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### Wisdom Gained in the Superintendency: A study of Leadership Lessons Learned from Retired Superintendents

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WISDOM GAINED IN THE SUPERINTENDENCY: A STUDY OF LEADERSHIP  
LESSONS LEARNED FROM RETIRED SUPERINTENDENTS

By  
William Jeffrey Booker

A Dissertation Submitted to the  
Gardner-Webb University School of Education  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Doctor of Education

Gardner-Webb University  
2019

## Approval Page

This dissertation was submitted by William Jeffrey Booker under the direction of the persons listed below. It was submitted to the Gardner-Webb University School of Education and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education at Gardner-Webb University.

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I appreciate the unlimited time and candor the 12 retired superintendents provided to me during the research of this paper. Each of them was willing to add clarification and support to enable me to complete this work. You all exhibited servant leadership and continue to serve the state of North Carolina.

## **Abstract**

WISDOM GAINED IN THE SUPERINTENDENCY: A STUDY OF LEADERSHIP SKILLS RETIRED SUPERINTENDENTS WISHED THEY HAD POSSESSED AS A NEW SUPERINTENDENT. Booker, William, 2019: Dissertation, Gardner-Webb University.

The study examined the experiences of retired superintendents who served in North Carolina public schools and the reflective thoughts they amassed regarding leadership traits which are contributory to success. Additionally, this study sought to explore the potential development of lessons learned through the experiences of the retired superintendents. The researcher used a qualitative approach to conduct this study. Qualitative data were gathered through the use of a questionnaire and in-depth interviews. The open-ended questions explored the experiences of the retired superintendents beginning with their first superintendency and continuing through the culmination of their career. The participants were also asked to share their views on the changing role of the superintendent. The research questions examined (a) What is successful leadership as described by retired superintendents; (b) What knowledge or skill would have helped you to make a positive impact on your superintendency; and (c) What is the impact of successful superintendency on a school system? The analysis highlighted how the demands of serving as a superintendent continue to grow. The ability to clearly communicate goals and expectations, develop relationships, and build trust within his or her organization were attributes identified as critical. The participants expressed concerns about qualified and capable candidates seeking the position of superintendent. Despite the increasingly challenging environment, the retired

superintendents believed that their contributions made a difference to the children they served and the communities in which they lived, and this realization brought a real sense of satisfaction and accomplishment.

*Keywords:* leadership, superintendent, board of education, preparation program

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

### **Introduction**

Galston (2005) asked the question,

Why is it that education issues in the United States frequently become deeply politicized, and often polarized? At the most general level, the answer is clear: Education policy straddles the fault lines of the major divisions of U.S. politics and society, and it cannot avoid those divisions. Moreover, public education in the United States is bound to evoke passion because it is linked to virtually everything Americans care about, especially with respect to the nation's children. (p. 57)

In the middle of this inherent public education conflict resides the role of the public school superintendent, faced with running a complex organization focused on educating a diverse population of children, while addressing concerns of various stakeholders. When one considers the perspectives and myriad of expectations of parents, board members, and community leaders, the job can seem impossible. This balancing act of managing the economics, educational, political, and social issues takes a toll on superintendents. Cuban (1985) stressed that "conflict has become the DNA of the superintendency" (p. 28).

Given the complexity and current expectations of superintendents, this study sought to provide an understanding of the role of the superintendent by conducting interviews with retired superintendents in the state of North Carolina. Leadership characteristics that are necessary to be successful and effective as a superintendent have been identified. Effective leadership plays a strong role in improving student achievement. According to a study commissioned by the Wallace Foundation

(Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004), evidence supporting a leader's impact on student learning is often underestimated because most leaders contribute to learning indirectly, primarily through their influence on other people or through other variables. Essentially, the study concluded that both district- and school-level leadership provide a critical bridge between reform initiatives and having those reforms makes a direct and meaningful impact on all students (Leithwood et al., 2004). The role of a superintendent has grown to the extent that this person is seen as the face of the district, driving change and innovation and challenging the status quo, all the while assuring the longstanding members of the organization that everything is okay. The superintendent often bears the sole burden of failures while sharing the credit with the board of education, administration, school-based leaders, and teachers. With unlimited amounts of information and data available to the general public, the superintendent is forced to work with others and operate with transparency. The superintendent must build relationships in the community, while instilling confidence in stakeholders that the school system is not just surviving but is indeed thriving. The demands to be an effective superintendent require an exceptional person who possesses a unique skill set (Meador & Meador, 2018).

### **Statement of the Problem**

Continuity of leadership is crucial to implementing lasting reform, according to Freedberg and Collier (2016) after interviewing superintendents from California. Those interviewed agreed that experience was the single greatest factor in determining leadership. They also found to implement sustainable change results takes time (Freedberg & Collier, 2016). Robert Christmann, a former superintendent who now conducts superintendent searches for school districts, believed that the revolving door can

create a stranglehold on progress, noting that the efforts to turn a district around can take 3-5 years; and there is no one solution. Each potential candidate brings his/her own idea of what will work and what should be done to improve the school district (Gref, 2014).

Experts agree that in order to attain achievement and improve student academic outcomes, a substantial degree of stability is needed in the superintendent's office (Freedberg & Collier, 2016; Gref, 2014). Becca Bracy Knight, executive director of Broad Center for the Management of School Systems in Los Angeles, stated, "Smart people say reforms need time to take effect, four to six years, or five to seven years. The length of time that superintendents are in office does not come close to the length of time it takes for these reforms to take root" (Freedberg & Collier, 2016, p. 5). In fact, Marshall Smith, the former dean of the Stanford Graduate School of Education and undersecretary of education, surmised that significant change cannot be expected unless a superintendent serves 8 or more years (Freedberg & Collier, 2016).

In 2003, the Thomas B. Fordham Institute and Broad Foundation noted in their study entitled "Better leaders for America's schools: A manifesto" that

if two decades of research into school effectiveness have reached any reliable conclusion, it's that successful schools invariably have dynamic, savvy and focused leaders – women and men who are capable of rallying educators, parents, children, and community members to achieve shared goals. (p. 16)

Furthermore, the study went on to note that America's schools face a crisis in leadership that is continuing to deteriorate as current principals and superintendents retire, accountability demands escalate, and the job becomes more difficult and unappealing (Better leaders for America's schools: A manifesto, 2003).

Research from the Brookings Institute revealed that during their review period

from 2006 to 2010, the typical superintendent in Florida and North Carolina had been on the job for 3-4 years, and more than half were in their first 3 years of service (Chingos, Whitehurst, & Lindquist, 2014). Common factors for superintendent turnover include personnel issues, political agendas of school board members, and board operational ineffectiveness and conflict (Grissom & Andersen, 2012; Metzger, 1997). Political agendas include issues such as frequent board member turnover, power struggles among members of the boards, special issues being advocated by one or more board members, disagreements about respective roles and responsibilities between board members and the superintendent, and community controversy (Metzger, 1997). High superintendent turnover negatively impacts a district's ability to implement needed reforms or to provide the strategic vision that will indirectly impact student achievement (Grissom & Andersen, 2012).

According to Jack Hoke (personal communication, September 24, 2017), Director of North Carolina School Superintendents Association, approximately 40% of superintendents in North Carolina have been replaced since 2015. Reference is made to Table 1 as noted.

Table 1

*Superintendent Years of Experience Over the Last 5 Years*

Years of Experience	2013/2014	2014/2015	2015/2016	2016/2017	2017/2018	Average %
0-5	79	77	81	80	76	68%
6-10	17	17	20	21	28	18%
11-15	12	11	9	10	5	8%
16-20	4	6	3	3	4	3%
> 20	3	4	2	1	2	2%

*Note.* North Carolina has 115 school districts with 115 superintendents.

Information from the North Carolina School Superintendents Association was utilized to determine years of experience for superintendents over the past 5 years. The

greatest number of superintendents over the 5-year period have 0-5 years of experience, while those with greater than 20 years of experience over the 5-year review period do not exceed 2% of the total 115 school systems. The average number of superintendents with 0-5 years of experience makes up 68%. This clearly displays the large discrepancy in years of experience which exists among superintendents. Reasons for the massive discrepancy could be attributed to high turnover, late-career assumption of role, or tenacity of individuals to endure the high-pressure role of superintendent.

North Carolina is no different than other states, where there remains a revolving door in the position of the superintendent. New superintendents must possess and develop certain leadership skills that will allow them to build strong relationships with stakeholders and provide a strategic vision within their respective districts. The ability to develop, implement, and accomplish a strategic plan cannot be accomplished in an era of high turnover and demand for immediate results. The continual turnover of superintendents through school districts creates a perception of the superintendent's office being one of constant change and reformatting. The media's portrayal of some of the nation's largest urban districts' superintendent issues have perpetuated the "popular conception of the modern superintendent as a chronic mover in continual public disharmony with a conflict-ridden school board" (Grissom & Andersen, 2012, p. 2).

Buchanan (2006) concluded that with the expectation of inevitable chronic turnover, superintendents have a short-term focus with an insufficient investment in long-range vision and infrastructure. Natkin et al. (2002) further concluded that this perception makes superintendents reluctant to implement major reform efforts and the principals and teachers reluctant to wholeheartedly adopt the superintendents' priorities and directives. Grissom and Andersen (2012) noted that the story of superintendent

turnover is well-known: “A new energetic leader implements a revitalization plan, only to clash with an impatient school board and impatient community, thereby exiting the district and leaving it to search for the next perfect leader” (p. 1).

The pressure for someone to have all the answers with immediate results draws one to conclude that a board of education looks to secure the perfect candidate; however, high profile school reformers are not performing any major miracles, and these well-intentioned superintendents across the United States are losing their jobs at unprecedented rates (Hackett, 2015). Hackett (2015) elaborated that poor relations between superintendents, the community, and school boards create a revolving door in leadership where our nation’s children pay the ultimate price.

Dan Domenech (2015), Executive Director of the American Association of School Administrators, stated,

One of the things we are very concerned with is that we are seeing a lot of turnover of superintendents around the country, and not necessarily in those districts we might traditionally think of where there has been a revolving door, but rather in high-functioning school districts. That’s disturbing. If we are to build high-functioning districts, you need the continuity of leadership. (p. 1)

Turnover has a costly impact on school districts as demonstrated by a report sponsored by The Wallace Foundation in the July 2010 (Louis et al., 2010). The authors of the study concluded that “one of the most serious threats to stability in a school district is frequent turnover in the ranks of superintendents, principals, and vice principals. Instability at the school level often reflects a failure of management at the district level” (Louis et al., 2010, p. 112). As well, Caputo (2015) concluded that high turnover at the superintendent level is financially expensive as evidenced by suburban school districts



that approve six figure separation checks, payments for unused vacation days, and other benefits; costing taxpayers millions of dollars, these settlements can take resources away from students and classrooms.

Given the high turnover of superintendents and the current level of inexperience, school boards must be able to identify and develop those leadership characteristics which increase the probability of stability and success from both traditional and nontraditional candidates if there is to be meaningful improvement in student achievement. The General Statutes of North Carolina 115C-271 Article 18 states, “that each local board of education has the sole discretion to elect a superintendent of schools.” Those new to the role must emulate qualities which have made veteran superintendents successful while adapting to changing conditions throughout education today. The Council of Chief State School Officers produced Standards for Educational Leaders in 2015 which included Ethics and Professional Norms, Equity and Cultural Responsiveness, Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment, Community of Care and Support for Students, Professional Capacity of School Personnel, Professional Community for Teachers and Staff, Meaningful Engagement of Families and Community, Operations and Management, and School Improvement.

### **Purpose**

The North Carolina State Board of Education determined that school systems need chief executive officers who are able to develop a common shared purpose between staff, students, parents, the community, and all stakeholders. School system leaders need to be able to create a culture where there is trust and open communication. District leadership must be able to harness effective teams that will use data to establish goal-oriented actions for sustained improvement.

In 2007, the North Carolina State Board of Education established a minimum set of requirements for qualification for the office of superintendent. These requirements set standards in service, credentialing, and educational prerequisites. Local school boards now have the ability to use and apply these established guidelines for setting expectations and improving district-level leadership.

Research tells us that effective leadership requires many different traits in superintendents. Such factors that may impact the superintendency include the various amounts of turnover, traditional yet ineffective strategies, and/or the confidentiality that boards of education may require of superintendents. In September 2007, the North Carolina State Board of Education recognized the need for a new type of school leader, notably an executive versus an administrator. There are seven distinct leadership standards an effective leader must practice: strategic, instructional, cultural, human resource, managerial, external development, and micropolitical.

The seven leadership standards as outlined by the North Carolina State Board of Education (2007) are described as

1. Strategic Leadership – Superintendents who are strategic leaders create conditions that result in reimagining the district’s vision and mission by creating positive relationships with the board of education; challenging the status quo; identifying new processes to define, review, and revise a district’s vision; and communicating and modeling the vision with and to stakeholders.
2. Instructional Leadership – Superintendents, as instructional leaders, are responsible for setting high standards for instruction and assessment that result in an accountable environment for schools and students by establishing professional learning communities focused on highly engaged instruction and

improved learning and setting up specific student achievement goals.

3. Cultural Leadership – Superintendents must understand and work to create a culture that is consistent with the history, traditions, and norms of the district but that is able to adapt, if needed; to align the culture with the district’s goals of improving student learning; and to entice passion, meaning, and purpose for all stakeholders.
4. Human Resource Leadership – Superintendents who provide human resource leadership structure the district as a professional learning community with systems in place that result in the recruitment, support, evaluation, development, and retention of high-performing staff.
5. Managerial Leadership – The superintendent must serve as the manager and procurer of resources for the school district including leading the budgeting of operating and capital dollars and develop work plans to organize and develop the work of the district to enable student learning in a safe environment.
6. External Development Leadership – Based on the premise that strong schools build strong communities, the superintendent is encouraged to engage the community. Through engagement, one will create opportunities for the community to share time and resources for the development of a strong school system that is valued.
7. Micropolitical Leadership – “The superintendent promotes the success of learning and teaching by understanding, responding to, and influencing the larger political, social, economic, legal, ethical, and cultural context” (North Carolina State Board of Education, 2007, p. 8).

General H. Norman Schwarzkopf commented that “leadership is a potent

combination of strategy and character. But if you must be without one, be without strategy” (Charlton, 2002, p. 83). The role of a North Carolina superintendent requires being a strategic leader of strong character and balancing the seven standards outlined by the North Carolina Department of Education, while responding to the complex demands of an evolving world. No longer may the superintendent focus solely on a student’s education. The superintendent of today finds himself/herself in a complex position where politics (local, state, and national), the community, the market place of educational choices, the continual change of technology, and diverse workforce weave together more challenges than ever before.

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of retired superintendents who served in North Carolina public schools and the reflective thoughts they have amassed regarding leadership traits that are contributory to success (or nonnegotiables for success). Additionally, this study sought to explore the potential development of lessons learned through the experiences of the retired superintendents. The study conducted qualitative research of leadership qualities that were found in 12 retired superintendents.

### **Research Questions**

1. What is successful leadership as described by retired superintendents?
2. What knowledge or skill would have helped you to make a positive impact on your superintendency?
3. What is the impact of successful superintendency on a school system?

### **Significance of the Study**

Lytle and Sokolf (2013) researched public education’s fight for economic and political survival. “There have been dramatic changes in the education sector and the

superintendency over the past three decades, and these changes are not sufficiently understood by policymakers, boards of education or academics” (Lytle & Sokolf, 2013, p. 13). The September 2011 edition of the Harvard Business Review focused on embracing the complexity of an organization. The work of Sargut and McGrath (2011) described complex organizations versus complicated organizations:

Complex organizations are far more difficult to manage than merely complicated ones. It’s harder to predict what will happen, because complex systems interact in unexpected ways. It’s harder to make sense of things, because the degree of complexity may lie beyond our cognitive limits. (p 38)

Sargut and McGrath believed that three properties determine the complexity of an environment:

The first, multiplicity, refers to the number of potentially interacting elements.

The second, interdependence, relates to how connected those elements are. The third, diversity, has to do with the degree of their heterogeneity. The greater the multiplicity, interdependence, and diversity, the greater the complexity. (p. 39)

Analyzing the operation of a public school system by utilizing the work of Sargut and McGrath (2011), Lytle and Sokolf (2013) surmised that school districts meet all the qualifications of a complex system. Furthermore, they felt even a small school district with six schools has the interconnected performance from classroom to classroom, school to school to meet the definition. Moreover, as districts get larger, the complexity grows. After working with a number of superintendents in Pennsylvania, Lytle and Sokolf developed a spider map of complexity.



*Lytle and Sokolf, A Complex Web: The new normal for superintendents, September, 2013*

*Figure. Dealing with Complexity.*

The spider map describes the broad and wide range of responsibilities and issues faced by superintendents in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Traditional roles of policy and politics, technology, community, and leadership are now joined by market competition, social media, and evolving demographic makeup. The ongoing challenges of a connected world directly impacts public school systems.

