secure buy-in and to gain understanding, particularly on hot issues.

Sometimes it means realizing you’re in big trouble, that you’ve got to really move, and you’ve got to move fast, but you can’t overwhelm people because you’ve got to get the people involved. You’ve got to get their buy-in; they’ve got to have ownership. They’ve got to have a voice, and they’ve got to know what’s going in, they’ve got to be informed, and you have to keep going, and keep going, and keep talking, and keep talking, and then do what you say you’re going to do, and we did that, and we brought in so many outside experts, and looked at so many different angles, that at the end of the day impacts student achievement, and some of them didn’t cost a thing to do.

Stakeholder groups extend beyond parents and staff. Bennett met with area clergy, students, and parents on a destructive student activity.

I said, “I am going to take this to parents. I am going to take it to the high school kids,” because I have an advisory group of high schoolers, and I had a key communicators group in the community, and I am going to share what are some of the things on this list, and just say, “Come on, guys. We are better than this.” I said, “You are better than this” to the kids. I even worked with the area ministers and also talked about how we’re all better than this as a community.

Superintendent Allen used experts to generate both data and training.

We audited everything that was auditable. It’s one of those things you can do when you’re new because you want to say, here’s where I’m starting from. An expert or professional report has instant credibility.

Bennett deployed experts to provide their perspectives to trustees on major decisions.

I’d get the right people at the workshop. It wasn’t just me and the seven board members, but it would be the administrators, and maybe down to the assistant principals or even teachers. If it was a topic where I thought these people have the most information on the day-to-day of how this decision affects the operation of the campus, for instance, or how they do their job. I get people in and the board has been very responsive to that, of hearing from the experts on the topic.

Bonds utilized experts in projecting significant data.

[F]or example, you find a really good demographer, even if it’s the most expensive one you can find, it’s worth the investment. They have to be nearby so they know the area. It’s crucial to have the best data, the most accurate information, when it impacts funding. It drives everything we do.

Similarly, Osborne attributed some of the longevity to the fact that,

I was able to explain things with expert testimony. I would have one of my directors attend the meeting. Or we would have a principal on discipline concerns. We used experts on funding or audits or enrollment projections. Get the people out in front who know the most about the issue at hand.

**Overlapping codes and intersecting themes.** Throughout the review of the data, several codes consistently occurred together. The greatest overlap was centered on communication, which clearly emerged as a meta-theme, overlapping with several other

codes. Based on a matrix-coding table of all themes and references, the theme overlapped multiple others.

Most frequently, communication was identified concurrently with visibility, team building and relationships, seeking common ground, stakeholder involvement, and maintaining a focus on students. Bonds voiced this confluence,

...you accomplish so much from being visible and accessible. You have opportunity to communicate with your people. You form relationships with them and build trust. You reach multiple stakeholders at once. You have to listen more than you talk. Always listen first.

Another superintendent, Bennett, expressed a similar point, from the perspective of an investment.

I was telling you about how many things you go to and the need to be visible, every time you go someplace or are someplace. As you talk to the people there, you are making an investment in relationships. You make some relationships, and when you do that a lot you can clear up a lot of things by being honest and saying, "That's not what really happened."

Powell also seized on the multiple benefits of visibility and communication and how interrelated they are.

We had that kind of relationship that came from being present. They never had to worry about what the superintendent thinks or if I even had a thought on a matter. Well, I was always right there, chiming in with my two cents and answering their questions and listening to their concerns.

Superintendent Ellis also emphasized communication as the mechanism for community awareness, for building support for initiatives, and for earning trust through openness with stakeholders and special interest groups.

I always made sure that the community was aware of our rapid growth. I wrote about it in my Monday message to staff. I talked about it at Rotary clubs, Chamber of Commerce meetings, and placed that I would go, in community newsletters. I would let them know through our newsletter and I would write



articles in the main newspaper. I told about the changing demographics, and how our economically disadvantaged population was growing. I made it clear that if we were to stay a recognized district, we were going to have to put more resources into working with our disadvantaged children. The community learned to trust me, that I was forthcoming, because I made it real to them. There is no other way to create that relationship, but through communicating and being anywhere and everywhere in the community to do that communicating.

Osborne described this connection as “they want or need to know something. I have to explain. Doing so builds a rapport that can only come from being accessible, truthful, and from talking and listening.”

Allen established ground rules, explaining that doing so made the relationships stronger by setting boundaries at the onset. The example provided was focus groups with students:

You have to have ground rules, you know. You have to tell them that we are not going to sit here and say you hate a teacher or you want a teacher fired. That’s not what our relationship is all about. We are here to talk and to listen and to talk about what we each can do to improve education, to do better. I tell them to tell me what we are doing that is working well, that you don’t want us to tweak. We really developed close relationships that last today in some cases. I would really talk to them about everything. We talked about dress code, sex ed, grades, the changes coming down the pipe for high schools, their careers. It was about communication, but it was also about being with them and inviting them to be part of the team that was working to improve the district. It was powerful.

Ellis summarized,

If you are a person of trust, a person of integrity, a person that people know that you’ll tell them how you feel and they realize they may not agree with you but they know where you stand on the issues because you built a personal respect there. You took the time to communicate and form a relationship, to build trust, to reach out to everyone.

Powell similarly explained,

I think that helped people to understand what was going on. Sometimes, I hope a lot of times, you had mommas and daddies out in the community as they went out to eat with their friends or went to some school events, when somebody

would come up with an outlandish thought about what was going on in the schools somebody would say, “Oh wait a minute, I had a conversation with Dr. Powell and that is not accurate.”

Thus, it was frequently impossible to separate the various aspects from the participants’ responses. Communication requires listening. It comes from being visible and accessible in the community and at district events, from purposefully being inclusive of special interest and community groups, and it fosters relationship development. All of these factors work together to support the work of the district and to engender longevity.

### **Unanticipated Findings**

Data analysis yielded additional practices that were not directly related to the research questions but applied to overall topics of longevity and sustainability in the superintendency. They are chronicled below.

**Courage and perseverance.** All participants discussed being courageous and persevering in inevitable times of conflict and dysfunction. Conflict is inevitable as Bonds described: “As you have to say no to things and people, you begin accumulating baggage. You start carrying it around. You have to stick to your convictions and persevere if you are going to have a career in the superintendency.”

Ellis voiced a similar theme,

When you are in positions of leadership and authority and power, whether it be schools, the military, the corporate world, or wherever you are, no matter where you are, every year you have to make decisions. When you make decisions, you are going to make some people happy and some people mad. Every year you may make 5% to 10% of the people mad. After five years, you might have half the people mad at you. At that point, you have to decide if it is going to affect you as far as your job. You make the choice to weather the storm or move on.

Bennett also discussed this challenge,

If you can get through the hard times, people forget so quickly. They forget it so much sooner than you do. It may have scarred you or given you high blood pressure, it may have caused all kinds of things and taken its toll on you personally, but the public just moves on after a while, especially if your board was behind you and they were re-elected and no one took them out of office. At the time, it's either that you are going to retire or I am going to continue to be a superintendent. It takes a lot out of you to get through it. You have to have courage and support. You have to have tenacity and perseverance.

Bonds expressed the sentiment that,

It's not about you, but you can surely get caught up in it, though. One reason you get paid a lot of money as superintendent is because of the dynamics of politics. When you say politics, people assume it's the election points, but that is just part of it. Your decisions affect so many people and every year you are there, you make more enemies. No one remembers all your "yes" decisions. The only thing they remember is when they didn't get something they wanted or thought they needed. They get mad and they want a new board member and a new superintendent.

Powell explained the need for courage as a leader,

[T]here are some things that you simply cannot delegate as a superintendent. Even after more than 20 years, there were people who didn't want to listen to me make a speech, but again, standing up in front of a room, talking to a group of citizens, a group of hostile people, and I had to do that many times in my career. These aren't things I enjoyed doing, but I also knew that I had to have the courage to figure out how to do it. The only way is through it.

For Allen, courage sometimes included putting oneself on the line for what was right.