This study is significant because it sought to speak with individuals who served as superintendents during this evolving era of public school leadership. To inquire as to what one thought was needed to be a superintendent and then compare what was needed was valuable. Additionally, insight was gained into what leaders believe today's leaders

should be preparing for in the future. The opportunity to learn from experienced practitioners will allow those considering the superintendency to be better prepared.

### **Overview of Methodology**

The qualitative method was used for this study. The researcher used a naturalistic inquiry study based on interviews with retired superintendents. Naturalistic inquiry involved direct contact with subjects to conduct in-depth interviews. Participant words were collected, recorded, and analyzed. Interpretations were formulated as data were gathered. The researcher looked for trends and patterns in the information collected in the interviews (Armstrong, 2010).

### **Context of the Study**

The study gathered qualitative information from 12 retired superintendents who served public school districts in North Carolina. The superintendents were identified from a list of superintendents who retired within the last 25 years. The retired superintendents were asked to complete a background questionnaire of their background and past work experience, and then they were interviewed.

### **Definition of Terms**

For the purpose of this study, the definitions of terms are identified below.

**Retired superintendent.** A former leader of a North Carolina public school district.

**State School Board of Education.** Appointed board that governs all public-school districts, charters, and home schools within the state.

**Local School Board of Education.** Elected board that governs the local school district.

**School leader.** A school leader is a person who serves or has served as a licensed

school principal within the past school year. This person may be an active principal or a central office leader.

### **Delimitations of the Study**

While minimal, there are two identified delimitations of this study. Foremost, the researcher is a current superintendent in North Carolina. Second, the researcher has worked in North Carolina public schools for more than 15 years.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Retired superintendents may have been inactive in the public school arena since retirement. The amount of time between retirement and the interview could have impacted the recollections and perceptions of their experiences within their respective districts and therefore be reflected in the interview. The limitation of being a retired North Carolina superintendent may or may not make the information less relevant on a national basis.

### **Organization of the Study**

This study contains five chapters. Chapter 1 includes an introduction, statement of the problem, purpose of study, research questions, significance of the study, overview of methodology, context of the study, definition of terms, delimitations and limitations of the study, and organization of the study. Chapter 2 contains a review of related literature on superintendent leadership that can be utilized by superintendents to increase their effectiveness and success. Chapter 3 provides pedagogy and methodology utilized in collecting, analyzing, and reporting data. The methodology utilized is a qualitative study based on naturalistic inquiry. Chapter 4 presents outcomes of methodology as well as an analysis of data revealed through the research. Finally, Chapter 5 contains conclusions and summaries of findings in addition to a proposal for improvement of future research



on the similar topic.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to examine experiences of retired superintendents who served in North Carolina public schools and the reflective thoughts they have amassed regarding leadership traits. Additionally, this study sought to explore lessons learned through the experiences of retired superintendents. The study focused on the following research questions:

1. What is successful leadership as described by retired superintendents?
2. What knowledge or skill would have helped you to make a positive impact on your superintendency?
3. What is the impact of successful superintendency on a school system?

A review of the most relevant literature pertaining to superintendents and leadership was completed. The review included the history of the superintendency based on the five role conceptions identified by Callahan (1966) and Kowalski (2005) as well as factors impacting leadership and obstacles faced. The literature review offered evidences of the narrowness of the definition by providing research exploring the roles of superintendents.

The role and position of a school system superintendent began to emerge in the early to mid-19<sup>th</sup> century with the movement towards state run public schools (Kowalski, 1999). The expectations and responsibilities of the school superintendent have drastically changed over the years, with more responsibility and ever-changing demands now more than ever (Edwards, 2007). Merriam-Webster (n.d.) defined a superintendent as “one who has the oversight and charge of a place, institution, department, organization, or operation.”

The superintendent is the CEO of the school district. He or she sets the tone, charts the course of the district, and works closely with the board of trustees. The superintendent is also responsible for hiring and supervising the other administrators in the district, including the chief financial officer and the school principals. (GreatSchools, 2015, p. 1)

### **History of Superintendent**

“From the founding of the republic to the present day, Americans of all stripes and stations have worked to establish, define, and provide a system of public education that benefits people individually and the nation collectively” (Puriefoy, 2005, p. 235). Tyack and Hansot (1994) described 19<sup>th</sup> century America as a rural, dispersed population with over 70% of the population living in communities of less than 2,500 people. The business of education was managed by local trustees, and teachers were often young and “rarely educated beyond the elementary subjects” (Tyack & Hansot, 1994, p. 17). The creation of the position of superintendent of schools dates prior to the Civil War. As early as 1830, leaders were serving as superintendent of schools; and by 1850, 13 large city school systems employed an administrator as the superintendent. Growth of city schools, consolidation of rural schools, quest for efficiency, challenge of curriculum standards, and increased accountability created the need for a school executive (Kowalski, 2008, 2009).

Callahan (1962) provided an often-cited document on the history of the first 100 years of superintendents, which evaluated the superintendent and the impact of social forces. This research paper identified some trends but, in particular, the outside pressures on leadership. Callahan (1962) determined the school executive method had been created during the business environment of the 1920s. Utilizing a grant from the U.S Office of

Education, Callahan (1966) sought to determine “the changing conceptions of the superintendency from 1865 to 1965” (p. 8). From his research, Callahan (1966) concluded that since the mid-1800s, there have been four separate role conceptualizations for school superintendents: teacher-scholar, business manager, statesman, and applied social scientist.

### **The Teacher-Scholar**

The concept of superintendent as teacher-scholar began in the mid-1860s. Master teachers were identified, promoted to the superintendency, and charged with instructional supervision (Callahan, 1962; Spring, 1994). Superintendents of the time were viewed as teachers of teachers and were charged with the responsibility of adherence to the course of study and attendance to all supplies and needs of the school (Cuban, 1976).

### **The Business Manager**

The American educational landscape began to change as America and its citizens slowly became an industrial society (Kowalski, 2011). The powerful forces of industrialization facilitated changes to the superintendency. The early 20<sup>th</sup> century saw the superintendency more as a business manager and school executive (Callahan, 1966).

### **The Statesman**

The idea of superintendent as statesman can be best equated with that of a democratic leader (Björk & Gurley, 2003). A democratic leader found roots in philosophy and the politics; and as an educated society became more important, school competed increasingly with governmental agencies for funding and resources (Kowalski, 2011). The superintendent as democratic leader lasted into the 1950s and began to change as business leaders turned toward scientific empirical decision-making (Kowalski, 2011).

### **Applied Social Scientist**

Callahan (1966) identified several conditions that can be attributed to the changing role of the superintendent in the post-World War II era. A growing dissatisfaction with democratic leadership, growing development in the social sciences and funding to support the universities, and an overall resurgence of public education criticism attributed to this changing superintendent role. Superintendents were seen as experts in the field who applied social science with educational realism (Johnson & Fusarelli, 2003).

### **Communicator**

As American society has transformed from a manufacturing to an information-based society, so too has the school district leader (Kowalski, 2001). Human transactions and the way we communicate have become the driving force by which organizations are led. Schlechty (1997) asserted, “systemic thinking requires us to accept that the way social systems are put together has independent effects on the way people behave, what they learn, and how they learn what they learn” (p. 134). Systems are communicative creatures that depend on the flow of information (Conrad, 1994).

### **Superintendent as Leader**

The National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA) conducted a study over a 3-year period to determine the characteristics school boards desire in their superintendent and why superintendents are not retained in their positions, by interviewing professionals who work with school boards to conduct new superintendent searches (Bagin, 2007). The research team identified 95 individuals throughout the country at search firms and obtained responses from 31 individuals. Questions asked during the interviews included the following:

- Name the top qualities and/or skills school boards look for in a superintendent candidate.
- What is the most important quality among those you mentioned?
- On a scale of one to seven, with one being the lowest and seven being the highest, how would you rate the following in general:
  - The candidate's communications experience
  - The candidate's level of communications training
  - The candidate's ability to build consensus
  - The candidate's ability to lead a district through change
  - The candidate's ability to manage crises
  - The candidate's ability to communicate with staff
  - The candidate's ability to work with a school board?
- What is the most important factor affecting the failure of a superintendent's tenure?
- What is the most important factor in support of successful superintendent tenures?
- As you work with school districts, what difference, if any, do you find between those districts that have a formalized communications program and those that do not? (Bagin, 2007, p. 3)

The NSPRA study identified vision and strategic leadership as the most important qualities named by respondents; as well, good communication skills were cited as a necessity for a superintendent's success by nearly all of those interviewed. One professional said,

They [schools boards] want someone who can communicate what the district

could be to the community, communicate the district's needs to the community and can work well with a board as well as communicate expectations to the staff and follow up on those. (Bagin, 2007, p. 5).

Bagin's (2007) study found that the skills most desired by school boards were strategic in nature and as follows: (a) leadership and vision, (b) communication skills, (c) ability to motivate others, (d) management practices, (e) understanding of school finance, (f) years of superintendent experience, and (g) academic background.

Henry (2006) sought to identify qualities and practices which contribute to the success of superintendents. Like the Bagin (2007) study, respondents (16 of 17) identified leadership/vision/strategic thinker and problem-solving as the most important skills in one's success; however, communication and community relationships were also identified as extremely important to their success.

The North Carolina State Board of Education in September 2007 recognized the need for a new type of school leader, notably an executive versus an administrator. The State Board determined school systems need chief executive officers who are able to develop a common shared purpose between staff as well as other stakeholders such as students, parents, and the community. These leaders need to be able to create a culture which utilizes distributive leadership where there is trust and open communication; using data, teamwork, and measurable best practices to drive goal-oriented actions. To achieve this, the Board outlined seven standards as follows:

1. Strategic Leadership
2. Instructional Leadership
3. Cultural Leadership
4. Human Resource Leadership

5. Managerial Leadership
6. External Development Leadership
7. Micropolitical Leadership (North Carolina State Board of Education, 2007, pp. 1-6).

Given the purpose of this study was to examine the experience of retired superintendents who served in North Carolina public schools, these seven standards served as a baseline for the research. The standards begin to identify the necessary leadership traits which can help produce and determine effective district-level leaders.

### **Strategic Leadership**

Superintendents who are strategic leaders create conditions that result in reimagining the district's vision and mission by creating positive relationships with the board of education, challenging the status quo, identifying new processes to define, revising the district's vision, and communicating and modeling the vision with and to stakeholders (North Carolina State Board of Education, 2007). Jack Welch, Chairman and CEO of General Electric, stated, "good business leaders create a vision, articulate the vision, passionately own the vision, and relentlessly drive it to completion" (Woods, 2000, p. 151). Drew (2010) conducted and published a study regarding higher education leadership engaging in change. This qualitative study was based on interviews from senior leaders in both academic and administrative leadership roles. "In an environment of potentially differentiated agenda, background, skill and knowledge bases, it is not an easy matter to foster the quality of strategic engagement that can build unity of purpose. Yet it is effort worth taking" (Drew, 2010, pp. 58-59). The study identified five themes: resources both fiscal and human; flexibility, creativity, and change capability; responding to competing tensions and remaining relevant; maintaining academic quality; and



effective strategic leadership (Drew, 2010). The need for innovation, collaboration, and ability to influence along with influencing change were items identified for strategic leadership. Strategic leadership involves a longer view and the ability to align others to the vision. Drew added personal resilience and ethics demonstrated by the leader provided a positive model to others. Compelling sagas – being able to communicate passion for a winning strategy with clearly defined values and convictions – is what brings the vision, mission, values, and strategies to life (Warner & Schmincke, 2009).

Strategic leaders are passionate about their vision (Bagin, 2007; Couros, 2015; Warner & Schmincke, 2009). “Good leaders set vision, missions and goals. Great leaders inspire every follower at every level to internalize their purpose and to understand that their purpose goes far beyond the mere details of their job,” according to Collin Powell, United States Army four-star general (Powell & Koltz, 2012, p. 25). Being able to develop and communicate a future-oriented vision is a critical element of leadership. Leaders are called to anticipate obstacles and to seize opportunities while communicating a future that will be better than the present. If a leader does not take time to create the vision of the future, there is a high probability that no one on the team is thinking about that future (Blanchard & Miller, 2014).

In an environment where superintendents are almost seen as disposable, with average tenures being reported by the Council of the Great City Schools in 2014 as 3.2 years, it is important for a strategic superintendent leader to have a strong foundation upon which to base his or her work (Riede, 2018). Waters and Marzano (2006) published a McREL (Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning) working paper on the effect of superintendent leadership on student achievement. The paper was a meta-analysis of 27 studies conducted since 1970 and involved more than 2,817 school

districts. The study determined three major findings: Finding 1, district-level leadership matters; Finding 2, effective superintendents focus their efforts on creating goal-oriented districts; and Finding 3, superintendent tenure is positively correlated with student achievement. Within Finding 2, effective superintendents focus their efforts on creating goal-oriented districts, the researchers identified five district-level leadership responsibilities related to goal-focused districts. The leadership levels include collaborative goal setting which includes all district employees and stakeholders, a collaborative goal-setting process that establishes nonnegotiable goals for student achievement and classroom instruction, securing board alignment and support for the nonnegotiable goals, ongoing monitoring of the goals established for achievement and instruction, and effective allocation of resources to support the nonnegotiable goals (Waters & Marzano, 2006).

Forner, Bierlein-Palmer, and Reeves (2012) conducted a multiple-case study to evaluate effective superintendent leadership in rural districts of one Midwestern state when compared to the Waters and Marzano (2006) district-level responsibility findings. The study consisted of 27 interviews in seven districts with interviewees which included the superintendent, a high school principal, one teacher, and one board member. “The interview transcripts revealed 388 specific references to specific leadership activities from among the 27 interviews” (Forner et al., 2012, p. 6). Leadership findings included the need for the superintendent to establish goals and drive reform; to support reform through constant promotion; to provide intervention strategies for struggling students and teachers; to have a willingness to remove struggling principals and teachers; to develop a deeper, meaningful relationship with building principals; to negotiate contracts strongly with unions; and to align financial resources of the district to the established priorities.

Additionally, Deeboonmee and Ariratana (2013) conducted a study which included 32 school leaders and 217 teachers from 11 different schools. This descriptive data analysis study found a positive correlation in the relationship between strategic leadership and school effectiveness with an emphasis on setting the direction of the organization (Deeboonmee & Ariratana, 2013).

In studying 12 newly appointed superintendents over a 3-year period from 1989 to 1992, Susan Moore Johnson delved deeply into leadership roles of superintendents. She found teachers, principals, and community members wanted a clear vision coupled with a focused plan toward which efforts may be directed. The superintendent needs to be cognizant of the district's history and current needs, the character of the communities within the district, and the structure of the district. The way to a successful strategic initiative is to ensure the superintendent's personal beliefs are shared as he or she communicates the vision. "A superintendent's vision does little to promote leadership for better education unless teachers, administrators, school officials, parents, and members of the community understand it, believe that it is meaningful, and know what it implies for them" (Johnson, 1996, p. 84).

Organizations worldwide are looking for leaders who have the ability to innovate by creating something new and better. Couros (2015) suggested characteristics of an innovative leader include being a visionary leader, which involves good planning and strategy. Couros noted the following:

Our vision for what education can look like today should be compelling not only to our students but also to teachers, leaders and the greater community—and it has to be better than being "a great place to work." But before we can decide how best to communicate our vision, we have to establish one, we have to articulate

the desired characteristics of our learners and the optimal learning environment.

It's important to note, too, that *how* we go about creating a school or district's vision and mission statements will determine, in large part, whether it compels people to participate in making it a reality. (pp. 107-108)

Maggie Hughes, president and chief operating officer of LifeUSA Holding Inc., noted that

the success or failure of any company boils down to one question. Are you operating from passion? If you are, you're going to succeed. If you believe what you're doing, you're going to make sure that everyone around you believes it too. (Woods, 2000, p. 69)

Passion and positive school cultures begin with thinking in strategic ways and the desire for continuous improvement.

### **Instructional Leadership**

Superintendents, as instructional leaders, are responsible for setting high standards for instruction and assessment which result in an accountable environment for schools and students. Instructional leadership may establish professional learning communities focused on highly engaged instruction and improved learning and for setting up specific student achievement goals (North Carolina State Board of Education, 2007). Effective instructional leaders guide with a focus on continued learning and challenge educators to define the knowledge and skills needed to ensure every student graduates from high school and is ready for work and/or postsecondary education. Effective instructional leaders expect collaborative goal setting with nonnegotiable goals for student achievement (American Association of School Administrators, 2007; North Carolina State Board of Education, 2007).

Effective superintendents understand they are the primary instructional leader for the district and recognize the importance of student achievement and effective instructional practices (ECRA Group, Inc., 2010; Waters & Marzano, 2007). The district-level leader who serves as the instructional leader contributes to the overall success of their school district (Björk, 2009). A superintendent evaluates the district's instructional programs, communicates learning and achievement expectations to faculty, monitors progress toward student achievement goals, and encourages professional development and coaching (ECRA Group, Inc., 2010).

Bredeson (1996) conducted a study of superintendents in a large midwestern state regarding their involvement in curriculum development and instructional leadership. He solicited survey responses from 397 superintendents and received responses from 326 regarding their roles in curriculum development and instructional leadership. The responses generated 708 items which were categorized into four primary areas. The most frequent response (37.4%) was instructional support by providing financial, personnel, and material resources, system support, psychological support, and encouragement. Bredeson also found that instructional collaboration (21.8%) was the second highest responsibility. The superintendents responding to the survey were involved in the planning, designing, implementing, and assessing of instructional programs. The third identified area was instructional delegation (21.6%) where superintendents saw their role as securing the proper individuals to provide curriculum and instruction guidance and empowering them to accomplish the work. The superintendent's role involved monitoring progress, informing the school board, and coordinating district efforts. The fourth area involved instructional vision and purpose (19.2%). These superintendents were the vision developers who cast a vision and sought to keep others focused on

students and learning outcomes. A superintendent in the instructional vision role describes the vision of instruction and exhibits a personal interest in teaching and learning (Bredeson, 1996).

Ten years later, Bredeson and Kose (2005) performed a second survey of superintendents and identified four key findings. The work of the superintendent intensified over the past decade. The response to accountability and the focus on student outcomes stresses the function of superintendents as instructional leaders. Emphasis on external accountability threatens internal accountability measures. In the area of involvement with curriculum and instruction, the study compared the response results from 1994 and 2003, finding an increased involvement in instructional leadership (Bredeson & Kose, 2005).

Table 2

*Superintendent Change in Curriculum and Instructional Leadership Over Prior Years*

Survey Year	Involvement Increased	Stayed the Same	Decreased
1994	34.1%	40.7%	25.3%
2003	48.4%	22.5%	29.1%

The 2003 survey also requested the respondents to rank their satisfaction with curriculum and instruction leadership on a scale of one to five. The superintendents reported a moderate satisfaction, which led the researchers to suggest the respondents saw room for improvement. The researchers did note that “larger district superintendents were found to be more satisfied in this leadership area than their counterparts, which may be explained by their ability to delegate more of this responsibility” (Bredeson & Kose, 2005, p. 11).

Additionally, Waters and Marzano (2006) determined district leadership matters

with respect to student achievement; and effective superintendents insist on goal-oriented districts through collaborative goal setting, nonnegotiable goals for achievement and instruction, board alignment and support of district goals, monitoring goals for achievement and instruction, and the use of resources to support achievement and instruction goals. The superintendent's responsibilities as an instructional leader can be measured, in part, through how much autonomy is provided by him or her to the building principal. Research has traditionally supported that change must be carried out in schools where actual student learning happens. Principals, therefore, are held accountable by the superintendent and the constituent members of the schools in which they serve as leaders (Crankshaw, 2011; Lee, 2005). Johnson (1996) found the superintendent contributed to instructional leadership by communicating the vision for the future and placing the vision in a context of meaning for principals and teachers. The ability to provide support to the communicated vision in writing and in speaking was critical to instructional success.

### **Cultural Leadership**

Superintendents must understand and work to create a culture that is consistent with the history, traditions, and norms of the district (North Carolina State Board of Education, 2007). Superintendents must also be able to adapt, as needed, to align the culture with the district's goals of improving student learning and enticing passion, meaning, and purpose for all stakeholders. Effective superintendents communicate strong ideals and beliefs about teaching and build common understanding of what it means to ensure that every student graduates from high school prepared for work and/or postsecondary education. Effective superintendents create a shared vision and equitable practices for all stakeholders and promote a sense of trust between staff, students, parents, and the community (North Carolina State Board of Education, 2007).

In order for an organization to survive and thrive, superintendents need to possess the ability to build and sustain culture as an ongoing strategic process (Fullan, 2005). Superintendents, as cultural leaders, must create a learning culture that exists and contains a certain amount of co-shared assumptions that are truly shared but questioned (Schein, 1992). The superintendent, therefore, “attempts to develop a learning organization which will be able to make its own perpetual diagnosis and self-manage whatever transformations are needed as the environment changes” (Mohrman & Cummings, 1989, p. 363).

Duckworth (2016) noted,

At its core, a culture is defined by the shared norms and values of a group of people. In other words, a distinct culture exists anytime a group of people are in consensus about how we do things around here and why. (p. 244)

Duckworth identified successful leaders and how they influence the culture in their respectful businesses. For example, she described how Jaime Dimon, CEO of JP Morgan Chase, believed a leader can absolutely influence the culture of their organization but “it takes relentless—absolutely relentless—communication. It’s what you say and how you say it” (Duckworth, 2016).

Superintendents hold the power to improve the school culture. They can help ensure a healthy and productive environment. As Collins (2001) put so well in the opening of his book,

Good is the enemy of great. And that is one of the key reasons why we have so little that becomes great. We don’t have great schools, principally because we have good schools. We don’t have great government because we have good government. Few people attain great lives in large part because it is just so easy



to settle for a good life. The vast majority of companies never become great, precisely because the vast majority become quite good – and that is their main problem. (p. 1)

Collins (2001) maintained that in order to sustain great results, one must build a culture full of self-disciplined people who take disciplined action; bureaucratic cultures that arise to compensate for incompetence and lack of discipline must be avoided.

A connection exists between the culture of a school, instructional leadership, and student achievement (Jones, 2009). Further, studies by MacNeil, Prater, and Busch (2009) have proven a positive school climate increases student achievement. Successful superintendents create school cultures which are student-centered and committed to continuous improvement through innovative thinking and problem-solving (Deal & Peterson, 1999; Kentucky Association of School Administrators, n.d.). A superintendent's effectiveness relies on his/her cultural leadership, which norms are established for the district's culture by what leaders (or superintendent) stress as important, how they respond to crisis, what they model, and who they bring in or allow to remain in leadership (Deal & Peterson, 1999; Kentucky Association of School Administrators, n.d.). Culture is more of a cause than an effect (Schein & Schein, 2016). It is a powerful influence on how those in a school district think, perceive, and feel about the organization and the work they do (Schein & Schein, 2016).

Organizations which thrive understand their purpose and measure their day-to-day activities against that purpose. The purpose of an organization is reflected in the culture of that organization. Finding individuals who align with the values of an organization is critical to establishing positive culture. A leader who espouses an organization's values and then acts in a way which conflicts with the values will undermine the culture of an

organization.

Being a leader is like being a parent, and the company is like a new family to join.

One that will care for us like we are their own ... in sickness and in health. If we are successful, our people will take on our company's name as a sign of the family to which they are loyal. (Sinek, 2014, p. 17)

Furthermore,

to ask our employees not simply for their hands to do our labor, but to inspire their cooperation, their trust and their loyalty so that they will commit to our cause. To treat people like family and not as mere employees. (Sinek, 2014, p. 17)

Many organizations function with a purpose built on what they do and how they do it. Sinek (2014) maintained that organizations should “start with why” (p. 1) and believed the why is what drives the culture of a successful organization (Gutierrez, 2016). Successful leaders must establish and communicate with clarity the why of their organization. “People do not buy ‘what’ you do, they buy ‘why’ you do it” (Sinek, 2014, p. 156; Gutierrez, 2016).

Sinek (2014) noted the organization must allow for employees to feel a sense of trust, a trust that comes from understanding that the organization is being driven to a purpose greater than the individual. The leader must espouse a purpose that exercises the common values and beliefs of the members of the organization. It is the imperative drive of the leader to communicate beyond words, a commitment to the “why” of the organization. The leader must be willing to take the risk before others and be willing to sacrifice themselves for the safety of others (Sinek, 2014). A healthy culture where that is understood and valued leads to a successful organization.

## **Human Resource Leadership**

Superintendents who provide human resource leadership structure the district as a professional learning community with systems in place that result in the recruitment, support, evaluation, development, and retention of high-performing staff (North Carolina State Board of Education, 2007). The superintendent's role includes ensuring that resources are in place to meet the district's goals for achievement and instruction, communicating consistently with school leaders regarding how policies and procedures relate to the district's mission, modeling the importance of continued adult learning by continuing education, communicating with a positive attitude the ability of personnel to accomplish substantive goals, creating opportunities for staff to grow in their leadership role and fully develop their strengths, and utilizing data to create a positive work environment (North Carolina State Board of Education, 2007).

Diane Massell for the Consortium for Policy Research in Education (CPRE) observed 22 districts in eight states over a 2-year period in regard to capacity building of students, teachers, and schools. The results of the study identified various strategies, with four appearing more frequently: interpreting and using data, building teacher knowledge and skills, aligning curriculum and instruction, and targeting interventions on low-performing students and/or schools (Massell, 2000). All four items can be seen as contributing to the growth in human resource leadership. Providing schools with feedback in the form of data on individual student performance and teacher strengths and weaknesses allows for the growth in personnel as well as with the students.

The area of management which can be the most time consuming is personnel. When analyzing a public school district budget, 80-85% of the budget is dedicated to personnel. In most states, the school board is required to approve the hiring of

employees, and the legal requirements of managing personnel are vast (Hoyle, Björk, Collier, & Glass, 2005). “Avoiding and handling legal problems in personnel administration are among the more difficult tasks the CEO superintendent faces” (Hoyle et al., 2005, p. 173). The rights of employees combined with legal requirements of nonrenewal, dismissal, and tenure can consume a superintendent. According to Hoyle et al. (2005), the potential for expensive litigation is an overarching concern for any superintendent.

The provision of professional development for teachers and administrators has long existed in the form of workshops or conferences; however, the “one shot” workshop model without sustained follow-up support is often criticized (Massell, 2000). The study by the CPRE found school-based support for professional development by the majority of districts. The use of central office staff or designated teachers to rotate among a number of schools can be key to providing needed assistance and support. Developing mentor/master teachers to support the implementation of initiatives was highlighted and included several districts where individual schools receive help with the school improvement plan through the interpretation of student achievement (Massell, 2000).

The shortage of qualified teachers has necessitated active, ongoing recruitment of teachers by school districts. Efforts such as “grow your own” where school districts seek to retain local students who receive teaching degrees, create dual enrollment opportunities where students may begin to earn college credits, and establish programs to develop classified personnel into certified teachers are developed by some school districts. The school district establishes a defined process for recruitment that may include a recruitment message, a lead recruiter (or recruiters), a target area (or areas) to recruit from, and an ongoing evaluation of the progress toward recruitment goals (Hoyle,

et al., 2005). Even with targeted plans for recruitment, recruitment remains difficult and dropout rates for new teachers remains high (Glass & Franceschini, 2007).

Massell (2000) noted many districts go beyond the use of support and harness teacher leaders to develop assessments, rubric standards, and the curriculum. The focus on curriculum and instruction is common with districts seeking to align themselves with state curriculum and district guidelines. This study found the process of accomplishing curriculum alignment was wide ranging and many districts developed curriculum guides which were supported by district professional development. Also, professional learning communities developed content that was relevant to the standards to be taught.

Finally, Massell (2000) found that these districts provided target resources to schools identified to be low performing by state or district standards. The resources provided to low-performing schools ranged from assistance teams to direct instructional strategies that are mandated. The study identified numerous challenges, and one in particular relates to human resources. The effect of high teacher turnover versus a stable mature staff requires a different, structured professional development. The stress of reduced district monetary funds directly challenges the professional development needs of districts. The ongoing challenge to professionally grow staff during a period of increased turnover was seen as a formidable barrier to improvement (Massell, 2000).

In 2003, the Fordham Institution and the Broad Foundation collaborated on a study entitled “Better Leaders for America’s Schools: A Manifesto” and observed that U.S. schools did not have the caliber of leadership due in part to existing leadership retiring; growing accountability demands; and the job becoming more unappealing with modest pay, long hours, and the lack authority needed for the responsibilities (Finn, 2003). Trevino, Braley, Brown, and Slate (2008) surveyed 46 public school

superintendents in South Texas to analyze challenges they faced as superintendents. The challenge of personnel ranked first among the 10 categories surveyed with teacher and principal shortages highlighted. Finn (2003) concluded that a superintendent must be given the authority by school boards to select their staffs and school principals who share in his/her vision and carry the vision to fruition.

The varied demands of a superintendent's time such as accountability, school board member relationships, funding issues, legislation changes, and community issues, to name a few, can impede the development of day-to-day working relationships with principals. The items that often require the superintendent's attention are imposed on him or her by the actions of others and require an immediate reaction. Consequently, evaluation and management of principals in large districts is often delegated. The result is limited, if any, genuine interaction with principals by the superintendent. "The only time the superintendent becomes involved is when disciplinary action is called for or some high-profile honor is to be bestowed" (Schlechty, 2002, p. 68). The principal evaluation of today contains the influence of student achievement on state-mandated standardized tests, and what distinguishes a good principal from a bad one is the percentage of students who earn a proficient score on the test (Ediger, 2002); however, superintendents who prioritize establishing relationships and connection to principals are more likely to effectively implement district reform (Schlechty, 2002).

### **Managerial Leadership**

The superintendent serves as the manager and procurer of resources for the school district including leading the budgeting of operating and capital dollars. The superintendent must develop work plans to organize and develop the work of the district to enable student learning in a safe environment (North Carolina State Board of

Education, 2007). Phil Schlechty stated,

The superintendent should be viewed as a CEO. Now, that is a very different role for a superintendent: to be called on not to solve all the problems, but to decide which problems are worth solving, and then create conditions in which those problems get solved; to be a decision-causer rather than a decision-maker.

(Brandt, 1993, p. 11)

The importance of managerial leadership was highlighted by Cuban (1988) in discussing the range of responsibilities of superintendents as the chief administrators. The need to manage finances, the physical plant, and district organization is a critical role of the superintendent. Johnson (1996) further developed managerial responsibility when she highlighted that school boards delegate educational leadership to superintendents; but without effective management of day-to-day operations, the superintendent will not succeed as a leader. “The superintendent’s management role is an integral aspect of their work” (Björk, Kowalski, Browne-Ferrigno, 2014, p. 11).

In many communities, the public school district is one of the largest employers, if not the largest, and has operating budgets that reflect their size. As an entity that generates little revenue and relies on federal, state, and local dollars to operate, the management of financial resources is complex. School districts must engage in fiscal planning, budgeting, accounting, debt management, investing, auditing, purchasing and contracting, property and supply management, risk management, and salary and wage management (Glass & Franceschini, 2007). A fiscally responsible superintendent must have a full understanding of how finances operate, how to allocate funds to accomplish strategic priorities, and how to anticipate the changes in funding (Edwards, 2007).

Robert E. Quinn, professor emeritus at University of Michigan’s Ross School of

Business and cofounder of the school's Center for Positive Operations, and Anjan V. Thakor, professor of finance at the Olin Business School at Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri, performed research regarding the creation of a purpose-driven organization. Based on consulting research work with hundreds of organizations and extensive interviews with dozens of leaders, the pair developed a theoretical model. Their research showed that viewing employees as self-interested agents to whom a company provided training, incentives, and managerial oversights often provided disappointing results (Quinn & Thakor, 2018).

The struggle for executives was that "it defies what they have learned in business school and, perhaps, in subsequent experiences: that work is fundamentally contractual, and employees will seek to minimize personal cost and efforts" (Quinn & Thakor, 2018, p. 80). The established organizational system creates a cycle that delivers what the managers expect. Employees are trained to respond to incentives and controls and perform as instructed. The initiative to improve on practices, means and methods and to grow coworkers is squelched. In turn, management feels compelled to further dictate operations and restrict employee initiative.

Quinn and Thakor (2018) noted, "we have come to see that when authentic purpose permeates business strategy and decision making, the personal good and the collective good becomes one. Collaboration increases, learning accelerates, and performance climbs" (p. 80). Quinn and Thakor developed eight essential steps to embracing purpose and growing employee motivation.

First, leaders must envision an inspired workforce (Quinn & Thakor, 2018). The traditional economic relationship is for a worker to perform a prescribed task for a defined wage. If the employer envisions more work, incentives and controls must be in



place. Purpose work looks for the employee or work group that exceeds the norm. Find an example and use it to highlight the positive; find out what causes the individual to excel and envision it permeating your organization. “Leaders get the best from others not by building fires under people but by building the fire within them” (Kouzes & Posner, 2007, p. 293).

Second, you must discover the purpose. Many organizations seek to bring focus groups of managers and employees together and craft vision and mission statements. The work often ends up lofty and irrelevant to the day-to-day work. Quinn and Thakor (2018) cited examples of the leader listening to the workforce and capturing the spirit of the organization. “You can discover it by empathy, by feeling and understanding the deepest needs of your workforce. That involves asking provocative questions, listening, and reflecting” (Quinn & Thakor, 2018, p. 81).

Third, Quinn and Thakor (2018) noted that one must recognize the need for authenticity. Many leaders feel compelled to state a purpose, as the notion of a purpose is in vogue. Fueled by organizations such as Ben and Jerry’s, Starbucks, and Southwest Airlines, the statement of purpose has come to be expected. The lack of authenticity in purpose can cause harm to the health of the organization. “People also have a need for purpose and meaning – for making a contribution to that which is meaningful” (Covey, 1990, p. 297). The purpose identified must be followed with integrity. An authentic purpose will be behind every decision, driving you to do things others would not. People begin to embrace and embody the purpose as they see it in action.