You have to be right out in the middle of them, saying here I am, you want a piece? Come get it. Just that high visibility, and just that high accessibility, and then having a cabinet that also spoke with one voice, and that also picks up the ball and runs with it. You have to have the courage to make tough decisions, have staff support them, and then hold your head high and keep on keeping on.

**Maintain personal energy, balance, and health.** An opinion consistently expressed by the participants was that the superintendency is a demanding job that

requires time, energy, and commitment. Ellis expressed a perception that some superintendents who fail or who are not successful do not invest the proper commitment.

I do want to just say that I think that the superintendency is a great profession, but I think that many of the people who become superintendents are not willing to spend the time and the commitment that it takes to be successful. That worries me.

Allen was more direct, “You have no life as a superintendent, but I wouldn’t take it for anything. It was absolutely one of the best times of my life. I loved it.” Based on the participants’ statements, having no life as a superintendent appeared, from participant statements, to stem from the need for visibility as well as from the job demands.

Bennett concurred, citing empathy for those who leave the superintendency because of conflict or the stress.

[That incident] took a lot of support from other people that were close to me. It was a hurtful thing because there were things that happened that I would not have chosen to have happened to people. I couldn’t control it. It was very hurtful. People were misbehaving in lots of ways, and it was a very hurtful thing that happened, but again, the board knew all the facts, and the board again was 100% with me and very protective of me in that regard, and so was my family. For other superintendents who moved into a new community to take a job, and then they encounter something very difficult in those years, usually boards buy them out, or they quit, and they move on, they’re looking for their next job, and I completely understand why because it takes a lot out of you to get through it, you can’t do it without support from your family.

Powell explained, “you have to be physically fit enough to do the job. The stress of the job is such that you’ve got...your body has got to be able to compensate for the stress that this job entails.” Powell went on to discuss the pitfalls of failing to maintain health and appropriate balance.

There are lots of people who had mental breakdowns...or had some type of physical problem as a result of the job. The stress was just great. There is honest talk about suicide, divorce, [and] mental issues with this job. It can be overwhelming...it's about the balance of life, and it's about getting yourself mentally, physically, spiritually, and psychologically balanced to do this job.

Similarly, Ellis described the toll that the position can have.

I think the longer you go as a superintendent, you're going to have more baggage that you're going to have to carry, whether it be boundary changes, tax increases, bond issues, decisions you're had to make about certain people's kids as far as discipline is concerned. I definitely think that if you're superintendent, every year as you go as a superintendent, you're going to have to work issues more and more to help people understand why you do things and you're going to have more and more people mad at you. It gets exhausting because it takes so much energy. You have to have ways to manage the stress in healthy ways. ...Effective superintendents don't sleep much, they have lots of energy.

Allen concurred, saying, "I don't think many of us need lots of sleep. We have tons of energy and we use that energy optimally."

Even with great stores of energy, there are familial aspects that cannot be overlooked. Ellis identified the superintendency as a way of life.

I just think people who become superintendents have to understand it's a way of life. It is a life to you. My [spouse], and my kids as they were growing up, school was our life and that's what a superintendency is. It's a life that you live and you learn to do in a way that your whole family and your whole self is involved in that. It's not a job. I think that's where some people fall off the track when they become superintendent is they look at it as a job, and it's not a job. Maybe getting a little out there with this, but it is, it's almost a calling I think.

Bonds captured the idea in this way,

[I]t's kind of a balancing act with everything. You go to too many meetings, you can't do your job as superintendent. You don't go to enough, you're in an ivory tower, so you try to do that balance. You neglect things at work, your job and career suffer. You neglect things at home, [and] your family suffers. It's a tightrope.

Powell, who placed the greatest emphasis on this area, iterated the need for a strong support system at home.

[Y]ou've just got to figure out what there is to do in the home life and you've got to figure out how to balance that out. Some of those things have to be done by the spouse. That's very difficult if there's no spouse there, but still you figure out how to balance that out. You've just got to figure it out. If you've got whatever help you've got, it's what you have to do. That's the answer to the question. It's always been the answer to the question from day one of the superintendency to the last day of the superintendency. Find a way to get balance.

The demands, both emotionally and of time, can have a significant toll on superintendents. Creating support structures that can mitigate the effects of the many stressors endemic to the position is an essential mechanism for sustaining personal energy, well-being, and cultivating positional longevity.

**Superintendent preparation programs.** There was less agreement among the superintendents as to models for superintendent training programs. Through a coding process that mirrored the one applied to the previous data, seven themes were identified and applied. Table 7 shows the frequency of code occurrence by theme. While these responses did align to some degree with the findings regarding longevity such as in the areas of communication, best leadership practices, and awareness of politics, they differed enough to merit inclusion as unanticipated findings. Consistently, superintendents cited on the job training, mentoring, and a practitioner model for superintendent preparation as the most needed content for training programs. A majority of participants explained the best training for the position lies in actually “sitting in the superintendent’s chair,” as Powell stated.

**Table 7**

***Coded References for Preparation Models by Theme***

| Themes              | Totals by Theme |
|---------------------|-----------------|
| Practitioner model  | 12              |
| Mentoring           | 12              |
| On the job training | 10              |
| Best practices      | 9               |
| Politics            | 8               |
| Communication       | 6               |
| Essential functions | 6               |
| <b>Total</b>        | <b>63</b>       |

Superintendents most frequently identified the need for preparation models based on a practitioner model, and the inclusion of a strong mentoring component. Ellis explained,

I think because too many people that teach in superintendent preparation programs are college professors who really don't have an understanding of what it means to be a superintendent and what that job entails, and so they develop the courses in the programs based on what they like to teach and what they think a person should know. Really, they don't have a large understanding of what a superintendency really is.

Powell concurred, stating

I think that the best superintendent preparation courses are taught by people who have actually done the job...it's a multi-faceted job that needs to be taught by people who've done work and people who understand...what the textbook says and how to apply that in real situations.

Mentoring was identified as a similarly critical aspect. Ellis elaborated on this theme,

I think mentoring is a really important role and it's not so much from teaching the person how to be a superintendent, it's more in...a couple of aspects. Number one is being a sounding board of the person who's trying to navigate the beginning years of being a superintendent. Having someone to talk to about certain situations and asking, what would you do in this situation? ...[Number two] is just the confidence aspect of being able to talk to someone and know, okay, yes, I'm doing this right or that's a good idea, I'm going to do it a little

different. It's just having someone to guide you through the processes sometimes.

A strong emphasis on the nature of the job, and the belief that the majority of learning can only occur when one actually is a superintendent. Powell characterized the need in this way,

I think the cause of the stress and those components of that superintendency that are so difficult to experience, unless you've experienced them, that's what that superintendent preparation course needs to include. I don't think there's any job in the school district that prepares a superintendent to be a superintendent, because of the political aspects.

Ellis admitted that time and experience - not academic coursework - were the greatest teachers.

Let me tell you, I was a totally different superintendent after 25 years than I was the first year. I didn't know what I was doing the first year I became a superintendent and I had to learn it. You don't learn it in an internship. You don't learn it by people telling you about it. You learn it by doing it. You learn it by sitting in that chair.

In addition to on-the-job training, superintendents discussed the need for training on how to navigate the political frame of the job as well as the myriad ways in which effective superintendents must communicate. Bennett elaborated on this need,

I think that's probably how to handle the press during crisis situations, how to respond to political pressures and threats, how to get groups to work well together, that you need to work together, how to build alliances, how to have that conversation about your school. I think the superintendency preparation program really needs to spend 90% of their time on that kind of stuff.

These findings indicate an unanticipated difference in the skill set needed for preparation and skills best indicated for longevity. Participants did not describe superintendent preparation models that focus on strategic planning and goal setting, courage and perseverance, and maintaining personal energy, balance and health. Rather, they



identified the need to provide training that establishes knowledge of the essential functions of the superintendency, skill in communication, and for coursework that is applied from a practitioner viewpoint. In addition, political awareness, and on-the-job practice in applying best leadership practices were the most often identified components. This varies, aside from the emphasis on communication, from the most dominant themes from the longevity data. Communication was identified as important, but far less so than training programs that operate from a practitioner viewpoint, the importance of mentoring, and practices which allow aspiring superintendents to apply best practices in authentic situations. The data suggest that having the skill to secure the job as superintendent may vary from the skills required to retain the position for a greater than average time.