Fourth, a leader must turn the authentic message into a constant message. One thing that makes the nature of purpose work “relentlessly difficult is that it involves getting institutions to shift direction and existing cultures tend to impede movement. As

extensions of culture, managers also end up resisting the change. Other impediments are organizational complexity and competing demands” (Quinn & Thakor, 2018, p. 82). A leader who consistently and authentically communicates purpose can influence employees to believe the purpose; launching change from the top with growth coming from the bottom. Superintendents are responsible for creating a culture of effective communication that supports a district’s mission of providing quality education for all students (Bagin, 2007; Hilliard & Newsome, 2013).

Fifth, according to Quinn and Thakor (2018), a leader must stimulate individual learning. A leader must show that the learning and personal development of an employee are part of the higher purpose. The need to think, learn, and grow is a part of employee motivation. A purpose-driven organization provides opportunities for growth and learning.

The sixth point is to turn midlevel managers into purpose-driven leaders. For an effective purpose to be evidenced, midlevel managers must connect with the purpose and use it as part of their leadership actions. Managers must be willing to be vulnerable and share their personal stories and commitment to the purpose (Quinn & Thakor, 2018). The actions of managers influence point seven – connect the people to the purpose. “Employees need to help drive the process, because then the purpose is more likely to permeate the culture, shaping behavior even when managers are not there to watch how people are handling things” (Quinn & Thakor, 2018, p. 85).

The Professional Standards for Education Leaders (PSEL) was adopted in November 2015 by the National Policy Board for Educational Administration to replace the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) standards. The standards continued to focus on many of the same areas of school mission, vision, and core values;

however, the new standards expand on areas such as ethics, equity, and culturally responsive schooling. A shift in the standards is reflected from “instead of relying on a deficit-based perspective, it emphasizes the strengths that individuals and communities bring to K-12 education” (Murphy, Louis, & Smylie, 2017, p. 23). The conceptual framework involves Positive School Leadership (PSL) that includes the following dimensions: a stronger professional calling, a stronger moral framework, a focus on character and virtue, a focus on the interest of others, personalized relationships, and empowerment and community building. The research cited in developing the framework mirrors the observations noted by Quinn and Thakor (2018) regarding historic management theory.

Murphy et al. (2017) noted that organizations closely supervised workers, directing their actions on what and how to complete tasks to meet the organizations goals. Individuals were seen as a vehicle to accomplish a task and not a valuable entity unto themselves. Positive-based leadership pursues improvements in the workplace and employee engagement.

Finally, point eight is to unleash the positive energizers (Quinn & Thakor, 2018). Organizations include people who are natural influencers. These individuals are optimistic by nature and bring positive energy to the workforce. The effective leader identifies these individuals, provides them with information, and empowers them. These individuals will provide valuable feedback and challenge assumptions.

Purpose is not a lofty ideal. People who find meaning in their work do not hoard their energy and dedication. They give freely, defying conventional economic assumptions about self-interest. They grow rather than stagnate. They do more and they do it better. By tapping into the power, you can transform an entire

organization. (Quinn & Thakor, 2018, p. 85)

Hartnell, Kinicki, Schurer Lambert, Fugate, and Doyle Corner (2016) published a research paper regarding the CEO leadership impact. The research was based on results from information gathered from 114 CEOs and 324 top management team members. The study's findings identified two items regarding managerial actions that support Quinn and Thakor (2018) in regard to authenticity. First, CEOs must adjust their respective leadership styles to the culture of the organization they are asked to lead. The researchers emphasized the point that it is easier for a leader to modify his or her leadership behavior than to change an organization's culture. Second, the leadership behavior of the CEO must be adaptive. Effective leadership behavior at one point in time may not be as effective at another point in time (Hartnell et al., 2016).

Salicru (2017), an author and researcher in leadership development, identified five practices for the modern leader. First, provide sense-making – leaders need to become storytellers who help people see change and act. The leader can help others to understand change and respond positively to it. Second, Salicru noted a leader builds leadership capability – often management, authority, and power are seen as leadership; however, true leadership involves exercising influence. CEOs need to be working to increase the depth of leadership in their organization to include collaboration between units and relationships among leaders.

Third, Salicru (2017) maintained that leaders move beyond competencies – those defined qualifications for a position based on past successes and behaviors that were popular in the 1970s. Today's leader must look for those who have knowledge and skills for where the job will be in the future. "Meta-competencies enable learning, adapting, anticipating, and creating change. Both self-leadership (personal mastery) and leadership

development require going beyond competencies” (Salicru, 2017, p. 39).

Fourth, Salicru (2017) noted that leaders focus on creative thinking and innovation – organizations must continue to grow and evolve to survive. Leaders must encourage creative thinking and innovation to gain a competitive advantage. Innovative workforce behavior is critical to organizational survival in a world of accelerating technological change and increased competitiveness. Finally, conduct impact evaluations – any leadership growth should include evaluation. Salicru described benefits that include gathering suggestions for future initiatives, reflecting on success and failure, and fostering employee engagement and loyalty.

Carter and Cunningham (1997) often described the management responsibilities of a superintendent in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century as the four Bs: bonds, buses, budgets, and buildings (p. 23). Today, managerial leadership by a superintendent requires a multifaceted lens that shifts with the day-to-day demands of the superintendent’s job. The superintendent must be able to manage physical resources as well as people and relationships.

### **External Development Leadership**

Based on the premise that strong schools build strong communities, the superintendent is encouraged to engage the community. Through engagement, one will create opportunities for the community to share time and resources for the development of a strong school system that is valued (North Carolina State Board of Education, 2007). “A skilled superintendent will understand the need to identify the external forces and groups that relate to the school district, and the superintendent’s commitment to include these groups must be genuine” (Edwards, 2007, p. 65).

Kowalski (1999) discussed that a superintendent must recognize the different

members of a community and develop plans that meet the needs of the school district, while being respectful of the education and community values. A superintendent must work to communicate effectively with all groups within that community, and the focus should be on students and their success (Edwards, 2007). The school of today has made the superintendent's responsibilities more demanding and complex. Our communities are more diverse in ethnicity, culture, and religious beliefs, combined with a growing disparity in socioeconomic status. The number of children exhibiting social and emotional issues is greater than ever.

Additionally, public schools have a smaller market share with fewer taxpayers having children enrolled (Kowalski, 2008). The superintendent of today must find multiple ways to communicate to a diverse group of stakeholders who exhibit apathy until an issue directly affects them. Superintendents must be proactive in their communication, providing timely and relevant information to all stakeholders. The communication should be frequent and clear, providing an understanding of the district mission and the superintendent's vision (Waters & Marzano, 2007).

In 2006, the Education Commission of the States (ECS) sponsored a study to identify and understand leadership practice in four diverse, high-needs school districts from across the country (Anthes & Long, 2006). One of the areas identified was the need for shared leadership to bring about lasting change. The success of the districts had been buoyed by working with community partners to "broaden the concept of the 'district' and who has a leadership responsibility and stake in it" (Anthes & Long, 2006, p. 3). Community partnerships help schools secure additional resources, develop support among community leaders, and achieve district goals. "A superintendent's vision does little to promote leadership for better education unless teachers, administration, school

officials, parents, and members of the community understand it, believe that it is meaningful, and know what it implies for them” (Johnson, 1996, p. 84).

### **Micropolitical Leadership**

According to the North Carolina State Board of Education (2007), the superintendent “promotes the success of learning and teaching by understanding, responding to, and influencing the larger political, social, economic, legal, ethical, and cultural context” (p. 8).

Superintendents must be cognizant of a wide variety of economic, social, and political changes unfolding in the nation as well as the state where they serve; be well-versed in national, state-level and local policy initiatives; and have the capacity to translate that knowledge into a systemic implementation plan that will withstand the rigors of continuous public inspection and criticism. Consequently, the nature of superintendents’ work is as complex as it is intense, requiring multiple and diverse roles. (Björk et al., 2014, p. 12)

Debate regarding education reform has influenced the attention and workings of public education for more than 3 decades. Macropolitical influences from local, state, federal, and private sector entities have all influenced education reform policies (Blasé & Björk, 2009). The current ideal model superintendent is a superintendent who communicates strongly, builds relationships, and demonstrates political acumen (Glass & Franceschini, 2007).

Micropolitical processes are part of organizations, and public schools are no exception. The workings of a school district are influenced by everyday politics of district offices and the relations with school locations. The difficulty to complete facility work orders, secure supplies, and utilize funding are impacted by the micropolitical world

of public schools most often identified as central office bureaucratic functions. While some studies show the central office work as key to reform and restructuring because of their expertise (Björk, 2001), other studies indicate the central office bureaucracy impedes change and resists external reforms. The work of public education is impacted by what is in the best interest of adults: From bargaining tables with teacher unions to debates in various legislatures, the interest of children is rarely a driving factor. Often, the various interest groups and advocates look out for the members of the public school systems, but rarely is anyone advocating for students or parents (Kahlenberg & Green, 2012; Rotherham & Hannaway, 2012).

School district superintendents are operating in a complex, politically charged, and contentious environment. The work environment has moved from collegiality to one of dysfunction. In a study commissioned by ECS (Anthes & Long, 2006), 71% of responding superintendents believed the position of superintendent is in crisis with poor school board and superintendent relations, long working hours, and stressful working conditions seen as overarching issues.

The relationship between superintendents and school boards is unique. The board of education is statutorily assigned the responsibility to hire a superintendent and provide policy direction and financial oversight; however, the relationship between a board of education and the superintendent is fraught with opportunity for conflict. The board of education as an elected body elicits and responds to citizens while being in a position to provide support to the superintendent. A superintendent must be able to develop relationships with board members and communicate effectively with school board members while developing a collaborative relationship (Eadie, 2014).



**Summary**

The role of a superintendent has grown to be that of the person seen as the face of the district, driving change and innovation and challenging the status quo, while simultaneously assuring long-standing members of organizations that everything is satisfactory. Superintendents bear the burden of failures while sharing credit with the local board of education, administration, school-based leaders, and teachers. Immense amounts of information and data that are available to the general public force superintendents to work with others, build relationships in the community, and instill confidence that school systems are not just surviving but are thriving. Demands to be an effective superintendent require an exceptional person who possesses quality character and a unique skill set (Meador, 2017).

## **Chapter 3: Methodology**

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of retired superintendents who served in North Carolina public schools and the reflective thoughts they have amassed regarding necessary leadership traits that are nonnegotiables for success. Additionally, this study sought to explore the potential development of lessons learned through the experiences of the retired superintendents. This chapter articulates details of methods and processes utilized in conducting this study. The population of retired North Carolina superintendents is identified along with the instruments utilized to gather data for design of the study.

According to a study commissioned by the Wallace Foundation (Leithwood et al., 2004), evidence supporting a leader's impact on student learning is often underestimated and not totally understood. Most leaders contribute to learning indirectly, primarily through their influence on other people or through other variables, often difficult to measure (Leithwood et al., 2004). Leithwood et al. (2004) concluded that both district and school leadership is a critical bridge between reform initiatives, and having those reforms makes a direct and meaningful impact on all students.

Galston asked the question,

Why is it that education issues in the United States frequently become deeply politicized, and often polarized? At the most general level, the answer is clear: Education policy straddles the fault lines of the major divisions of U.S. politics and society, and it cannot avoid those divisions. Moreover, public education in the United States is bound to evoke passion because it is linked to virtually everything Americans care about, especially with respect to the nation's children

(p. 57).

Effective leadership plays a strong role in improving student achievement. In the median of this inherent conflict, public education resides. Public school superintendents are faced with running a complex organization which is focused on educating a diverse population of children, while addressing concerns of multifaceted stakeholders. When one considers the perspectives and various expectations of parents, board members, and community leaders, the expectations of the role of superintendent can seem impossible. This balancing act of managing the economics, educational, political, and social issues takes a toll on superintendents. As Cuban (1985) pointed out, “conflict has become the DNA of the superintendency” (p. 28).

The role of a superintendent has grown to the point that they are the person seen as the faces of their districts, driving change and innovation and challenging the status quo, while simultaneously assuring longstanding members of organizations that everything is okay. Superintendents bear the burden of failures while sharing credit with the local board of education, administration, school-based leaders, and teachers. The immense amount of information and data available to the general public forces the superintendents to work with others, build relationships in the community, and instill confidence that school systems are not just surviving but rather they are thriving. Demands to be an effective superintendent require an exceptional person who possesses quality character and a unique skill set (Meador, 2017).

### **Context**

This study gathered qualitative information from 12 retired North Carolina superintendents. The majority of the research took place remotely to allow for convenience of those individuals being surveyed. The superintendents were asked to

complete a background questionnaire, and then they were interviewed. As a member of the North Carolina School Superintendents Association, the researcher has been exposed to the impact of turnover in North Carolina. According to Hoke (personal communication, September 24, 2017), Director of North Carolina School Superintendents Association, approximately 40% of superintendents in North Carolina have been replaced since 2015.

Table 1

*Superintendent Years of Experience Over the Last 5 Years*

Years of Experience	2013/2014	2014/2015	2015/2016	2016/2017	2017/2018	Average %
0-5	79	77	81	80	76	68%
6-10	17	17	20	21	28	18%
11-15	12	11	9	10	5	8%
16-20	4	6	3	3	4	3%
> 20	3	4	2	1	2	2%

*Note.* North Carolina has 115 school districts with 115 superintendents.

The relative inexperience of the cohort has been reflected by 68% of the superintendents having less than 5 years of experience, while those with greater than 20 years of experience over the 5-year period do not exceed 2% of the total 115 school systems. Table 1 clearly displays the large discrepancy in years of experience that exist among the role of superintendents in North Carolina. The reasons for the massive discrepancy could be attributed to high turnover, late-career assumption of role, or tenacity of individuals to endure the high-pressure role of superintendent. Both Schlechty (1997) and Fullan (2001) have written about the impact of a superintendent's leadership taking 5-7 years to occur. The need to identify successful leadership methods is imperative to extending superintendent longevity.

## **Research Design**

The research method for this study was qualitative and designed to gain a deeper

understanding of the characteristics, traits, and successful practices utilized by the retired superintendents while they were superintendents. Creswell (1998) pointed out that in qualitative research, the goal is to achieve, as best possible, understanding. He believed qualitative design allows for the researcher to have a role as an active listener and explore the participant's perspective (Creswell, 1998). The qualitative method includes comments by the researcher about their role and their own self-reflection (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The case study method allowed the researcher to collect detailed information from a variety of sources using various data collection procedures. The case study method also allowed for in-depth analysis of one or more individuals (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2009, 2012, 2014).

Grounded theory research methodology supports a qualitative research design where the investigator is the primary data collector (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). An analysis of the data "assumes an inductive stance and strives to derive meaning from that data" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 31). Interviews and questionnaires are used to collect a rich description of grounded data to support theories that naturally emerge. Data is then analyzed and compared to one another to determine similarities and differences. Data are grouped together to determine relationships to build a grounded theory (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Lincoln and Guba (1995) described the overall findings of the case study to answer the general question of what lessons were learned. The means of interpretation involved summarizing the overall findings, comparing the findings to literature, discussing a personal view of the findings, and stating the limitations and future research that could be considered (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

## **Participants**

The study gathered qualitative information from a sample of 12 retired North Carolina superintendents. A sample is defined as “a group of subjects from whom data are collected; often representative of a specific population” (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010, p. 490). The researcher interviewed four retired superintendents to identify and compile a list of potential participants. The researcher was unable to locate some of the prospective participants and some declined to participate. The 12 retired superintendents who agreed to be interviewed served as superintendent from a range of 4-33 years, with the medium being 7.75 years. Of the 12, seven of the superintendents had been retired 5 years or less. The majority of the research took place remotely to allow for the convenience of those individuals being surveyed. The superintendents were asked to complete a background questionnaire of their tenure as a superintendent and then were interviewed.

### **Instruments Utilized**

Upon receiving approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Gardner Webb University, the participants were contacted to discuss the purpose of the research and to explain the qualitative case study process (Appendix A and B). After providing written consent for their participation in the study, participants were provided a questionnaire for their background and past work experience to complete. Additionally, a copy of the 14 interview questions was provided for the participants to review prior to the interview. The Background Questionnaire and interview questions may be found in Appendix C and Appendix D.

### **Data Collection Process**

Twelve retired superintendents agreed to participate in this qualitative study. The purpose of this study was discussed with an emphasis placed on the importance of their

participation and candor to the study. The researcher elucidated specifics of what was being requested of them and why it was important. Additionally, the participants were informed that their participation was desired and appreciated but completely voluntary.

All retired superintendents who participated were provided with a Background Questionnaire to be completed. Once the questionnaire was completed, the participants were contacted by the researcher to set up a time and place to be interviewed. Each retired superintendent was interviewed separately to increase validity of the study's research. To remove any risk of retired superintendents' identities being known, precautions were employed. All responses will remain anonymous, and there is no mention of participant name or previous location of their superintendency other than stating they are within North Carolina.