## **Discussion**

Key findings of this study were grouped into three dominant themes: *goals and parameters* (clear roles and procedures, student focus, strategically plan and set goals); *outreach* (be visible and accessible, involve stakeholders, form relationships and team-build); and *strength and resilience* (courage and perseverance, energy/balance/health). Consistently, this study revealed the interconnectedness of each facet of this triad. *Communication*, which had the greatest number of overlapping influences, impacts each of the three primary strategies and cannot effectively be separated from any other action. Participants' myriad accounts of ways in which they purposefully deployed communication with all stakeholders, including their boards of trustees, reinforced the theory that the modern-day superintendent's role is that of a communicator (Bjork &

Keedy, 2005; Gunther et al., 2011; Kowalski, 2005) who must remain aligned with both his or her school board and maintain an awareness of the community's pulse (Callahan, 1962, Lutz & Iannaccone, 1986). Participants' descriptions of their deliberate *outreach* to community and internal interest groups - including high visibility - confirmed both Eaton's cumulative theory (1980) and Callahan's vulnerability theory (1962). Further, the unanticipated but equally critical theme of *strength and resilience* completes the portrait of the essential components for superintendent longevity. Figure 5 portrays the essential triad of communication practices that this study identified. *Communication* must focus on goals, working within *clearly established parameters* for appropriate roles, focus groups, and key communicator groups. Those varied groups should be accessed by effecting purposeful *outreach* through high visibility and accessibility and through high involvement in community activities. In inevitable times of conflict and dissent, communication should represent the superintendent's *strength and resilience*. Finally, in addressing preparation models for the next generation of school superintendents, a focus on practitioner models, which blend mentoring with providing a strong knowledge base and create opportunities to discuss navigating the political frame.



**Figure 5. Triad of Essential Strategies**

## **Summary**

This study examined the professional experiences of six long-serving Texas public school superintendents, who led academically successful school districts. To gain a deeper understanding about leadership actions and structures that these superintendents believed to have contributed to their longevity, a qualitative research design was used. Interviews were conducted to provide individual level responses and robust descriptions of their experiences. This chapter presented a composite demographic summary and profiles of the six participants, including descriptions of their professional backgrounds.

Utilizing the data gleaned from interview responses as well as archival documents many themes became apparent: strategically plan and establish goals; form relationships and build teams; honestly communicate; be visible, accessible, and involved; and maintain student focus. An additional theme was that of co-occurrence of codes related to communication across all themes . Additional themes which were not related to the research questions but which resulted from the interviews and had overall relevance to the research topic were presented: being courageous and persevering in times of conflict, and seeking ways to maintain energy, balance, and health. Together, these themes condense to three major findings: long-serving superintendents must create structures and deploy actions that utilize communication as the centerpiece of establishing goals and parameters, promoting outreach with all stakeholders, and cultivating personal strength and resilience. A graphic depiction of that triad was presented. The findings discussed in this chapter will be further explored in Chapter

Five, as they relate to the research questions that guided the study, along with implications for practice and for further research.

## **Chapter Five: Summary**

This chapter presents a summary of this qualitative, phenomenological study. The results were obtained through qualitative methods specified in Chapter Three. The data gathered through in-depth interviews provided thick, rich descriptions and were supplemented through reflective journals and archival documents. Collectively, these data sources facilitated the determination of the study's comprehensive findings. Each superintendent shared his or her individual lived experiences and beliefs through the semi-structured interview process. Transferability of this study's findings is possible because of the study design. Each of the six superintendents interviewed had tenure of at least six years in academically successful Texas public school districts, which ranged in size from 8,000 to over 90,000 students. The findings are presented in three parts. The first section provides the findings, by research questions, followed by a visual representation of the collective participants' experiences. A review of the study's limitations is presented. The second part specifies implications for practice for future or current superintendents. The final section offers recommendations for future research.

### **Problem Statement**

Effective school district leadership is a function of the skill and effectiveness with which a superintendent creates and sustains focus on student achievement, which in turn is dependent on the length of the tenure he or she is able to maintain in his or her school district (Waters & Marzano, 2006). Organizational stability, through the superintendent and school board, is essential to maintaining school district success (Bolman & Deal, 2010; Dervarics & O'Brien, 2011). The ability to develop and nurture

effective working relationships with their boards of trustees, their stakeholders, and their community is predictive of superintendents' longevity (Byrd et al., 2006; Kowalski et al., 2011; Petersen, 2005). Multiple internal and external forces can limit a superintendent's tenure in a given position. The most successful superintendents are highly skilled in working with their boards of trustees (Callahan, 1962), with various internal and external organizations (Eaton, 1990), and with the greater community as a whole (Lutz & Iannaccone, 1986).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to describe and analyze the leadership practices of long-serving superintendents with at least a six year tenure in a single academically successful Texas school districts. The study described and analyzed long-serving superintendents' leadership actions they believed had influenced their longevity. The research questions and theoretical framework provided the context for framing the semi-structured interview protocol and a priori codes. Emergent themes that evolved during data analysis were incorporated into the a priori coding scheme and ultimately led to axial codes.

### **Research Questions**

To gain a deeper understanding about leadership practices of long-serving Texas superintendents, the following questions guided this study:

1. How do superintendents maintain alignment with their boards of trustees?
2. How do superintendents cultivate relationships with external and internal special interest groups?

### 3. How do superintendents navigate connectivity with their community?

#### **Methodology**

This qualitative, phenomenological study utilized in-depth interviews with six superintendents who had served in an academically high achieving school district for six or more years. A semi-structured interview design allowed participants significant autonomy in how the interview evolved. An interview protocol was used as a foundation; some questions were not asked and others were expanded or added by each individual participant (Hays & Singh, 2011). This allowed each interview to be highly unique and contextualized and facilitated rich, thick description.

Superintendents were selected for participation based on requisite criteria of having served six years or more as superintendent of the same school district that was identified as academically successful by state or national standards (rated recognized or exemplary). Six years was selected as the cut-off longevity criterion for this study, for two reasons: Eaton's cumulative theory (1990) identifies years four through six of a superintendent's tenure as a period of increased vulnerability. Yee and Cuban (1996) established 5.8 years as their benchmark for long-term superintendency. Superintendents were purposefully selected to represent the continuum of school district size, from small (8,000 or less students) to medium (20,000 or more students) to large (90,000 or more students). Interview data were triangulated through the lens of archival documents, field notes, and a reflective journal.

## **Significance of the Study**

This study chronicled school superintendents' reflections of their own leadership practices that led to increased positional longevity. Both organizational stability (Petersen, 2005) and increased student achievement are linked to superintendent longevity (Waters & Marzano, 2006). Therefore, identification of specific factors which limit superintendent tenure as well as practices that increase longevity are paramount. The significance of this study was threefold. First, the study sought to deepen the understanding of successful actions which long-serving superintendents believe to enhance their tenure. Second, the study advanced Eaton's cumulative theory (1990), Callahan's vulnerability theory (1962), and Lutz and Iannaccone's dissatisfaction theory (1986) regarding reasons for shortened superintendent tenure. Finally, it was designed to add to the body of research on effective superintendent leadership practices.

This study uncovered several key findings related to best practices for working with boards of trustees, internal and external interest groups, and the broader community. These included communication, team building and relationships, visibility and accessibility, role clarity and establishment of procedures, and strategic planning/goal setting.

## **Results Summarized by Research Question**

Chapter Four conveyed the themes and findings of the research data, illustrated with specific examples the participants provided. A graphic depiction of the communication triad that emerged from the study was provided. This section applies those results to the specific research questions and provides a comprehensive summary



of the study findings. The results of this study were directly applicable to the theoretical framework. The ways in which the six superintendents in this study worked collaboratively with their boards may have reduced their vulnerability to losing their positions. The mechanisms they deployed to inclusively involve constituents through dialogue, advisory opportunities, and participation in decision-making may similarly have decreased threats to longevity from various interest groups. Finally, a lack of board turnover for five of the six superintendents suggests that superintendent tenure can be similarly stable, as was the case for all participants. This finding confirms Lutz and Iannaccone's premise of community dissatisfaction.

**Research question 1.** How do superintendents maintain alignment with their boards of trustees?

Callahan's vulnerability theory (1962) links superintendent longevity to the ability to remain aligned to the goals, decisions, and actions of the board. Vulnerability occurs when that alignment is lost; then the likelihood of shortened tenure increases. Results of this study strongly suggest when dealing with boards of trustees, frequent and honest communication, team building and relationship formation, seeking common ground, goal setting and strategic planning, and the establishment of clear roles and boundaries are essential leadership practices to promote positional longevity. In addition, when making decisions, providing trustees with expert information such as from demographers and external audit results, and with direct information from front line users cultivates positive working relationships with trustees and maintains focus. The goal of all these practices is to cultivate trust and empower teams of eight to

effectively do their jobs when making decisions based on what is best for students.

Following the lines of Callahan's vulnerability theory (1962), all six participants iterated intentional practices and structures that they utilized to work collaboratively with their boards of trustees, which may have reduced their vulnerability to losing their position.

***Communication.*** Kowalski (2005) classified the modern role of the superintendent as communicator. Conrad (1994) described culture as a product of communication, while Kowalski identified the interdependence of culture and communication. "Culture influences communicative behavior, and communicative behavior is instrumental to building, maintaining, and changing culture" (p. 13). The results of this study indicate that to maintain longevity, superintendents must create a culture of openness and trust with their boards of trustees through effective and multifaceted communication structures and practices. To sustain alignment with their boards of trustees, all six participants identified communication as the single most important leadership practice that a superintendent must deploy with his or her board of trustees. Each participant shared examples of how they assured that board communication was frequent, transparent, timely, honest, and equitable among all trustees, so as not to create divisions within the board. These efforts included providing communication in a variety of ways: in person, via telephone or text, through email, in weekly correspondence and through board documents. The study participants also utilized communication as a primary mechanism for establishing strong relationships within and among the team of eight. Participants consistently discussed the amount of time that is required to effectively communicate in a comprehensive way, and the need

for candor and truthfulness in all communications. All six participants provided illustrations of ways in which they over-communicated with their boards, provided them with more data and information than they needed, and operated from a perspective of eliminating surprises.

***Team building and relationship development.*** The relationship between superintendents and their board members is critical to the success of the district as well as to the longevity of the superintendent (Bjork & Keedy, 2005; Petersen & Fusarelli, 2001). Yee and Cuban (1996) asserted that harmonious relationships with board members lead to longer tenure. Failure to cultivate positive board/superintendent relationships is one of the most commonly cited factors for limited superintendent longevity (Alsbury, 2003; Glass & Franceschini, 2007; Kowalski et al., 2011; Petersen, 2005). Houston (2001) expressed the opinion that “leadership in the future will be all about the creation and maintenance of relationships” (p. 430). Effective superintendents spend significant amounts of time in developing and preserving connections between people (Collins & Porras, 2002; Collins, 2011; Schlechty, 2002; Wiseman & McKeown, 2010). It is in the strength or weakness of those relationships that a superintendent often finds his or her success or failure.

Relationship development and team building were the second most frequently discussed practices of the study participants. All six participants discussed the solid connection between communication and cultivating positive relationships with their trustees. Each provided examples of ways in which they deployed truthful communication with their trustees. To sustain a positive working relationship with their

boards, the participants shared evidence of how they systematically helped the board develop as a team of eight and how they worked to form relationships with each individual trustee. Those strategies included investing time in getting to know each of the trustees; setting norms for the group; hiring experts to provide training on team building; scheduling periodic board retreats; and using concrete, accurate data to inform the board. Further, each participant discussed ways in which they identified the unique strengths and perspectives of their trustees to promote engagement and collaboration. Trust was an integral aspect for each participant, examples of which included treating others with respect, practicing integrity, consistency, reliability, and following through on actions that are promised.

Effectively navigating board relationships once communication and goals are in place can be a significant challenge to superintendents. Whereas theoretical clarity in the division of superintendent and school board authority is statutorily provided for Texas educators, the daily operations can be murky (Eadie, 2005; Glass, 2000; Goodman & Fulbright, 1999). When superintendents and school boards have difficulty remaining in their assigned roles, it is an issue of governance (Houston & Eadie, 2003). Defining the roles and respective functions, developing strategies to handle conflict, and creating parameters for individuals' conduct work together to improve relationships and team of eight functionality (Smoley, 1999). A smooth and steady relationship can enhance the district's ability to achieve its goals and objectives and serves to solidify the effective practices of the team.

Participants unanimously acknowledged the need for clearly defined board/superintendent governance structures as a tool for maintaining focus and for supporting superintendent longevity. Each superintendent offered methods for establishing those role limitations and for creating board-operating procedures, as key strategies that are essential to effective team building and relationship development. Some built upon formal training and team-building sessions, utilizing a professional learning model. Others relied upon board-created and voted-on procedural manuals and policies to guide the behavior and work of the trustees, extended by frank discussion when issues arose. Archival documents such as formalized board-operating procedure manuals reinforced the implementation of this practice. The superintendents in the study provided examples of ways that they referenced operating procedures, or reinforced concepts of role boundaries.

***Goal setting and strategic planning.*** Superintendent resilience is enhanced by the ability to sustain focus, maintain a cohesive sense of purpose and organizational mission, and eliminate distractions from the core body of work (Atherton, 2008). Strategic planning involves establishing both long and short-term goals through a “comprehensive goal-setting process to develop board-adopted, non-negotiable goals” (Waters & Marzano, 2006, p. 14). That process must necessarily involve a wide range of stakeholders to secure buy-in from implementers as well as from the community. Community members desire to know about the future of their school district, what its goals are and what issues may be on the horizon. Providing a vision and the goals to

realize that vision is highly important for superintendent longevity and success (Atherton, 2008).

All six participants identified the importance of maintaining a student-centered focus through strategic planning as well as through the establishment of board/superintendent goals. Each provided anecdotes that illustrated ways that they used data as a foundation on which to collaboratively craft the goals. Clear communication was both a consistent foundation and reinforcement for establishing and implementing shared vision and goals. Bolman and Deal (2011) examined goal setting through the perspective of coalitions of diverse individuals coming together to negotiate and bargain to develop those goals. All superintendents in the study utilized each of these practices, which they perceived to provide structure, alignment, direction, and cohesion.

***Seek common ground and understanding.*** When factions emerge, superintendents must find ways to seek common ground and reach consensus in order to make the best decisions for students and the district. One superintendent discussed seeking to avoid a tyranny of the majority by attempting to reach common ground.

Bennett explained,

You have to know how to make those kinds of decisions and have those conversations so that people are still on board, and still helping with the decisions, the yeses that are given, and being supportive of one another. Building that kind of consensus and group that I think is the job of the superintendent has to do.

Ellis emphasized the need to have mutual respect for the various forms of power that boards and trustees respectively have to make decisions.

The position of superintendent, I think does carry weight, it does carry power, if you want to put it that way with it, and always tried to make my board

understand that the board itself has a lot of power but the superintendent has some power and you have to coalesce that power to bring about change and effectiveness.

This requires having the skill and finesse of working with the board through conflict and the front-end investment of time in forming personal relationships with the board.

***Keep student focus.*** The primary work of the district is to create optimal outcomes for student achievement and safety. All superintendents emphasized the importance of keeping these goals at the forefront of decisions and conversations. Each participant uniquely expressed ways in which they maintain consistent student focus with their boards of trustees, thereby consistently maintaining board emphasis on decision-making through the lens of what is best for students.