Interviews were recorded and then transcribed prior to being analyzed. In an effort to ensure confidentiality of all participants, names were not attached to the survey responses, and all interviews were transcribed by Trint.com. Trint.com is a secure, internet based, transcription site that is not familiar with the superintendents. Trint.com utilizes data protection protocols. Data collection from participants is available for review with redacted information where necessary to protect their privacy and that of others as needed.

### **Data Analysis Process**

Information from the Background Questionnaire was collected and summarized into a chart with each superintendent identified as a number. As previously stated, the interviews were recorded and transcribed by Trint.com which is an internet based, transcription site. Based on these printed transcripts, the researcher was able to sort the data into common patterns and themes. All responses were utilized in answering research

questions for this study and provided a deeper understanding of the data. The themes were quantified and prioritized, and the information was compiled in several tables presented in Chapter 4.



## **Research Questions**

### **1. What is successful leadership as described by retired superintendents?**

This question was answered through the data collected from the responses to the Background Questionnaire and interviews. Superintendent interview transcriptions were analyzed for common themes and trends in responses.

**2. What knowledge or skill would have helped you to make a positive impact on your superintendency?** This question was answered through the data collected from the interviews. Superintendent interview transcriptions were analyzed for common themes and trends in responses, which provided data of prevalent themes. Themes identified were evaluated to provide a conclusion as to adjustments or similarities.

### **3. What is the impact of successful superintendency on a school system?**

This question was also answered through the data collected from the interviews. Superintendent interview transcriptions were analyzed for common themes and trends in responses, which provided data of prevalent themes. Themes identified were evaluated to provide a conclusion as to adjustments or similarities.

The compiled data from the questions, with detail, are presented in Chapter 4; and conclusions are presented in Chapter 5.

## **Limitations and Delimitations of Study**

This study was limited to the responses of 12 retired superintendents. Due to geographical constraints and convenience to those being interviewed, some information was gathered via email and over the telephone. Also, this research was limited to retired superintendents and may not be generalized to other populations or situations.

### **Assumptions of Study**

There were several assumptions to be considered throughout this study. First, retired superintendents would respond with candid responses. Second, retired superintendents understood the questions and their meaning when they were presented to them. Third, the survey and interview questions provided adequate information to answer the research questions presented in this study.

### **Instruments**

For this study, there were two instruments utilized in collecting data: a Background Questionnaire and a set of interview questions. The Interview Questions (Appendix D) were utilized to provide consistency in gaining responses from the retired superintendents. Interviews occurred over the phone with 10 retired superintendents, and two interviews were conducted face to face. Participants were asked to be candid and to articulate as much as possible. Participants were informed of being recorded as well as of the fact they did not have to respond to a question if they would prefer not to do so.

All data collected from surveys and interviews were held confidential and not associated with names of the individual, nor the individuals' location of superintendency.

### **Summary**

This chapter includes a description the study; a narrative of research design; and explanations of instruments utilized, data collection process, and data analysis process. The collection of data was specific to the background and interviews of 12 retired superintendents. The study was designed to enlighten the level of self-efficacy in successful leadership, to determine similarities that would provide knowledge for beginning superintendents, and to determine the impact of a successful superintendency on a school system. Chapter 4 affords in-depth results of findings concluded from

analysis of data and a summary.

## Chapter 4: Results

### Overview

The job of a superintendent has become increasingly demanding and difficult. Changing political agendas and the innovation of new methods to educate and equip children for a global, technology-based world further complicate the difficult task of school system leadership. With turnover in the superintendent role high, 76 of the 115 superintendents in North Carolina have less than 5 years of experience (Hoke, 2017), there is a clear and immediate need to better inform and equip those who choose to become superintendents. Collin Powell once said in his published work on leadership, “leaders are leaders because they pass on the generations of experience they have amassed” (Powell & Koltz, 2012, p. 89). The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of retired superintendents who served in North Carolina public schools and the reflective thoughts they have gathered regarding leadership traits, which contribute to the successful leadership of a school district. Additionally, the study sought to explore potential lessons that may be learned from the experiences of retired superintendents.

The research method for this study was qualitative and based on a focused case study research method. The case study method allows the researcher to collect detailed information from a variety of sources using various data collection procedures. The case study method also allows for in-depth analysis of one or more individuals (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2009, 2012, 2014). “For example, in case study research, Stake (1995) referred to an assertion as a propositional generalization – the researcher’s summary of interpretations and claims – to which is added the researcher’s own personal experiences, called ‘naturalistic generalizations’” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 86). Lincoln and Guba (1995) described the overall findings of the case study to

answer the general question of what lessons were learned. The means of interpretation involve summarizing the overall findings, comparing the findings to literature, discussing a personal view of the findings, and stating the limitations and future research that could be considered (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

### **Research Methods and Data Collection Procedures**

This chapter seeks to present and synthesize the collective lessons and experiences of 12 retired North Carolina superintendents through a qualitative study utilizing two different types of processes to collect information. Upon receiving approval from the IRB of Gardner Webb University, the participants were contacted in person to discuss the purpose of the research and to explain the qualitative case study process. After providing written consent regarding their participation in the study, participants were provided a questionnaire regarding their background and past work experience to complete and a copy of 14 interview questions. The Background Questionnaire and interview questions may be found in Appendix C and Appendix D.

Participants completed the Background Questionnaire and submitted the Questionnaire to the researcher; the researcher then scheduled an interview consisting of the 14 questions. The researcher conducted and recorded individual interviews with 12 retired superintendents which lasted from 30-90 minutes.

The recorded interview data were transcribed into a Microsoft Word document utilizing Trint, an online software provider; reviewed for accuracy by the researcher; and then produced for use in the dissertation. Parts of interviews were redacted to protect the privacy of the participants, districts, and/or individuals mentioned. Once in print form, the data were analyzed for common themes or experiences. Data were delineated into manageable themes, then correlated to each of the three research questions. Common

leadership themes were identified as well as knowledge or skills necessary for success in the role of superintendent.

### Participant Sample

The study's population consisted of 12 superintendents who had served in at least one North Carolina public school system. A summary of participant information is found in Table 3.

Table 3

#### *Superintendent Background Information*

Superintendent Number	Gender	Number of Years Superintendent	Estimated Size of District by Pupil Count in Districts Served	Number of Districts Served	District Setting (1)	Number of Years Retired
1	Male	19	5,000-29,000	5	S	8
2	Male	6.2	2,500-160,000	5	S/R	8
3	Male	14	1,700-45,000	4	U/S/R	24
4	Male	7	36,000	1	U/S/R	2.5
5	Male	7	38,000	1	U/S/R	6.5
6	Female	4	42,000	1	U/S/R	2.5
7	Male	7.5	72,000	1	U/S	2
8	Male	26	5,000-54,000	5	U/S/R/M	0.5
9	Male	33	180-53,500	4	U/S/R	5
10	Male	8	32,000	1	U/S/R	5
11	Male	18	21,000-180,000	3	U/S	0.75
12	Female	7	25,000	1	S/R/M	5

(1) S-Suburban, R- Rural, U-Urban, M-Military

The groups' experience serving as a superintendent ranged from 4-33 years. The group all had advanced degrees with 10 having educational doctoral degrees. The districts served had student populations ranging from as little as 180 students to more than 150,000 students. The majority of the superintendents described their districts as urban and suburban. Two emphasized the rural location of the district and the impact of military personnel. Six of the 12 spent their entire career in the same district. Six of the retired superintendents were in their 40s for their first superintendency, three in their 50s, two in their 30s, and one was in his 20s. Individuals were identified as Superintendent 1

through Superintendent 12.

### **Research Questions**

The study was guided by the following three research questions:

1. What is successful leadership as described by retired superintendents?
2. What knowledge or skill would have helped you to make a positive impact on your superintendency?
3. What is the impact of successful superintendency on a school system?

Fourteen interview questions were developed to identify specific leadership traits thought to be necessary for success in the role of a superintendent, knowledge or skills that allow one to have a greater impact in the role, and finally what does that impact look like? The questions asked in the respective interviews were as follows:

### **Interview Questions**

- 1) As you reflect on your first superintendency:
  - a. What surprised you?
  - b. What advice were you given that was most helpful?
  - c. What is the lesson you would want to share with a new superintendent?
- 2) What leadership traits do you think were:
  - a. your strengths?
  - b. your weakness?
- 3) As you reflect, can you determine what leadership traits were necessary for your success as a superintendent?
- 4) How did you set goals and expectations for the district?
- 5) How did you communicate the goals and expectations for the district?
- 6) What was your most significant achievement as a superintendent?

- 7) What was your lowest point as a superintendent?
- 8) What was your “sword” you were willing to “die” on as a person serving as a superintendent?
- 9) What was your experience like with the Board of Education of the district(s) your served as superintendent?
- 10) What is something that if you went back you would do differently?
- 11) What is something that if you went back you would do the same?
- 12) Were there any factors that you feel contributed to your longevity as a superintendent?
- 13) How do you think the role of the superintendent has changed from when you first became a superintendent to today?
- 14) Is there anything else you would like to add?

Table 4 outlines which interview questions were targeted for the three research questions noted above.

Table 4

*Relationship of Interview Questions to Research Questions*

Research Questions	Interview Questions
1. What is successful leadership as described by retired superintendents?	1, 2, 3, and 12
2. What knowledge or skill would have helped you make a positive impact on your superintendency?	1, 4, and 5
3. What is the impact of successful superintendency on a school system?	6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 13, and 14

Once the interviews were completed and reviewed, the researcher was able to



identify common themes centering around these three questions.

### Research Question 1

#### What is successful leadership as described by retired superintendents?

Research Question 1 asked retired superintendents to describe what successful leadership was to them. Leadership is multi-faceted and requires various traits. The 12 participants in this case study identified a number of traits that successful superintendents exhibit. The leadership traits consistently identified by all of the participants were developing relationships and trust, integrity/transparency/authenticity, being a communicator, developing people, accountability, and being a good listener. Table 5 outlines by participant what skills they noted within their interview that were necessary and/or made them successful. Table 5 provides the recorded responses by participant by topic.

Table 5

#### *Leadership Traits – Research Question 1*

Leadership Traits	Superintendent Number												Total
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	
Developing Relationships/Trust	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	12
Integrity/Transparency/Authenticity	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	11
Communicator	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	12
Developing People	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X			X	X	10
Accountability			X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		9
Listening				X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	8
Creativity/Innovator	X				X	X				X		X	4

### Developing Relationships and Trust

Developing and building relationships takes time. Superintendent 6 noted, “if you think you are leading and you turn around and look, and no one is following, you are not leading.” In order to build those relationships and trust, Superintendent 6 would spend time out in the schools noting that it was a “grass roots effort,” and “everybody’s got to have a little skin in the game, because if they see that you’re just a mouthpiece, that you’re not interested in doing it, then they won’t follow it.” Superintendent 8 cited that a

key leadership trait was “certainly establishing relationships with all constituencies.”

Superintendent 8 commented that he had once read that “in a bureaucratic organization, the leader passes down the blame and sucks up the praise, but a real leader passes out the praise and assumes responsibility.” Further, Superintendent 8 noted that it was his goal to always treat people like you would want to be treated: “I have always thought trustworthy people trust others because we all think people are going to behave like us. So, if I am trusting people, I think I can be trusted.”

“Another trait I would add would be commitment,” shared Superintendent 10. Superintendent 10 worried that some people enter the superintendency with an attitude of “I’ll try this out and if does not work out, I will just walk away.” Superintendent 10 continued that it takes commitment to stick in when things get tough and especially working with boards of education.

I think you know your commitment is not to the school system or yourself [but] even more to the kids and the employees. If you don’t have that commitment then I think you just give up too easy and that’s just not a good thing. (Superintendent 10)

Superintendent 10 also thought some early advice in his career had helped him to be trusted:

A superintendent in a nearby county told me “Boy don't piss people off on your way up because on your way down they'll piss on you.” I got out of that that it was important to treat people the way that you wanted to be treated. That carried over as I became superintendent because I think it's awful easy that I have reached the ultimate goal that I've tried to aspire to. Now I'm on top and that attitude of, everybody is beneath me I think is easy to creep in. I think that advice helped me

not to do that.

When asked, “What do you think your strengths were that helped you as a superintendent,” Superintendent 5 stated, “I trusted my people. I delegated authority to them and trusted them to get the job done.” This thought was echoed by Superintendent 4 who said,

In my case, the primary skill would have been interpersonal skills, people skills and understanding people. You know conceptual skills, understanding the big picture and an ability to communicate the big picture, and an ability to explain to people the connections – how A is connected to B and B is connected to C and to build that trust and build credibility. But primarily interpersonal skills which would involve trust building and communicating effectively are what I think.

Superintendent 5 went on to say that “relationships are all there is,” and so he “worked hard to really care about people and build relationships.” The consistent message was that without credibility and trust from your team, little could be accomplished and much could be lost. Superintendent 1 spoke of “we” becoming the key word to his relationships: “I always thought that if things are going well you give ownership to the people in your organization or the people on the team, that if things are going lousy the head man takes responsibility and I have always done that.”

Superintendent 2 reflected that if he were to go back again and lead a school district, the one thing he would not change was the way he focused on relationships: “I think that’s the key, thinking about relationships with teachers, and with custodians, and with your board members, and the community. Really it’s what it’s all about.”

### **Integrity/Transparency/Authenticity**

Eleven of the 12 retired superintendents discussed that having integrity and being transparent and authentic are critical traits for the success of a superintendent. Integrity must exist in every aspect of the job: integrity in how one carries him/herself in the central office, integrity in how one deals with parents and students, integrity in how one navigates the politics of elected officials, integrity in how one hires administrators, and integrity in how one interacts with the public.

Superintendent 12 encapsulated many of the thoughts when she stated, During your tenure you will face many difficult decisions and you will be tasked with many uncomfortable situations. You may feel that you are being pulled in many different directions but at the end of every day remember:

You are responsible for your own INTEGRITY – and no one can take that away from you unless you allow it. Stay true to your values and beliefs even in the most difficult of times, taking nothing personal, but keeping it personal.

Superintendent 7 had enjoyed a successful career in private industry before joining the leadership team of a school district. After serving as chief of staff and deputy superintendent, he was named superintendent of another district. When asked what advice he would provide to a new superintendent, Superintendent 7 stated,

It is so important that you hold true to your core values. Whatever those core values are, they will get tested as a superintendent unlike any situation and so you need to know what those are and then hold true to them.

Superintendent 7 went on to share a story regarding an interaction with an elected official who wanted to trade a vote on an upcoming issue for a different outcome on a current decision. Superintendent 7 believed if trading for votes was required, maybe he was not

the person for the job: “I am going to do things the way I believe speaks to integrity.”

Superintendent 10 served in a variety of leadership roles including a statewide leadership role in the Department of Public Instruction. When Superintendent 10 responded to what a new superintendent would need to know, he shared,

I think that I am certainly not the smartest superintendent to have ever been nor am I the dumbest. I do not know where I would fall on that spectrum but I do know that in terms of honesty and integrity, I do not remember sacrificing even one of those in the years that I was superintendent.

Superintendent 10 continued to discuss that he found out early, especially with elected officials but also with the business community, that if they asked him to do something that he felt was illegal or unethical, he would say, “Hey, you know that’s illegal. I don’t think you want me out there saying that you asked me to do something illegal.” He found they would drop the request.

One participant shared that being named superintendent in December, in the middle of the school district’s budget season, only added to the stress of his new position. As he began to review the school system’s financials, he thought he found a discrepancy in the reporting. The finance officer, who was also new, verified that the district had a large sum of reserves that was not accounted for in the fund balance. Superintendent 4 said,

The school district had \$20 million sitting in an account that the county commissioners didn't know about. Which isn't right. I was going to look after schools but I couldn't operate that way. And at the end of my first year as a superintendent I gave 10 million dollars back to the county commissioners. That's unheard of. But that one move set a level of trust that I didn't have to worry about

anymore and you know it was risky because I didn't want the school people to think I'm not fighting for them. But I could not operate knowing that if I had kept it I would have had to been lying to the commissioners. Because I would have to continue a lie that was started before me. But I could not do that. I won't be that kind of leader. I would quit before I stood in front of a group and lied, knowing I was lying. I wasn't going to do that.

For Superintendent 4, the benefits continued throughout his superintendency, as he and the county manager would meet and develop budgets jointly to present to the commissioners. Superintendent 11 shared that by being transparent from the beginning, he was able to establish credibility. Superintendent 11 felt the early work paid dividends but that you had to be willing “to put it all out there, admitting when you messed up, taking your occasional hits when you got to take them.” It built credibility in the communities and allowed parents and business to support the district. Superintendent 11 added, “that’s the big stuff that takes time. But it is really foundational to the work, I think.” Superintendent 8 shared similar feelings and commented, “I think to be transparent is not always easy. But credibility is leadership. You earn credibility minute-by-minute and you can lose credibility at the snap of a finger.”

The value of building and maintaining positive relationships was further supported by Superintendent 3 when he stressed to “truly understanding what you value” and “using those values to guide your work.” Superintendent 3 felt that “a job is not worth having that causes you to live in a way that is not aligned with your values.” Superintendent 10 brought the perspective of family relationships to the understanding of authenticity when he said,

I think if you can't live with yourself and if your family can't see that you're doing

what you honestly believe is the right thing for kids, then I do not know how you can be successful in the job.