**Research question 2.** How do superintendents cultivate relationships with external and internal special interest groups?

Eaton's cumulative theory (1990) extends Callahan's vulnerability theory (1962) by identifying other sources of vulnerability for superintendents beyond their board members. Eaton emphasized the need for superintendents to form positive relationships with special interest groups, teacher associations, students, parents, and community members. Pearson (2000) found the ability to collaborate with various stakeholder groups is a key factor in superintendent longevity. Effective superintendents purposefully nurture collegiality with their internal and external stakeholders to effect sustainable change and execute district plans for continuous improvement (Brunner & Grogan, 2007). A consistent message from the participants was that the scope of work for public education is far too critical and large to reside solely with the superintendent

or with the team of eight. There was significant overlap between communication and the formation of relationships as with board communication and relationships. Positional, personal, and legitimate powers are some of the power roles available to superintendents (Yukl, 2012). Within each of these roles, effective superintendents situationally utilize their communication and relational skills to interact with the various interest groups within their district. Houston (2001) asserted, “Successful superintendents of the 21st century will be those who find a way of leading by sharing power and by engaging members of the organization and the community in the process of leading” (p. 429).

***Communication, accessibility, and visibility.*** Communication with internal and external groups is essential to convey and solidify the district’s vision, mission, values, and goals. The ongoing communication process is evident in those interactions. This reciprocal exchange of ideas, concerns, and perspectives ensures positive working relationships. Every superintendent interviewed provided instances of how they assured core tenets of communication: honesty, candor, listening, reciprocity, varied, and frequent. Establishing a climate of listening and mutual respect and guaranteeing access to one another engenders trust. For special interest groups, that communication is facilitated through opportunities to interact with the superintendent. For superintendents, it is fostered through utilizing every feasible venue and avenue to interact with constituencies. Even the act of participating in dialogue forms points of contact and connectivity. Those connections are significant in maintaining relationships. Every superintendent shared examples of how they cultivated dialogue with various groups. Some of the methods included having student and faculty advisory groups, scheduling



regular meetings with teacher associations and using every available forum to deliver information: social media, key communicator groups, email and text blasts, webpages, and the like.

To communicate effectively, one must be available to the public. All six superintendents interviewed identified the challenge of making time to attend events and making themselves both visible and accessible to their public. They all made it a point to attend as many student events as possible: athletic games, and fine arts performances as well as academic competitions. Each had unique ways of reaching out, but all of them invested significant amounts of time and energy, knowing that they would not see the yield for perhaps years to come. This is clearly heard through Dr. Allen's voice.

The first three years are years of action, high visibility, pounding the pavement, developing all those communication groups, [and] spending hours with every board member. They are an investment that you may not yield a return on until year six or seven, but they are so very essential.

***Maintain student focus.*** By sustaining a consistent district-wide baseline of making all choices and decisions from the perspective of what is best for students, vision alignment can be maintained. Superintendent Bennett explained the need to be forthcoming with stakeholders and to explain decisions from the perspective of what is best for students.

You cultivate those relationships by getting to know them and them knowing that you really are trying to work in the best interest of the school district, and that you'll tell them why. You don't ever say, "Because I said so."

Not only must superintendents explain decisions and recommendations they make when working with their boards of trustees, the rationale for those decisions must be made with a student focus in mind. This corresponds to the findings of Waters and Marzano

(2006), positively related to setting and keeping districts focused on teaching and learning goals.

**Research question 3.** How do superintendents navigate connectivity with their community?

Lutz and Iannaccone's dissatisfaction theory (1986) suggested that board turnover precedes and results in superintendent turnover as a natural response of community dissatisfaction with district policy or practice. The community's disenchantment manifests at the election site as incumbent trustees are defeated for re-election - which in turn leads to an involuntary change in superintendents and ultimately a change in school district policy (Alsbury, 2003). School board members are elected to represent their communities and should be aligned with the values of that community. When that alignment ceases to exist, change is inevitable (Atherton, 2008). As mentioned in the goal-setting section above, it is imperative that superintendents systematically create structures to solicit community input and involvement (Brunner & Björk, 2001; Eadie, 2005; Lutz & Iannaccone, 1986; Pearson, 2000).

***Community involvement and visibility.*** All six superintendents shared specific examples of how they immersed themselves in their communities, beyond their visibility and presence at events. Interview responses and archival documents evidenced practices that included involvement in being a joiner of community volunteer organizations and advisory boards and scheduling meetings with powerful groups such as a ministerial coalition, chambers of commerce, city councils, and such. Participants utilized these activities as ways in which they reciprocally interacted with their community members—

simultaneously gaining a comprehensive knowledge of their needs and culture, and providing them with an analogous knowledge of the needs and culture of the school district. A consistent belief participants voiced was that the schools and the district belong to the taxpayers; therefore it is not merely a political necessity but also a matter of professional integrity to solicit community engagement. Communication—listening more than speaking—and relationship formation were acknowledged as inextricably linked to community engagement practices.

***Stakeholder involvement.*** Actively soliciting stakeholder involvement transcended all three research questions for this study. This finding corroborates prior research citing the interdependence of stakeholder groups (Fullan, 2011; Houston, 2001). In dealing with trustees, superintendents should involve stakeholders in answering questions before the board, making presentations in their areas of expertise, and assuring that those who have the greatest knowledge of an issue are able to share their information directly. With respect to special interest groups, all participants shared specific strategies for actively seeking out the input and perspective of stakeholders. Participants cited various initiatives such as establishing key communicator groups and special action committees, task forces, and advisory groups that gather student, faculty, parent, and community input as multiple mechanisms for engaging a wide range of interest groups. Finally, reaching out to continually maintain a finger on the pulse of community sentiment emerged as an essential way in which superintendents successfully maintain an awareness of increasing dissatisfaction within spheres of the community.

## **Additional Findings**

Though not directly related to the three research questions, two additional themes emerged from the study, which directly relate to the overarching concept of identifying strategies for increasing superintendent longevity. They are to exhibit courage and persevere in challenging times, and to maintain personal energy, balance, and health. Brief descriptions of these follow.

**Courage and perseverance.** The superintendency is not without difficulties. When factions develop within the board, or when community sentiment is divided over a decision, the participants in the study consistently advised leading with courage and persevering through the fray. To accomplish this, one must rely on the courage of his or her convictions and the knowledge that he or she has made the best decision possible.

Superintendent Allen explained:

At the end of the day, when you've presented your position, and it's data-driven, and here are the reasons we have to make this change or implement this policy, you know, and if it's not working well, we'll see if we can tweak it...but you know, right now, this is what we're going to do, and here's why. You have to keep walking head high through the detractors.

Frequently, as identified by dissatisfaction theory (Lutz & Iannaccone, 1986) and

Superintendent Bonds,

when voters are mad and parents are mad, instead of thinking through something and looking at the plan and going, there's no way this will work anymore, it's like, "I'm mad and I want a new board member and I want a new superintendent because we're going to get a superintendent who will listen to us." You have to weather the storm and hang tough.

Bennett concurred, advising that superintendents must have “tenacity, perseverance.” They must also recognize that it is not always feasible or legal to fully explain decisions.

You take a lot of hits because misinformation gets out. You can't for a lot of reasons. It's not necessarily legal even, but it's ethical. You can't really explain everything. It might involve personnel issues. It can involve special education issues. It could involve mental health issues of employees. It could involve lots of different things that you can't explain. You just have to keep your head up and weather the storm.

Sometimes, like Bonds, you can “feel the posse forming” and you must reinforce the support systems that you have in place, if you are to weather the storm. It takes resilience and courage not only to survive community incidents, but also to persevere in the superintendency.

**Maintain personal energy, balance, and health.** Several superintendents identified the stress of the job as a significant potential barrier to longevity and even physical well-being. Prior research (Merrell, 1997) viewed Callahan's (1962) vulnerability theory through the lens of job stressors and identified several motifs related to physical illness, emotional distress, and even impacts on the families of superintendents. This was borne out by comments made by more than one participant. The findings from this study make a strong case for the need for sitting superintendents to find ways in which to relieve their work-related stress, to balance job and family demands and sustain the high energy that the position demands.

### **Emergent Theoretical Framework**

These two themes, while unanticipated, nonetheless contribute important perspectives and depth to the study findings. Thus, they were incorporated into the final

emergent theoretical framework, which captures the nine key themes, that resulted from this study. Figure 6 illustrates an updated theoretical framework derived from the data obtained in this study. It identifies the key strategies long-serving superintendents of academically successful Texas school districts utilized in working with their boards of trustees, their internal and external stakeholders, and their larger community.



**Figure 6. Superintendent Leadership Actions That Promote Longevity**

The central focus of the above graphic represents that a superintendent’s leadership actions with internal and external special interest groups, his or her boards of trustees, and the greater community are at the core of his or her longevity. This framework may serve to guide future studies for more in-depth understandings of the relationships between superintendents and their various stakeholders and practices they utilize that promote longevity, and thus increase student achievement and organizational stability. For each theme, represented in Table 8, specific strategies and example actions and behaviors are provided, derived from participants’ responses to the study.

**Table 8*****Synthesis of Longevity-Producing Actions of Participating Superintendents***

| <b>Theme</b>                         | <b>Strategy</b>  | <b>Example actions/behaviors</b>  |
|--------------------------------------|--|---|
| Communicate honestly                 | Establish procedures and opportunities for systematic, equitable, and honest communication with: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• School board</li> <li>• District personnel</li> <li>• Community members</li> <li>• Community organizations</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Friday packets and weekly updates</li> <li>• Face to face meetings, focus and advisory groups,</li> <li>• Board workshops to allow deeper understanding</li> <li>• Transparency and honesty</li> <li>• Seek common ground and understandings</li> <li>• Seek to be known on a personal level</li> <li>• Never, ever lie</li> </ul>   |
| Create relationships and build teams | Create structures that provide for <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teaming</li> <li>• Communication</li> <li>• Training</li> <li>• Collaboration</li> <li>• Engagement</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Professional team building workshops</li> <li>• Seek consensus and mediate conflict</li> <li>• Open communication; all trustees receive the same information; no surprises</li> <li>• Get to know personally; listen more than talk</li> <li>• Train, train, train the board</li> <li>• Address issues and conflict head on with all groups</li> <li>• Identify strengths on which to build</li> <li>• Meet regularly with stakeholders</li> </ul>                                   |
| Be visible, involved and accessible  | Purposefully create opportunities that allow <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Multiple avenues for public interactions</li> <li>• Dialogue</li> <li>• High visibility throughout the district</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Attend everything feasible</li> <li>• Be a “joiner” of community organizations</li> <li>• Speak often at Rotary, Lions Club, Chamber of Commerce</li> <li>• Make it a point to talk to parents at events</li> <li>• Meet with special interest groups such as clergy, realtors, veterans</li> <li>• Be available at events</li> <li>• Meet with media when requested</li> </ul>  |
| Seek common ground                   | Establish procedures to facilitate effective board governance <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Board-developed operating procedures</li> <li>• Clear roles of superintendent and board</li> <li>• Create unifying goals and expectations for superintendent and board</li> </ul> Understand trustees individually <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dialogue</li> <li>• Training</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The board must develop, vote on, and annually approve their own operating procedures</li> <li>• Collaboratively establish board/superintendent goals</li> <li>• During team building, clearly define roles; consistently revisit boundaries in a non-threatening way</li> <li>• Maintain student focus</li> <li>• Mediate conflict and seek common ground</li> <li>• Talk through difficulties and disagreements</li> <li>• Refer to group norms and standards of conduct</li> </ul> |

**Table 8, cont.**

| <b>Theme</b>                              | <b>Strategy</b>  | <b>Example actions/behaviors</b>   |
|---|--|--|
| Strategically plan and set goals          | Establish district and board goals <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collaboratively</li> <li>• Data-based</li> <li>• Communicate goals and report on progress</li> <li>• Involving stakeholders</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Begin with the end in mind</li> <li>• Utilize data that is current, thorough, and honest</li> <li>• Report and update board routinely on goal progress</li> <li>• Maintain strategic plan and superintendent/board goals as the point from which all decisions emanate</li> <li>• Secure stakeholder input in plan creation</li> </ul>  |
| Maintain student focus                    | Maintain student focus in all decisions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Communicate goals and report on progress</li> <li>• With board and stakeholders</li> <li>• Align goals to student outcomes</li> <li>• Vision, mission, values, and goals</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consistently articulate what is best for students</li> <li>• Demonstrate this orientation through actions of team of eight</li> <li>• In community, present data from student impact perspective</li> <li>• Align policies and practices to student focus</li> </ul>  |
| Involve stakeholders; use experts         | Actively seek interaction with a wide range of stakeholders, particularly in decision-making<br><br>Whenever possible, utilize experts and direct end-users to provide information   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Put experts in front of the board for major decisions</li> <li>• Audit anything that can be audited and report findings</li> <li>• Invest money in hiring the best the district can find</li> <li>• Provide opportunities for community input on decisions which directly impact them and their children</li> </ul>   |
| Show courage and perseverance             | Act with courage & resilience <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Decisions, recommendations, and actions</li> <li>• Times of dissent or community unrest</li> <li>• Persevere through difficult times</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have a strong support group at home</li> <li>• Rely on others to encourage and to sustain</li> <li>• Hold head high and proceed with conviction</li> <li>• Reference values, mission, and goals of the district when explaining decisions</li> <li>• Push through the difficult times; wait for the public to move on</li> <li>• Maintain optimism</li> </ul>   |
| Maintain personal energy, balance, health | Care for yourself <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Find balance in work and life</li> <li>• Manage stress and maintain physical health</li> <li>• Create structures to accommodate demands of home and family</li> </ul>                                     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Find balance in work and life</li> <li>• Exercise and take care of physical stress</li> <li>• Don't neglect faith</li> <li>• Coordinate sharing of home duties with spouse or other support group members</li> <li>• Approach superintendency as way of life, not job</li> <li>• Invest needed time in the job, but prioritize work hours to meet various demands</li> <li>• Involve family in the job</li> </ul> |



## **Limitations**

The limitations of this study were related to sample size and study design. This study was limited to six superintendents of Texas public school districts, as defined in the definitions portion of this chapter. Limitations included those inherent in qualitative case studies: the findings only apply to the districts being studied and are not necessarily generalizable to other school districts. The validity of the study was dependent on the reliability of the survey instruments utilized. The scope of this work was limited by the fact that it had a limited number of participants, located in one state. It was a narrowly constructed investigation.

## **Implications for Practice**

The modern American superintendency has been described as in a state of crisis, with declining superintendent tenure, increasing accountability and fiscal demands, and a shallow pool of superintendents to fill vacancies. This study provides aspiring and current superintendents with specific actions they can implement with their boards, their communities, and their internal and external constituents. Given the nexus between superintendent longevity, organizational stability, and increased student achievement, the strategies that emerged from this data could promote longer tenure for superintendents. This study has implications for existing educational leaders, aspiring superintendents, as well as superintendent preparation programs. Findings from this study may: (a) provide proven strategies to increase superintendent longevity; (b) provide insight into the knowledge, skills, and practices that long-serving superintendents believe to positively impact longevity; and, (c) provide concrete

examples of structures that successful superintendents utilize to overcome theoretical barriers to longevity. The literature conveyed expansive reasons for communication, relationship development, goal-setting, visibility, consensus-building, and other procedures that superintendents can deploy to increase and to sustain effective relationships with all constituencies.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

Whereas multiple studies exist that examined reasons for failed superintendencies or decreased superintendent tenure, few studies examined specific actions and structures that long-serving superintendents utilize to solidify their tenure. This is the only study the researcher is aware of that specifically studied the influence of specific superintendent behaviors on superintendent tenure and organizational stability. Six Texas public school superintendents were purposefully selected for this qualitative study, to deepen the understanding of leadership practices and structures that they believe to have positively impacted their longevity.