The ability to tell the truth was affirmed by Superintendent 9 when he discussed being told he was “too honest.” A person said he needed to be less straightforward and forthright. “I think if you tell the truth, you do not have to worry about covering up stuff ... going back and retracting” (Superintendent 9). In discussing leadership, Superintendent 2 spoke of people knowing where he stood and not being afraid of sharing where he stood:

I believe that being direct, honest, up front even when people were not going to agree with me, resulted in folks respecting me as a professional and as superintendent even though they did not agree with the position I was taking.

Superintendent 2 went on to discuss that you have to not give in to saying the things that people want to hear or things just to make them happy. A superintendent must have the ability to not be confrontational while still being consistent in what you stand for and to stand strong on beliefs. While the superintendent is not elected, Superintendent 2 felt he was a politician and worked to not be viewed as one; but “you have to be one to survive.” Superintendent 3 continued with the need to have relationships with all people, whether it be the administrative staff in the office, the chairman of the board, the most powerful CEO in the community, or with the custodian at a school: “Being authentic and being true to yourself and making sure that your moral compass points True North, knowing the line you will never cross to get a job or keep a job.”

The words integrity, authentic, and transparent occurred numerous times throughout the interviews. The 12 superintendents would attribute any success or longevity they experienced to including these attributes.

## **Communicator**

The ability to transmit a message and to provide information in an understandable way is critical for school system leadership. Eleven of the 12 retired superintendents interviewed stressed the importance of communicating well in media interviews, parent meetings, and political events. The discussions encompassed being able to communicate as a key variable for success needed by a superintendent.

The need to engage in conversations with the media was identified. “I was pretty good at speaking before groups and speaking off the cuff and when channel 9 stuck the microphone in my face” (Superintendent 5). Superintendent 5 felt the ability to come across sounding intelligent was critical to the success of the system leader.

As you lead the district, you begin to see the need to develop your leadership team’s ability to carry the message. “There needs to be multiple communicators. The leadership team needs to be able to go into his or her community and be able to communicate,” shared Superintendent 7. The ability to grow the leadership team allows you to have “multiple communicators” and to be visible in more areas of the community.

One of the concepts that emerged when interviewing the participants is that a leader recognizes who his/her audience is and adapts his/her approach to best fit his/her audience. Superintendent 3 felt the need to connect point A to B and then to C was a necessary skill. That was echoed by Superintendent 1 when he shared that his direct reports told him that he had an “ability to take complex issues and make them simple.” When asked to clarify, he stressed that in education we have a tendency to speak in a way that our families and community struggle to understand. Superintendent 1 spoke of the “Walmart version” of his speech. You take a parent who may be a high school dropout with two kids in school and he wants the best for them.



You are sitting him down trying to explain your strategic planning and use all this education jargon and he does not know anything about what you're talking about.

But if you said to him, “What is it you think your kid needs to learn in school?”

He probably would say something like this: Well, I think he needs to read, and they probably need to learn how to write, there’s a whole lot of stuff going on with all these computers. I guess he needs to know something about that and he needs to be able to get along with people. (Superintendent 1)

Superintendent 1 felt confident that he had just simplified the core of most districts’ strategic plans he had ever reviewed. Superintendent 1 recognized the need to simplify the message so everybody will understand it, because “if I can get the masses of the common people to understand what I'm trying to do, those are the people that will move a district forward. They'll be behind you.”

Superintendent 2 expressed the difficulty of communicating when he described it as both a personal strength and a weakness. Superintendent 2 felt being able to communicate was something he did well but cautioned that no matter how well you think you communicated, someone probably felt left out: “It was never enough. It was never deep enough.”

### **Listener**

Another point that was made by the participants that goes hand in hand with being a good communicator is being a good listener. As a high school principal, Superintendent 5 felt he was able to listen to different stakeholders and sift through the data gathered. He would develop common themes. As he became a superintendent, Superintendent 5 capitalized on the ability to “listen to what people had to say and sort of put that into common themes and narrow it down.”

The need to listen was challenging to manage for Superintendent 11 as he met with his cabinet. A self-described good listener, Superintendent 11 would frustrate his cabinet in a meeting as he would not speak and they were waiting to hear from him: “It was a stand-off. But if you want to develop leaders, they’ve got to step up and you’ve got to be willing to let them go.” Superintendent 11 wanted to encourage the cabinet members to discuss issues and not have him be the only voice. He felt the way to create an atmosphere of trust and support was to have the cabinet share openly and to participate in meetings.

Upon entering a district, Superintendent 3 felt it was important to have a board retreat early. The information gleaned during the interview is often the opinions of individual board members and not the collective “we” of the board. You need to get them together and ask, “What’s working well with the district, what needs attention or improvement with the district. If you could change one thing that’s tangible to make the district more effective what would it be? And you listen” (Superintendent 3).

Many identified struggling to find the time to be in a position to listen. “One of the things that I would certainly do differently; I would have spent more time out in the community with folks that I cared about in terms of their opinions” (Superintendent 2). Superintendent 2 continued that the job demands you work a lot and your calendar is full. You have intentions to get out of the building, but the volume of other urgent issues that arise makes you never make it out.

When I did make it out, it tended to be more the events that I needed to attend. I didn’t purposefully go out spend time one-on-one with people that I believed had the best interest of the community and the schools in their heart on a regular basis. (Superintendent 2)

Also, allowing people the opportunity to engage with the superintendent in a nonthreatening way could be challenging. By being in the district most of his career, Superintendent 4 knew a large number of the teachers and staff. He had someone say to him, “I can’t believe you’re the superintendent.” He was bothered by the comment. “I just wanted to be where somebody needed to talk or needed to vent or needed to share an opinion that they might would feel comfortable to do it” (Superintendent 4).

As a self-described good listener, Superintendent 7 said, “[They] say that I can be deliberate. That can be a fact that could definitely be a weakness in a job where you're required to make significant decisions quickly and a substantial number of decisions quickly.” Superintendent 9 provided a different perspective as he described himself as analytical and able to think on his feet: “I think [a] superintendent does have to be able to act and has to be a good listener, but has to eventually, I mean you got to, make a decision sometimes.”

Listening is a critical component to the superintendent; as Superintendent 7 shared, “trying to make myself available to listen and learn from others.” Superintendent 4 emphasized, “what I learned to do was keep my mouth shut and listen and try to be responsive in some form or fashion [to] the needs of the county and the employees.”

### **Developing People**

Developing people involves investing in people, equipping them with the skills they need to be successful, fostering teamwork, and then giving them the freedom they need to do the job at hand. “I think surrounding myself with strong, capable, intelligent, and committed people,” was a strength, shared Superintendent 7. As Superintendent 3 stated, “I would bust my butt trying to help people develop at higher and higher levels because that is key.”

The need to develop people was driven home to one superintendent while he was responsible for human resources. As they evaluated the school leadership in their district, the majority of the principals were able to retire within a 5-year period. In response to the need, the district developed a leadership training program to develop assistant principals, principals, central services, and even a cohort on superintendent leadership. The intent “was to have internal candidates that were well-prepared, as well as any external candidates who showed up” (Superintendent 2). While Superintendent 2 served as superintendent, he shared that 95.6% of his principal appointments were internal candidates.

Another way superintendents spoke to developing people was through delegation. Superintendent 5 would formulate what he wanted to see, describe it to his deputy superintendents, and then let them go to work: “I think the thing I do [best] is to trust those staff and cut them loose and let them be creative.” An interesting post note to the story was that one of the two deputy superintendents was selected to succeed him as superintendent.

Three other superintendents highlighted the number of former employees who had gone on to become superintendents. Superintendent 8 shared,

We've got a bunch of superintendents out there that worked for me somewhere along the line. I think that I can identify talent and can develop people but I also let them do the work and get the job done. I can stay out of their way.

“I have had about eight or nine people who were either executive directors or assistant superintendents that went on to become superintendent and I am very proud of that,” shared Superintendent 1.

As Superintendent 10 came into the superintendent role, a number of his longtime

colleagues were able to retire. A number of them stayed to see him through the first years of his superintendency out of loyalty to him and the system. He took pride in the transition out of the “home grown people” and the quality of the people he developed. “Not that they weren't good people but the people that replaced them were better than they were. And I'm proud of the fact that two of those key people both became superintendents now and have done well,” shared Superintendent 10. “I think I was able to hand things off and then leave them alone and let people do things even if they sometimes screw that up” (Superintendent 10). Another perspective was shared by Superintendent 7 when he described what surprised him as he become a superintendent:

I had a wealth of experience when I moved into the role of the superintendent and then I would also say that I had the good fortune of working with someone when I was deputy superintendent who essentially treated me as though I was almost in training to be a superintendent. I was very much involved in a lot of the decisions and processes, etc. so I'm not sure there was much that surprised me.

A number of the superintendents spoke to having a person who had delegated to them and allowed them to work. “The people I worked with were good delegators. They didn't mess with [you], the different assistant superintendents,” said Superintendent 11.

The role of developing people is difficult to ensure, but the investment is rewarding. Superintendent 12 offered a perspective that clearly describes the process of developing people when she shared an encounter with one of the principals in her former district:

You know the thing that you don't know about yourself is that you left a legacy about building capacity of people. You didn't focus on programs and that you were always about the people whether it was the students or the teachers or the

principals or whoever.

After sharing the employee's comment, she added her response: "Well, I appreciate you saying it but I never thought about it that way. I think we're in the people business of education. So that's just part of what we should do."

### **Accountability**

In the world of public education, accountability has come to mean test scores, graduation rates, college and career ready, and pay for performance. Superintendent 7 reflected on the changes he had seen as a superintendent and felt since his leadership role was mostly in the previous decade that he did not have a perspective; but he commented,

You know the questions around accountability is being much more of the public face and the pace of things, and expectations. I think a lot of that had occurred by the time I became superintendent. But it's not like talking to someone who was superintendent, I believe 20, 30 years ago, where they didn't have the same levels of state and national accountability in place we were faced with.

The need to meet public expectations and have SMART goals has become part of the daily lexicon of public education. As you begin to plan and develop strategic plans, data is one of the first points of discussion. "First of all you look at data, you look at data with teacher retention, with principal retention, with student parent teacher surveys, with test score data, and then I came up with a goal for each section of data," remarked Superintendent 6. The superintendent who had been retired the longest, Superintendent 3, shared that data was key to the strategic planning process: "We would do formal and informal made assessments or situational analysis all the way from analyzing the data that we had available in those days to what we felt we had data to support."

The need for accountability was not questioned by superintendents, but the proper

way to use it was in question. Superintendent 10 stated,

I'm not sure that I had as strong a grasp as I should have had of how to measure things and make sure that the things that we were putting in place were working the way they were intended to work.

The need to be able to monitor and evaluate work was mentioned. Driven to be accountable was discussed and lamented.

I looked at all the data points and also with that I had a superintendent council with students, with teachers, and with community members and with each of those groups I would continue talking about what I thought next steps were (Superintendent 6).

The tension between being deemed proficient (on grade level) versus growing kids academically was felt when discussing accountability. "If you had twenty nine percent of kids on grade level, obviously you've got to grow kids now while I wanted proficiency to rise, I knew that proficiency would rise if growth rose" (Superintendent 6).

Accountability became a word of reckoning in public schools during the 1990s and continues to be at the forefront of education debate. While nine of the 12 superintendents spoke of accountability, none decried the need for being accountable.

The methods and factors however remain a wide open topic.

Research Question 1, "What is successful leadership as described by retired superintendents," sought to explore the leadership traits that retired superintendents valued. When reviewing the comments of those interviewed, the success of the 12, and their ongoing contributions to public education, it was apparent that one overriding trait was valued, relationships. As Superintendent 3 stated, "Relationships are all there is."

## Research Question 2

**What knowledge or skill would have helped you to make a positive impact on your superintendency?** The information gleaned from interviewing the 12 superintendents, along with the data furnished in the background questionnaire, provided several thematic responses. The most common response revolved around working with the Board of Education, which was the majority response to “what surprised you in your first superintendency?” Additionally, all of the superintendents commented on the need for a superintendent to be able to cast vision for the district, create a strategic plan, and then be able to communicate that plan to respective stakeholders. Reference is made to Table 6.

Table 6

### *Knowledge or Skills Required – Research Question 2*

Common Themes	Superintendent Number												Total
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	
Board of Education	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	12
Communication	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	12
Personnel	X	X		X		X			X				5
Strategic Planning/Vision	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	12

### **Board of Education**

The General Statutes of North Carolina 115C-271 established boards of education to serve as policy makers and to hire the superintendent to administer the school district. The majority of superintendents shared advice regarding their relationship with the board of education, noting the responsibility of managing the board, relationships with the board chair, the quality of the board and the overall politics.

The superintendent works for the board of education, which by its very nature establishes a relationship that resembles that of a shotgun marriage. With elections



generally held every 2 years, many superintendents work with board members who were not serving in the capacity at the time the current superintendent was hired. The responsibility for managing the relationship falls on the superintendent. “My job was working with the board and that’s what I did. And a lot of times all I did and that’s what it took,” shared Superintendent 2. Many superintendents shared their insight about building relationships with board members and with the district staff and the board. “I never lost sight of who I was working for. I was pretty adamant about helping staff understand who we worked for also” (Superintendent 11). Superintendent 11 continued by discussing the need to create a team atmosphere where the board was viewed as colleagues. Superintendent 11 felt that could make things enjoyable and draw positive people to serve on the board: “People wanted to join the team and board members wanted to join a good team.” Superintendent 1 shared that his skills as a basketball coach came into play when working with boards of education: “As a coach you would take people from all different backgrounds, race, socioeconomic status, and you would get them to buy into a common goal.” Recognizing the need to bring the board together on a daily basis, he worked continually at unifying the board around a common initiative.

Working with the board on decisions was an ongoing process for most of the superintendents. Board members come from many different backgrounds and bring different perspectives to the leadership role. Superintendent 7 said,

Perhaps it would have been easier if I was more willing to sort of do some of this trading and maybe a little bit easier. But I really felt like my job was to present the best positions and recommendations for the school district that staff could come up with. And then allow the board to make whatever decision they’re going to make.

The same description was shared by Superintendent 3 when he said,

I always took the position that I'd make the best educational recommendation that I could and they would either have to vote that up or down and if they wanted to make a political decision that it would be up to them.

A similar perspective was shared by Superintendent 5 when he described the relationship:

I think I was sort of like Kenny Rogers. I knew “when to hold them and when to fold them.” I knew when to press. I knew when to back off. And I was pretty good at reading the little dynamics and politics of the situation.

Superintendents felt that managing the relationship with the board required an ability to keep themselves, both personal beliefs and values, in mind without overstepping their bounds.

The quality of the relationship with the board of education was reflective of the relationship the superintendent had with the chairperson of the board. Superintendent 11 spoke to working with boards of all sizes: “seven, eleven, and nine were the sizes, all of which were good.” Superintendent 11 found that supporting the board’s governance structure was key to keeping a good relationship with the entire board: “The chair has a role. And don't take over the chair role. Force them back into doing what they're supposed to do.” Superintendent 7 shared that he was careful to manage the relationship with the chair. The process of sharing information was challenging, and he did not want three board members believing they had more information than others. He attempted to treat all board members the same when sharing information. “I would give the board chair more information simply because the board had selected that person as the board chair but I wouldn't start trying to play favorites,” stated Superintendent 7.

Board members require time, and superintendents must be sensitive to this

requirement. Superintendent 1 spoke to working to meet at least once a month one on one with board members so they felt a connection. He shared, “sometimes they can get jealous with the chairman, the chairperson has more access to the superintendent than others.” The relationship was summed up by Superintendent 3: “The quality of my work life was positively correlated with the working relationship that I had with my board chairs and then how the board chair worked with the rest of the board.”

The ability to communicate and inform board members was mentioned by several of the superintendents. Superintendent 9 shared that a turning point in his second superintendency was when he received advice about keeping board members informed. Superintendent 9 was advised to keep track of conversations, requests, and places he had been: “You cannot let board members think that one group is getting more attention than the other.” Superintendent 9 shared that he developed a weekly report to provide the board with information: “Every Friday, as a literal memorandum, this was before email, and I am going to tell you it made all the difference in the world.” He shared that for the next 17 years he produced the weekly report. Participant 4 shared a similar strategy: “If a board member asks for a document, send it to every board member regardless of the situation. This keeps board members aware of what other members are dealing with or are interested in.” He further shared that the practice did create some angst the first several times he sent the information to all but in the long run served him well.