This study could be replicated with a larger sample, to confirm findings. Superintendents from other states could also be studied, to determine transferability outside of Texas. Because of the breadth of this initial study, further studies could be designed to narrow the focus and delve more deeply into the data. Future studies could also examine (a) school board members' perceptions regarding leadership strategies they believe to increase longevity, (b) a broader sample size, accessing all superintendents with greater than six years' tenure, to confirm data, (c) specific strategies teams of eight utilize to bridge conflict and to reach common ground, (d) a comparison of small and

large school districts, to determine if or how practices vary with scale, (e) community and other stakeholders' perspectives on communication and relationship strategies they find most effective in cultivating positive relationships with the superintendent and trustees, and (f) a deeper exploration of successful superintendent's beliefs regarding optimal superintendent training program design.

## **Conclusion**

This study, through a phenomenological approach, brought a close examination of the professional experiences of six long-serving Texas superintendents. This resulted in a composite description of the leadership actions and structures to which they attribute their positional longevity.

Findings support an enhanced conceptualization of effective superintendent practices that extend beyond school board-superintendent relationships and encompass a broad spectrum of community outreach and engagement. Results of this study suggest that communication practices and team-building/relationship development are of primary importance in sustaining a superintendency for six or more years. A triad of communication was identified, reflecting: purposeful outreach to stakeholders, leading with courage and perseverance, and establishing clear goals and consistently communicating those goals. Results include strong participant perceptions of the value of involving internal and external stakeholders, and high superintendent visibility and accessibility as mechanisms and opportunities for communication.

Participants' notions of superintendent preparation programs differed somewhat from their beliefs about practices that promote job longevity. In this area,

superintendents indicated that communication was critical, but experience was the greatest teacher. From that perspective, participants identified ideal training models as those operating from a practitioner perspective - led by successful veteran superintendents - and balancing knowledge of the essential components of the superintendency with a strong foundation of organizational leadership theory. All participants identified the value and importance of strong mentoring models.

For practitioners, these findings suggest that orienting superintendents to having a high-energy, highly visible and accessible leadership style and leading from a perspective of transparency, honesty, effective communication, and goal-orientation may manifest in longer superintendent tenure and a concurrent increase in organizational stability and student achievement. Further, the results call for increased institutional support towards providing aspiring superintendents with training models led by experienced superintendents who can provide not only an immersion in the core knowledge of the political and organizational aspects of the superintendency, but also deliver a program designed through a practitioner lens. This, in concert with inclusive leadership and communication practices may serve to cultivate longer superintendent tenure.

## Appendix A

### Institutional Review Board Approval



OFFICE OF RESEARCH SUPPORT

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN

P.O. Box 7426, Austin, Texas 78713 · Mail Code A3200  
(512) 471-8871 · FAX (512) 471-8873

FWA # 00002030

Date: 03/04/14

PI: Susanna V Russell

Dept: Educational Administration

Title: Actions and Structures Superintendents

Believe to Enhance Superintendent Longevity

Re: IRB Expedited Approval for Protocol Number 2014-01-0011

Dear Susanna V Russell:

In accordance with the Federal Regulations the Institutional Review Board (IRB) reviewed the above referenced research study and found it met the requirements for approval under the Expedited category noted below for the following period of time: 03/04/2014 to 03/03/2015 . *Expires 12 a.m. [midnight] of this date.* If the research will be conducted at more than one site, you may initiate research at any site from which you have a letter granting you permission to conduct the research. You should retain a copy of the letter in your files.

Expedited category of approval:

- 1) Clinical studies of drugs and medical devices only when condition (a) or (b) is met. (a) Research on drugs for which an investigational new drug application (21 CFR Part 312) is not required. (Note: Research on marketed drugs that significantly increases the risks or decreases the acceptability of the risks associated with the use of the product is not eligible for expedited review). (b) Research on medical devices for which (i) an investigational device exemption application (21 CFR Part 812) is not required; or (ii) the medical device is cleared/approved for marketing and the medical device is being used in accordance with its cleared/approved labeling.
- 2) Collection of blood samples by finger stick, heel stick, ear stick, or venipuncture as follows: (a) from healthy, non-pregnant adults who weigh at least 110 pounds. For these subjects, the amounts drawn may not exceed 550 ml in an 8 week period and collection may not occur more frequently than 2 times per week; or (b) from other adults and children, considering the age, weight, and health of the subjects, the collection procedure, the amount of blood to be collected, and the frequency with which it will be collected. For these subjects, the amount drawn may not exceed the lesser of 50 ml or 3 ml per kg in an 8 week period and collection may not occur more frequently than 2 times per week.
- 3) Prospective collection of biological specimens for research purposes by non-invasive means. Examples:
  - (a) Hair and nail clippings in a non-disfiguring manner.
  - (b) Deciduous teeth at time of exfoliation or if routine patient care indicates a need for extraction;
  - (c) Permanent teeth if routine patient care indicates a need for extraction.

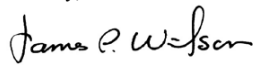
- (d) Excreta and external secretions (including sweat).
  - (e) Uncannulated saliva collected either in an un-stimulated fashion or stimulated by chewing gumbase or wax or by applying a dilute citric solution to the tongue.
  - (f) Placenta removed at delivery.
  - (g) Amniotic fluid obtained at the time of rupture of the membrane prior to or during labor.
  - (h) Supra- and subgingival dental plaque and calculus, provided the collection procedure is not more invasive than routine prophylactic scaling of the teeth and the process is accomplished in accordance with accepted prophylactic techniques.
  - (i) Mucosal and skin cells collected by buccal scraping or swab, skin swab, or mouth washings.
  - (j) Sputum collected after saline mist nebulization.
- 4) Collection of data through non-invasive procedures (not involving general anesthesia or sedation) routinely employed in clinical practice, excluding procedures involving x-rays or microwaves. Where medical devices are employed, they must be cleared/approved for marketing. (Studies intended to evaluate the safety and effectiveness of the medical device are not generally eligible for expedited review, including studies of cleared medical devices for new indications).  
Examples:
- (a) Physical sensors that are applied either to the surface of the body or at a distance and do not involve input of significant amounts of energy into the subject or an invasion of the subject's privacy.
  - (b) Weighing or testing sensory acuity.
  - (c) Magnetic resonance imaging.
  - (d) Electrocardiography, electroencephalography, thermography, detection of naturally occurring radioactivity, electroretinography, ultrasound, diagnostic infrared imaging, doppler blood flow, and echocardiography.
  - (e) Moderate exercise, muscular strength testing, body composition assessment, and flexibility testing where appropriate given the age, weight, and health of the individual.
- 5) Research involving materials (data, documents, records, or specimens) that have been collected, or will be collected solely for non-research purposes (such as medical treatment or diagnosis).  
Note: Some research in this category may be exempt from the HHS regulations for the protection of human subjects. 45 CFR 46.101(b)(4). This listing refers only to research that is not exempt.
- 6) Collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for research purposes.
- 7) Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.  
Note: Some research in this category may be exempt from the HHS regulations for the protection of human subjects. 45 CFR 46.101(b)(2) and (b)(3). This listing refers only to research that is not exempt.
- Use the attached approved informed consent document(s).
- You have been granted a Waiver of Documentation of Consent according to 45 CFR 46.117 and/or 21 CFR 56.109(c)(1).
- You have been granted a Waiver of Informed Consent according to 45 CFR 46.116(d).