The board of education for most districts in North Carolina is an elected body with some being partisan and the majority nonpartisan. The superintendents interviewed all mentioned “politics” in some form when discussing school boards, and for many it was discussed as their biggest surprise. Superintendent 3 shared, “one of the more challenging aspects of (superintendency) was how partisan politically the Board of

Education was. They literally despised one another. If they were Republicans, they despised Democrats, Democrats despised Republicans.” Superintendent 2 felt that early in his career, the members elected to the board of education “were somebody, bankers or lawyers, they were civic minded folks.” As he surveyed today’s board members, he stated, “They all want to beat somebody. They are aspiring to political positions and the partisanship bleeds over even though the races are nonpartisan.” Superintendent 10 echoed the shift in the type of school board members: He remarked that “during his 45 years boards changed a lot.” Early in his career, Superintendent 10 recalled boards meeting “on Wednesday from noon until 2 pm, once a month.” The members of boards of education were doctors, lawyers, business owners, professionals. “They didn’t want to run the school system. They used the business model of you hire somebody to run it, you turn them loose and let them run it, until they prove they cannot, then you replace them” (Superintendent 10). As Superintendent 10 left the superintendency, board members had become politicians and felt they should run the school system:

They don't understand, in my opinion, their role. They think, and when I say they, we have some wonderful board members, but a lot more, in my opinion, think that they ought to run the schools. That it's okay to go out into a school, to ask the principal what do you need me to do for you?

Superintendent 12 shared that when she began her superintendency, she did not understand how important it was going to be to “navigate some of the external politics, even some away from the school system.” She shared about a program that was proposed to be operated within the corporate limits of a municipality and that the county commission did not support the program. The county manager communicated they did not want county dollars supporting a municipality. Superintendent 12 stated,

My board backed out. They said this is a political nightmare with the county and they're going to hold it against us at budget time. And I thought, wow, who would have thought. Something like this comes from the education side of the house where you believe that you're doing the right thing for kids and that's not really what everybody thinks about.

Superintendent 1 summed up the feelings well when he stated, "I was never political, but always politically astute."

The other side to the politics of boards of education was the individual board members. Superintendent 7 stated,

It was actually challenging on some levels and quite rewarding on others. And so what I mean by that is when I, you, work with and listen to each board member individually, I found them to be pretty remarkable people. And there was a lot I could learn from each of them individually.

The difficulty he shared was watching them function as a group and to try and make decisions. "Each of them saw things from their own way and sometimes it was difficult to help them sort of see other people's perspectives on things" (Superintendent 7).

Superintendent 10 stated, "Realize that you know your board members are good people. Know they do dumb things and they do things that make life tough for you. But you know they're well intentioned, most of them." Superintendent 1 shared, "On your board there is always going to be one, at least one that is just different. I have had a lot of success with boards but there was always that one." Superintendent 1 went on to share that early in his career he would work to try and get the person to "come around." He would spend more time with the person and invest in the relationship. Superintendent 1 added,

Later in my career, I would put them on an island and the rest of board would help me do it. Because they knew it to. They knew that this individual was not going to be a team player. So we push them out and let them swim by themselves and it did not take long for them to learn, if I want to accomplish anything I am going to have to work with these people. You could bring them back in that way sometimes and then that didn't work.

Superintendent 1 went on to add that he did not advise new superintendents to follow that path, but he felt he had the support of the majority of the board: "They [the one] can't fire me, no they can't. So, there are all kind of ways to try and get them to at least try to play like a team. But anyway, there's always one." Superintendent 8 added, "Board members are board members. The names change, the gender changes, the race changes. You are going to have characters. If you can't accept that and you can't live with that, then it's not the right job for you."

### **Communication**

When asked what was the key to being successful, Superintendent 2 stated, The ability to communicate. Because no matter how well I ever communicated it was never enough. It was never deep enough. I think that always for me I'll view communication as a weakness even though I view it as a strength. If that makes any sense.

Superintendent 7 felt his public relations officer worked to ensure he was the face of the district; however, with a large community to serve, he could not do it alone.

She [his public information officer] was real keen on saying that there needs to be multiple faces, so there needs to be multiple communicators. And that every person on the leadership team needs to be able to go into his or her community

and be able to communicate these things as well. (Superintendent 7)

Superintendent 7 added that he felt a way to communicate was to have his leadership team active in “lots of different nonprofit organizations. Whatever your interest may be but you should be involved. That’s another way of communicating what the district is doing.”

Superintendent 11 spoke to the importance of getting off to a good start as a new superintendent in the first months: “I used to split my ratio of time between about 60/40 in the first three months. Sixty percent work in the community and learning who's out there and 40 percent internal. Then slowly shift more to internal.” He shared of doing “the famous listening tour” that many new superintendents do by holding meetings with the public as way of learning about the community. Superintendent 11 added that the listening tour was important “even if you're from the community, because your role is different.”

Superintendent 4 felt the challenge of now being seen as the superintendent. He had served in the district since he was a teacher and was taken back when a school employee remarked,

“Oh my God I can't believe you're the superintendent.” And that bothered me. I just wanted to be where somebody needed to talk or needed to vent or needed to share an opinion that they might would feel comfortable to do it.

Superintendent 4 felt that being approachable and accessible was key to his leadership style. Superintendent 7 felt that an entry plan was critical for a new superintendent. The plan needed to be “well developed” and shared widely. Superintendent 7 added that an annual “state of the school event that was televised” furthered the communication plan in his district. Superintendent 3 shared, “It [communication] was face to face, written, and

telephone. Just good solid communication that went with what we were trying to do.”

Superintendent 3 added, “Obviously, I was out of the superintendency before social media.”

A number of superintendents discussed the impact of social media.

Superintendent 11 spoke to how media has “changed the game” and the “speed has changed tremendously.” Superintendent 11 felt you used to have time to formulate and strategize about a response; “Now you have to anticipate and have responses ready and have a machinery ready and have protocols.” Superintendent 6 added to the perspective:

Everybody is using social media to hammer. Now there's a lot of good in social media, please do not misconstrue that. But people who have an agenda and an axe to grind, social media is their number one tool. Redistricting before social media, people would get mad and come to a hearing and speak. Once social media came about, they used Facebook or whatever app, as a way to galvanize and you can incite people. Just think about this recent election we've had. You can incite people to do dumb stuff just by flaming the fires. Whether it be truth or not. So, I think the advent of social media has changed things. And I wish I could say I think it's changed it for the best or for the better. I do not.

Superintendent 5, when asked about changes to the superintendent role, stated, “the power of social media.” Superintendent 5 felt the last 3 years he served it was really gaining ground, whereas in his early years, 2005, 2006, and 2007, “it was really not that big a deal. But now it just explodes.” Superintendent 3, when asked about communication, added, “I just can’t imagine what it’s like dealing with social media at the level superintendents have to deal with today.”

Communication with the board of education was mentioned by several



superintendents. Superintendent 4 expressed a sense of accomplishment that he could not recall a time when a board member said to him, “Why did I not know?” Superintendent 4 shared that he sent a mailing out to the board every Friday: “I would keep meticulous notes. I would pop a text to my secretary ‘put this on the board update.’” Superintendent 4 used the tool to let board members know about anything that was requested by board members: “There was always five or six things it seemed on that request list. And if I had a group of parents requesting information, I always made sure the board had anything that I sent to a parent.” These comments supported those shared by Superintendent 9 who said he started bi-weekly but moved to a weekly communication. Superintendent 9 stated, “You are the superintendent for every board member. The different board members take a lot of different amounts of time.” Superintendent 4 shared that after they realized he was going to share their request with everyone, “they quit asking for a whole lot of junk.” Superintendent 4 thought about the difficulty of not being able to share information as well:

One superintendent said to me “I feel like I've been in a corner for two weeks and they're just getting to pummel me and I can't throw a punch back.” I felt that way many times, many times. Matter of fact, I think that certainly you need to put that in your dissertation. And I'm being serious. Write that. Because people who can't deal with people saying it, who had to by nature punch back, are in for a long road. Because you can't do it.

### **Strategic Planning/Vision**

The questionnaire explored how superintendents set and communicated goals and expectations. All 12 respondents spoke to strategic planning and vision. Superintendent 4 provided a broad overarching statement:

I think an important part of being a good leader is understanding the situation that you are walking into. Part of the school board's responsibility is hiring somebody who can fix the issues in the district. But whoever comes in has got to figure out what the issues are.

The superintendents shared the methods for developing a strategic plan, and Superintendent 12 offered the most complete response. She described having numerous committees made up of stakeholder groups from parents, parent teacher organizations, county and city managers, community colleges, business leaders, school administration, teachers, counselors, all areas of support services, and the board of education. All of these groups worked to develop goals and to participate in meetings held throughout the different townships in the county. "It was just a great opportunity and process for a community to have a voice in the education process" (Superintendent 12).

Superintendent 11 spoke to the ongoing value of having a strategic plan in place: "It really clarifies future decision making in so many ways. It helps you be clear about what's on the chart and what isn't, what gets put on the chart and what doesn't."

Superintendent 11 added, "It can't be quick, it shouldn't be quick. You're building something that will withstand political changes, budget pressures." The emphasis on taking time to develop the plan was furthered by Superintendent 6:

In this country, each of us needs to feel like we have a voice that will be at least listened to, be heard, if not followed. So, I got stakeholder groups together and we winnowed it, and winnowed it, and winnowed it to come up with a plan and it took a solid year to do it.

Superintendent 7 felt the plan provided a document as a resource to measure against and to promote accomplishment: "We produced a strategic plan and have a big

launch event where we put it out publicly. We produced a document that said this is where we're going and so how about you join us on this trip.” Superintendent 3 spoke of developing a written plan for each of the districts he led: “My dissertation was on planning so I was a big planner and I always used the planning process to establish goals for the District.” Superintendent 3 continued,

Developing strategic planning and management documents to accompany those plans, which identified the goal, identified activities and had the strategies that had to be implemented to address the goal. That included who was responsible, what was the timeline and how were we going to evaluate it.

Superintendent 2 regarded the opportunity to have everyone focused on the same goals as an important by-product of strategic planning:

You would have to work hard to have found a bus driver who couldn't tell you what the vision was for the district. And most of them could tell you what the four big bucket goals were. They might not be able to tell you much beyond that. But we aligned everything to those four goals and talked about them all the time and gave feedback all the time.

Superintendent 5 stated, “I don't think you need to have 15 goals. I think you're better off if you have three to four. Three or five maybe really solid goals and areas of focus that you're going to work on.”

Superintendent 1 talked of focus areas: “When I became superintendent, I either adjusted or created a plan. You can call it a strategic plan. A lot of times I didn't, I just called it focus areas.” He would survey the community, internal stakeholders, and the board of education, then form a committee that represented all those facets. “As we started crafting out that plan and what those focus areas would actually look like, I would

try to draw them in that way” (Superintendent 1). Superintendent 1 spoke of being a Phil Schlechty disciple and the six critical systems of any organization: “It was important to me, that the board and we administratively in leadership and in our schools, knew what direction we were headed in.”

Superintendent 12 shared a concern about what she is seeing today in school districts: “Most folks are more interested in what do I put on my website or where do I go out and do a town hall.” She was frustrated that superintendents wanted to go out and share information but not listen for feedback. The method of providing an email address for participants to send questions to falls short. She stated,

That’s not active engagement in the decision making and the goal setting. We should be putting it out there. We should at least be having the conversation about it. Even if we're not able to do it let's start talking about some of these great things that we should try to accomplish.

## **Personnel**

A total of five participants directly mentioned personnel in their interviews. A number of the participants expressed how big a role human resources played in their success. Superintendent 2 shared, “I don't know what your observations are but mine are that people hardly ever get fired because of low test scores. It is finance, human resource issues, or board relations issues that get them every single time.”

One of Superintendent 10’s leadership roles prior to becoming a superintendent included human resources. He felt he was strong in human resources and shared in his interview of a personnel recommendation he made to the board on which he was challenged. He felt that the board, as a whole, would pass the recommendation as he had the majority of yes votes; however, the board member who was vocally against the

personnel selection represented the district where the school was located. Superintendent 10 weighed the decision and had to decide if that was not the sword he was going to die on: “I decided no. And so I gave them X, who bombed out after a year. He [the board member] ended up coming back to me and saying ‘I am sorry, I was wrong.’”

Superintendent 10 further analyzed the decision with “I may have won or lost that board vote but I would have lost the war because I would have lost him [the board member] and he turned out to be a fine supporter later on.” For Superintendent 10, this was one of the examples of how selecting the best personnel and managing the board intersected.

Four of the superintendents felt they had not been decisive enough with personnel. Superintendent 9 related a story from attending a speech by the CEO of a Fortune 500 business to a class of MBA students. The CEO answered the question of what decision she most regretted. She felt she gave people too long to improve before handling the personnel matter. Superintendent 9 felt that

in education we are hesitant to face poor performance. We will move people around and give them a chance. I think that sometimes with the people that are inside the organization we give them almost way too many chances, we tolerate a lot of poor performance before we're willing to act.

Superintendent 6 stated that her biggest surprise in becoming a superintendent was “the false friends and true enemies” you acquire. She found people were more interested in their own benefit than that of a child. It was a foreign concept to her, and she found many perceived friends would be her first naysayers when a decision did not benefit them. “In retrospect I probably should have been harder on a couple of folks. But I came up through the ranks with them. We were assistant principals or principals together” (Superintendent 6). Superintendent 8 felt he started strong by hiring the best

people for the job and it served him well; but as he spent time in the district, he lost some of his objectivity and as position turnover occurred, he may find himself rewarding someone for loyalty to himself and the organization:

I saw that I did that and I wasn't as clear and objective in some of my late hirings as I was earlier or as I should've been because of the sense of loyalty to my people. I do not think I had any major screw ups but I think there are cases I could have found somebody better.

Superintendent 11 commented, "I never complimented people enough, I never thanked enough." Being a former coach, Superintendent 11 felt he often accepted the completed work as a "win" and then moved on to the next event: "I expected a lot of people and I was probably not appreciative enough."

Superintendent 7 felt the ability to hire well was a strength that contributed to his success because by "surrounding myself with strong, capable, intelligent, committed people," that made our district better. Superintendent 10 stated, "You hire the right people that make you look good. You spend less time on their mistakes. If you have good people they make you look good and that enhances my longevity." Superintendent 8 shared a key to his success was "being able to recruit, develop, and retain quality people." Superintendent 12 shared a story of dealing with a building code issue and feeling inadequate with her knowledge. She remarked, "I saw that as a deficit in myself. I had to remind myself, I can't know everything that's why you hire good people." Superintendent 3 found that today's challenges require qualified leaders; and if he were leading a district today, he would spend time developing people: "I'd bust my butt trying to help people to develop at higher and higher levels because that's the key. The challenges are getting greater and greater and the people seem to be less competent or

less developed overall.”

A number of the participants spoke to the struggles of finding qualified and committed teachers today. Superintendent 12 commented,

Education for a lot of people is probably more of a job. In the past it used to be a passion and [today] more of them [teachers] see it as work. I guess that goes back to some of the conversations we've had about being our own worst enemy sometimes. We just see it as a job and so we respond to things based on it being a job as opposed to being a profession and a passion for doing good things.

Superintendent 3 added the same perspective when he said,

I think that when you look at the teaching ranks, there are many good teachers there still. But I think overall, there is an absence of that missionary zeal that I talked about and actually seeing teaching as a calling. So, it's just more of a job often times for teachers.

### **Research Question 3**

**What is the impact of successful superintendency on a school system?** The responses gathered from the superintendents did not have a grouping in a particular area related to success. In fact, Superintendent 7 responded, “I don’t know how successful I was. I had pretty high goals of what I wanted to do. We hit some, we did not hit a lot of others.” The 12 shared accomplishments they felt had improved the district(s) they served in as superintendent.

### **General**

When discussing a key to success, Superintendent 10 stated, “Patience.” Superintendent 10 shared that as he served as superintendent, he learned that it took time for change to occur.

If you have early success it's not really your success. If you have early failure it is not really your failure. It's a carryover of what someone else did. You have to have patience to give things that you try to put in place, that you value, a chance to work.

As she described her thoughts on success, Superintendent 6, shared that there is “a natural progression for each one of us because people run in cycles of appreciated, expected, and demanded.” She felt that the “wow” factor of innovation was appreciated at first, then the community came to expect innovation; then, they demanded it. “I always had to keep looking around the corner for that next transformational thing and a body can only take on so many things, so many changes, at once” (Superintendent 6). The efforts put forth by superintendents are often hard to quantify. Superintendent 9 shared,

Not a lot of people understand this at all. But if you're doing your job well you're preventing problems from happening. And when you prevent problems from happening nobody ever knows it because the problem never happened. I realize that now more as I observe things that happen. Probably the works and the work that I did prevented problems from happening.

Superintendent 1 stated, “As the leader of the organization you and the system are either moving forward or backwards. If you are content with the current status you are moving backwards. Teaching and learning are evolving and superintendents have to adjust.”

## **Resources**

Superintendent 4 discussed working through program evaluations, utilizing financial resources for capital and operating, developing relationships with the employees, and academic achievement. Superintendent 4 felt the one significant accomplishment was managing the budget crisis of the great recession and continuing to



improve academic achievement: “One thing I felt good about was that we, after we had cut budgets and cut people, we still had a focus on academics.” Superintendent 4 shared that during his tenure, all academic measures improved on a year-to-year basis including graduation rate and the dropout rate: “My commitment was to make absolutely sure that even though we were cutting, cutting, cutting, cutting,” they would not lose focus. Superintendent 4 learned “that money wasn't everything to get academic achievements up. I mean it goes a long way. But you've got to have dedicated, qualified people leading the show in the classrooms.”