**Responsibilities of the Principal Investigator:**

1. Report immediately to the IRB any unanticipated problems.
2. Submit for review and approval by the IRB all modifications to the protocol or consent form(s). Ensure the proposed changes in the approved research are not applied without prior IRB review and approval, except when necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to the subject. Changes in approved research implemented without IRB review and approval initiated to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to the subject must be promptly reported to the IRB, and will be reviewed under the unanticipated problems policy to determine whether the change was consistent with ensuring the subjects continued welfare.
3. Report any significant findings that become known in the course of the research that might affect the willingness of subjects to continue to participate.
4. Ensure that only persons formally approved by the IRB enroll subjects.
5. Use only a currently approved consent form, if applicable.  
Note: Approval periods are for 12 months or less.
6. Protect the confidentiality of all persons and personally identifiable data, and train your staff and collaborators on policies and procedures for ensuring the privacy and confidentiality of subjects and their information.
7. Submit a Continuing Review Application for continuing review by the IRB. Federal regulations require IRB review of on-going projects no less than once a year a reminder letter will be sent to you two months before your expiration date. If a reminder is not received from Office of Research Support (ORS) about your upcoming continuing review, it is still the primary responsibility of the Principal Investigator not to conduct research activities on or after the expiration date. The Continuing Review Application must be submitted, reviewed and approved, before the expiration date.
8. Upon completion of the research study, a Closure Report must be submitted to the ORS.
9. Include the IRB study number on all future correspondence relating to this protocol.

If you have any questions contact the ORS by phone at (512) 471-8871 or via e-mail at [orsc@uts.cc.utexas.edu](mailto:orsc@uts.cc.utexas.edu).

Sincerely,



James Wilson, Ph.D.  
Institutional Review Board Chair

## Appendix B

### Verbal Waiver of Consent

*IRB APPROVED ON: 03/04/2014*  
*IRB STUDY NUMBER: 2014-01-0011*

*EXPIRES ON: 03/03/2015*

#### Consent to Participate in Research

##### Identification of Investigator and Purpose of Study

You are invited to participate in a research study, entitled "Leadership Actions and Structures Superintendents Believe to Enhance Superintendent Longevity: A Qualitative Study". The study is being conducted by Susanna Russell, Cooperative Superintendency Program Cohort 23, Department of Educational Administration, of The University of Texas at Austin, 2266 Nancy McDonald, El Paso, Texas 79936; (512) 694-2955; susannavaulx@mac.com.

The purpose of this research study is to examine structures and leadership actions that long-serving superintendents believe have enhanced their longevity in their position. Your participation in the study will contribute to a better understanding of effective practices that may contribute to superintendent longevity. You are free to contact the investigator at the above address and phone number to discuss the study.

If you agree to participate:

- Complete a one-hour audio-recorded interview with you, the superintendent, to gain your perspective of the effective practices to which you attribute your longevity.
- Permit the Investigator to review agendas, sample communications and publications, and calendar appointments to support or further inquire about emergent themes.
- Complete a one-hour, audio-recorded, follow-up interview to clarify information and understandings.
- You will not be compensated

##### Risks/Benefits/Confidentiality of Data

There are no known risks to this study. There will be no costs for participating. You may benefit from participating in this research through your personal reflection on your career and your leadership practices. This study is confidential. Your name and contact information will be kept during the data collection phase for tracking purposes only, and will be secured in the researcher's home office safe. You will not be identified or identifiable in any reports of this research. For the analysis phase, you will be assigned a code number, which will be removed in the final document. In the dissertation and other publications, you and your district will not be identified or identifiable. At the conclusion of the research, the audio recordings and personal identifiers will be destroyed. Following publication, all transcriptions will be destroyed.

##### Participation or Withdrawal

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may decline to answer any question and you have the right to withdraw from participation at any time. Withdrawal will not affect your relationship with The University of Texas in anyway. If you do not want to participate simply notify the researcher of your wish to cease participation.

##### Contacts

If you have any questions about the study, please contact the researcher, Susanna Russell, at (512) 694-2955 or send an email to susannavaulx@mac.com. This study has been reviewed by The University of Texas at Austin Institutional Review Board and the study number is 2014-01-0011.

##### Questions about your rights as a research participant.

If you have questions about your rights or are dissatisfied at any time with any part of this study, you can contact, anonymously if you wish, the Institutional Review Board by phone at (512) 471-8871 or email at orsc@uts.cc.utexas.edu.

If you agree to participate, please give me your verbal consent, and the interview will begin.



**Appendix C**

**Interview Documents**

**Superintendent Demographic Information**

Superintendent Number: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Highest Degree: \_\_\_\_\_

Years with District: \_\_\_\_\_ Years as Superintendent: \_\_\_\_\_

Number of Superintendencies Held: \_\_\_\_\_

Years as Superintendent with Current (Final) District: \_\_\_\_\_

District Enrollment: \_\_\_\_\_ District Rating: \_\_\_\_\_

Number Board Members: \_\_\_\_\_ How Elected: At Large \_\_\_\_\_ By District \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Number of Board Members Served with in Current (Final) District: \_\_\_\_\_

**Years Experience as:**

Classroom Teacher: \_\_\_ Asst. Principal: \_\_\_ Principal \_\_\_ Central Ofc.: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Levels Experience (Elem./Middle/High) as:**

Classroom Teacher: \_\_\_\_\_ Asst. Principal: \_\_\_\_\_ Principal \_\_\_\_\_

## Interview Protocol Round 1

1. Can you reflect for me on what factors you believe influenced your longevity?
2. In what ways did you try to remain aligned with the letter and the spirit of school board decisions?
  - a. How did the alignment change over time?
  - b. In times of board dissension, how did you navigate the various factions?
  - c. In reflecting on the three types of power, (positional, personal, and legitimate) which do you feel you utilized the most with the board?
3. How did you cultivate relationships with internal and external special interest groups, such as teachers' associations, chamber of commerce, etc.?
  - a. What leadership strategies did you utilize to bridge conflicts with special interest groups?
  - b. Thinking of years 4-6 in the position, can you share with me how you handled any challenges you experienced?
  - c. In reflecting on the three types of power (positional, personal, and legitimate), which do you feel you utilized the most with special interest groups?
4. In what ways did you maintain awareness of changes in your community demographics and/or values?
  - a. When significant changes or issues arose, what leadership strategies did you utilize to respond?
  - b. In reflecting on the three types of power (positional, personal, and legitimate), which do you feel you utilized the most with the community?
5. How should superintendent preparation programs be training aspiring superintendents to deploy leadership with their internal and external constituencies?

## **Interview Protocol Round 2**

In the preliminary data, communication emerged as the #1 factor that participants identified as critical to longevity, followed closely by team building/relationship development across various constituencies.

Slightly less consistently, but still overwhelmingly, participants identified visibility/accessibility, earning trust, team building, goal setting and aligned vision, and honesty/integrity.

- 1) In reviewing these trends, are there any “aha” moments for you?
- 2) Talk to me about the importance of using data with trustees as well as internal and external interest groups, and what structures you implemented to do so.
- 3) Procedures, such as board operating procedures, as well as procedures for conducting the daily and long-term operations of the district were less frequently mentioned by participants. How critical are procedures, in your experience? How did you deploy them with your internal and external interest groups and trustees?
- 4) Have you thought of anything additional that you would like to include in your interview?

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## **Vita**

Susanna Vaulx Russell attended St. Mary's Hall in San Antonio, Texas and is a 1982 graduate of Friendswood High School in Friendswood, Texas. She attended Trinity University as a scholarship student, earning degrees in political science and psychology in 1986. Following graduation, she was selected as a member of the first alternative certification teacher cohort in San Antonio, Region 20. Upon attaining her teaching credentials, she taught in the Harlandale and Edgewood School Districts in San Antonio. Ms. Russell earned her Master of Arts in Educational Administration from the University of Texas at San Antonio in 1992. She served in a variety of campus administrative capacities, at the elementary and high school levels in the Edgewood, East Central, Judson, and Katy school districts: instructional specialist, assistant principal, vice principal, and principal. In 2007, she left the principalship to accept a position in Lake Travis ISD, as the Executive Director of Administrative and Human Resource Services. In 2010, she traveled halfway across the state to El Paso, to accept a position as an Area Superintendent in the Ysleta school district, where she is currently employed. In 2012, she began her doctoral studies in Educational Administration at the University of Texas at Austin, as a member of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Cooperative Superintendency Program Cohort, commuting from El Paso to Austin for classes. She is the devoted mother of a daughter, Lily Katharine.

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This manuscript was typed by the author.