The ability to successfully garner community support for passing bond issues was noted. Superintendent 8 said, “Working to pass a \$150 million bond issue. People said I was crazy that we can never do that and it passed 70% [approval].” Superintendent 10 felt “one concrete and measurable” evidence of his success was a bond issue: “I’m really proud of the \$175 million bond issue that we sold and passed. It wasn't easy and I was in a political environment that made it more difficult.” Superintendent 4 repeated a similar story regarding a bond issue of \$79 million in 2011:

One thing I did that I was told I was making a crucial mistake. Everybody said I was a fool to do it because it would never pass. It would be one of the first bond failures in the county and define my superintendency. We passed it with 80%, one of highest approval ratings.

Superintendent 12 spoke of developing mobile learning in 2006 before anyone else in North Carolina and the need to identify resources for the initiative:

When I took over and we started looking at some options. We did a smart phone initiative before smartphones were in people's hands basically. It sent a message across the community and we engaged our business leaders. The initiative was

funded through Qualcomm Inc. out of San Diego, California.

Superintendent 12 described how the president and founder of Qualcomm made it a priority to be a part of the project. He would use the corporate jet to fly in to the local airport.

Everybody [was] in awe because you know people like that don't just show up in southeastern North Carolina. It kind of gave people this idea of “oh, we can do something. We can do more than just the bare minimum.” (Superintendent 12)

The bigger impact than the dollars was shift in the district culture.

We built this culture around try something different. It's OK, it won't be perfect.

We're going to hit some bumps along the road. But it's OK because we're giving our kids an opportunity to do something different and they deserve it.

(Superintendent 12)

Superintendent 8 shared when discussing the means and methods to completing a strategic plan that he felt it was easy to have people excited and discussing a plan in September through December:

We'll see how serious everybody is come budget time. So this is the strategy, this is the vision this community wants. If we're going to get there, it's going to cost this much. I said, we can't go from here to there. What's a reasonable start?

He was proud to add that they received a 13% increase in that first year and a commitment from the commissioners to work to the total funding over a 5-year period. Superintendent 7 was excited to mention the “Say Yes to Education” campaign that raised \$40 million for scholarships: “We were able to help so many young people when they graduated from high school to receive last dollar tuition scholarships.”

## **Student Achievement**

Superintendent 1 felt the systems he served “were better when I left than when I arrived.” He spoke to working to improve the academic performance of students as evidenced by improved test scores, graduation and dropout rates, challenging curriculum, and innovative programs for all students. Superintendent 6 recognized the value of school leadership: “I empowered principals, who in turn empowered students, and the students were most successful. The growth we had, the test scores, we were top two in North Carolina.” Superintendent 7 commented on continuing the growth of the early college model that had started just before his arrival: “We may have been tied with Houston, Texas for having the most early colleges in the entire country and they were a multiple size bigger than us.” Superintendent 10 felt as he looked back “that developing the early college high school as something I am proud of.”

## **Developing the District**

Superintendent 5 remarked about his success not in terms of passing the bond issue for funding projects but in implementing the acquired capital dollars: “On my watch 13 new schools were opened. Ten of those we purchased the land and built the buildings. We had to [complete] redistricting with all those schools.” Superintendent 9 discussed the extensive redistricting program:

When I came here [county] student assignment was a major issue. My first year we went from a 5/4 Democrat board to a 7/2 Republicans. That first year we spent a lot of time because student assignment was a campaign issue.

The district was dealing with the vestiges of desegregation and cross district busing. Superintendent 9 was proud of the lasting impact of the work as “in 23 years they have [only] lost a half a percent of market share.” Superintendent 11 felt, “How well [in] all

my communities, we were transparent enough from the very beginning that we established great credibility with the media, parents, and everyone else. It's sort of foundational I think to the work."

Superintendent 2 stated his significant accomplishment was "without question the work done with leadership development. [That was combined with] the emphasis we placed on teacher development, assistant principal and principal development, and central services development." Superintendent 3 stated, "we were able to perform as a district with student achievement but I took a lot of pride in helping people develop."

Superintendents 1, 5, 8, and 11 spoke with satisfaction at having members of their leadership teams who had gone on to become superintendents.

### **Additional Comments**

The final question of the interview asked the superintendents, "Is there anything else you would like to add?" The additional comments follow.

Superintendent 1 stated, "I talked about the Myth of Measurement. You never know what you might say to a student or adult that has a lasting impact. An impact past all the curriculum you have taught."

Superintendent 2 shared,

I was thinking about that and I was going to give you the Lyndon Johnson quote that I liked the best. Vietnam is in the worst period of casualties ever. And the story is that Johnson would start signing the letters to go home to the parents after midnight and I'm sure he had to have been drinking and he would cry and sign them for hours and hours and hours and it was awful. This went on for months and a reporter asked him, "Mr. President, how does it feel having to deal with this? You're having to sign all these letters. More and more young men are being

killed in Vietnam and all this criticism keeps coming your way. How do you deal with this?" Johnson said, "Well it's like being a jackass standing in the middle of a field in a hailstorm. About all you can do is stand there and take it." It's not just with human resources, there are a lot of things that we are just like the jackass standing in the middle of the field. All we can do is stand there and take it.

Superintendent 3 felt that no matter whether one was an aspiring superintendent or a young superintendent, he felt that "self-understanding, personal mastery, and truly understanding what you value" were needed to guide your work.

Superintendent 4 wanted to share two questions he would ask when dealing with personnel:

Is their worth greater than their baggage? The moment a principal's baggage was more than they were worth to me, I got rid of them. The second one was – Would I want this person inside my tent pissing out or outside my tent pissing in? That helped me determine where I put them in an organization or whether I did or not. So you have to figure out the answers to those questions in hurry.

Superintendent 5 remarked,

It is a tough but fulfilling job. But I will tell you this and you won't realize this until you're retired but it's very satisfying to see things that are going on in the school district and you know that happened on your watch or started on your watch. It is still in place and it's grown. And you'll see your successor take it and carry it forward even further. But I see things all the time and hear things all the time that I know that started on my watch and that's satisfying to me. These things that started were either my ideas or the ideas of my staff who I was smart enough to cut loose and get out of their way.

Superintendent 6 stated,

I thoroughly enjoyed my tenure working full time for public schools in North Carolina. My least favorite job, and I was a bus driver, a coach, a teacher, an assistant principal, a principal, an assistant superintendent, a deputy superintendent, and a superintendent. My least favorite job was superintendent. I think it was Richard the Second or the Richard the Third said “heavy lies the head who wears the crown.” The joke is, everybody thinks you're in charge. Well, you don't have one boss, you've got nine bosses or wait one hundred thousand, how many kids you have. And we as humans, I think, always want more, more, more. I wish I'd had the forethought to stop and say, you know maybe this is good enough, because I was able to do more as a deputy superintendent than I was a superintendent. Although we struck some licks as a superintendent. That's all good.

Superintendent 7 shared, “One piece of advice. I would certainly try to give it to staff and that is to take care of yourself and take care of your family. These jobs are all consuming. You must remember to do that.”

Superintendent 8 stated,

No, I think I have said a lot. I do not think I would have preferred doing anything else. I couldn't play third base for the Phillies, I found out early that wasn't going to happen. I worked with so many great people. They're good people in our profession.

Superintendent 9 felt his heart and passion had been expressed in his earlier answers.

Superintendent 10 stated,

I am glad you are doing this. I think the one thing that I would say to people who prepare superintendents is to do a better job of preparing people to deal with change. To do a better job of helping people understand that running a school system today is not going to be the same tomorrow or five years down the road. And if you're not a person who can handle that change then you don't need ... I'm not sure you need any job, but you sure don't need to be a superintendent.

Superintendent 11 shared, "I like to think that I was able to create a team somehow out of these boards which make life better and more enjoyable. So we always looked at each other as colleagues not just workers."

Superintendent 12 stated,

As a retired superintendent, I have found myself continuing to search for ways to support sitting superintendents. I guess since this is a trait I carried into the role, it is still alive and well. Working with others to have an impact on students is something that is hard to turn off. So, I guess that means I am not very successful in the definition of retirement.

The free flowing statements made by the superintendents provide multiple perspectives on serving as a superintendent in North Carolina.

## **Summary**

Chapter 4 offered the results of interviews with 12 retired superintendents in North Carolina. The data and findings are presented in response to the three proposed research questions. Chapter 5 offers analysis and conclusions drawn from the research.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of retired superintendents who served in North Carolina public schools to determine what leadership traits they felt were necessary for success in the role of superintendent. The study also examined what skills and knowledge contributed to their positive impact on the superintendency. Last, the study strived to determine how one measures the impact or success of the superintendent within a school district. As a result of extensive interviews with 12 retired superintendents, recommendations and lessons were shared which can be valuable to prospective superintendents and for those who are new to the role. Lytle and Sokolf (2013) discussed public education's fight for economic and political survival, noting "there have been dramatic changes in the education sector and the superintendency over the past three decades, and these changes are not sufficiently understood by policymakers, boards of education or academics" (p 13). Freedberg and Collier (2016) determined that continuity of leadership is crucial to lasting reform and takes time. Despite the expressed benefits of the continuity of leadership, Chingos et al. (2014) noted in a study supported by the Brookings Institute that the school district superintendent is largely a short-term job in Florida and North Carolina, with the average superintendent serving 3.3 years. While the Brookings Institute study (Chingos et al., 2014) determined that superintendents do not have a reliably identifiable impact on student achievement, other thought leaders (Buchanan, 2006; Domenech, 2015; Hackett, 2015) suggested that the revolving door of superintendents and the lack of continuity in leadership result in a lack of long-range vision and meaningful reform.

This chapter outlines a description of the study and provides answers to each of the three research questions as well as conclusions and inferences drawn from the 12



retired superintendent responses from their respective interviews. Further, recommendations and lessons are shared for prospective candidates for the role of superintendent, boards of education when seeking a superintendent, and current superintendents who are new in their role. Limitations of the study are discussed, and the chapter concludes with recommendations for future research.

### **Description of the Study**

A qualitative study presenting and synthesizing the collective lessons and experiences of 12 retired North Carolina superintendents was conducted utilizing two different types of processes to collect information. Participants completed the Background Questionnaire and then engaged in an interview consisting of 14 questions. The interviews were transcribed and analyzed by the researcher for common themes and/or experiences. Data were delineated into manageable themes and correlated to each of the three research questions.

The three research questions were as follows:

1. What is successful leadership as described by retired superintendents?
2. What knowledge or skill would have helped you to make a positive impact on your superintendency?
3. What is the impact of successful superintendency on a school system?

### **Research Question 1**

Research Question 1 examined necessary leadership traits to be successful in the role as superintendent. Participants responded to 14 questions, which can be found in Appendix D. Interview question 2 asked participants, “What leadership traits do you think were your strengths, and conversely what leadership traits do you think were your weaknesses?” Other interview questions asked what leadership traits were necessary for

success as a superintendent and what factors contributed to their longevity as a superintendent.

Success, according to the participating retired superintendents (in the order of frequency mentioned), was dependent upon being able to develop relationships/trust, having integrity and being authentic, demonstrating good communication skills, developing people, holding people accountable, and being a good listener. These leadership traits are among those frequently listed by well-respected leaders such as Powell and Koltz (2012) and Maxwell (1995). Maxwell stated that “a leader without people skills soon has no followers” (p. 51) and that “excellent people skills involve a genuine concern for others, the ability to understand people, and the decision to make positive interactions with others a primary concern” (pp. 51-52).

Superintendent 3 echoed these thoughts by stating, “The primary skill would have been interpersonal skills, people skills and understanding people.” Superintendent 3 elaborated, noting, “interpersonal skills involve trust building and communicating effectively.” Superintendents who prioritize establishing relationships and connection to principals are more likely to effectively implement district reform (Schlechty, 2002). Superintendent 6 felt that the relationship with principals, in particular high school principals, was critical to her success:

About seven times out of ten, my idea was not the best idea. It came from the principals themselves. Here again, I met with my high school principals and I said, “Look, I need some help here.” I am going to say it one more time, if one does not have the high school principals behind them, one will not get much done.

Huntsman (2010), based on his own experience of refusing to compromise his principles, maintained that integrity is the reason he has been as successful as he has.

Huntsman wrote, “There are no moral shortcuts in the game of business or life. There are, basically, three kinds of people, the unsuccessful, the temporarily successful, and those who become and remain successful. The difference is character” (Tracy, 2016, p. 1). Superintendent 7 shared a story regarding an interaction with an elected official who wanted to trade a vote on an upcoming issue for a different outcome on a current decision. Superintendent 7 felt if trading for votes was required, maybe he was not the person for the job: “I am going to do things the way I believe speaks to integrity.”

Being a capable and qualified communicator was identified as a needed trait in the research and recorded in the interviews with the retired superintendents. The ability to take complex items and make them understandable was described by Superintendent 1 when he explained and described “the Walmart version” of his speech. He recognized the need to simplify the message so everybody will understand it, because “if I can get the masses of the common people to understand what I'm trying to do, those are the people that will move a district forward. They'll be behind you.”

Prolific leadership author Pat Williams (2016) wrote that communication was one of the keys to leadership excellence: “To lead, you must communicate so that your people understand. Never communicate merely to impress others” (p. 80). Williams described how to communicate so that people understand, with the examples of using the word “get” instead of “procure” or to use “prove” instead of “substantiate.” Williams interviewed the great New York Yankee announcer Bob Shepard, who was also a college speech instructor, about the key to being an effective public speaker. Shepard shared that he had lived by three keys to communication in his life: be clear, be concise, and be correct. Superintendent 3 wanted to ensure that people could understand how point A connected to B and then to C. Coble (2013) wrote that the successful education leader

rehearses the message, anticipates questions, and develops responses prior to delivering the message. The leader communicates the message in a way that becomes familiar to all stakeholders and recognizes that more can be said using less words.

The importance of developing leaders was illustrated by Blanchard and Miller (2014). The authors described in a fable that the best leaders invest in their people and make it a strategic priority of their organization. The way an organization may develop varies, but it must include an allocation of resources and that includes the resource of time.

The need to develop and grow people was described in multiple interviews. Superintendent 2 discussed developing leadership programs for teachers, assistant principals, principals, and central service areas of his district. Superintendent 12 shared how she still receives compliments on the work done to develop employees during her time leading her district. Additionally, the need to grow and foster talent was seen as a key goal by Superintendent 3: “I would bust my butt trying to help people develop at higher and higher levels because that is key.” The research by Massell (2000) supported the need for school-based support for professional development by school districts. The ability and support to grow classified personnel into certified teachers, the ongoing development of teachers into teacher leaders, and the development of school leaders were described as critical to the recruitment of school employees (Hoyle et al., 2005).

As Superintendent 4 illustrated, listening is a critical skill to leadership, noting, “what I learned to do was to keep my mouth shut and listen and try to be responsive in some form.” Gordon (2017) wrote,

The best communicator is not always the most eloquent speaker, but rather the person who has the ability to listen, process the information, and use it to make

decisions that are in the best interest of the team and the organization. (p. 110)

Listening to others makes them feel important and valued, and a true leader has the ability to hear people.

Despite their perceived “power” and high level of responsibility, every superintendent interviewed noted the importance of developing relationships and trust with principals, teachers, students, parents, the board of education, and the community. The foundation for leading, in particular serving as the leader of a public school district, is building and maintaining solid relationships.

## **Research Question 2**

Leadership, vision, and communication were important recurring themes in those superintendents interviewed. The themes were also identified as the most important qualities in the study completed by NSPRA (Bagin, 2007). Drew (2010) noted that “in an environment of potentially differentiated agenda, background, skill and knowledge bases, it is not an easy matter to foster the quality of strategic engagement that can build unity of purpose” (p. 59). It is not easy, but it is essential to the success of a district. The ability to reimage a district, create and communicate a compelling strategic plan, and relentlessly pursue and drive change takes courage. As Warner and Schmincke (2009) stated, “compelling sagas – that of being able to communicate passion for a winning strategy with clearly defined values and convictions – is what brings the vision, mission, values and strategies to life” (pp. 40-41).

The retired superintendents discussed strategic planning in relation to establishing goals for the school district. The need to involve various stakeholders in the community, in your schools, and in the political groups was consistently expressed. Superintendent 11 related how adopting a strategic plan provided clarity for making decisions and

direction when preparing the budget. The need for establishing a plan to be measured against and to be accountable for drove Superintendent 7. He felt that by publishing and promoting the goals, he could show the community where the district was going and then gain their support on getting there.

The comments from the superintendent interviews on strategic planning align with how Waters and Marzano (2006) described effective superintendents. They believe superintendents should establish nonnegotiable goals for achievement and instruction, bring about board alignment and support of district goals, monitor the stated goals, and then secure and allocate the necessary resources to support the goals. The North Carolina State Board of Education (2007) suggested superintendents should create a vision that supports the goal of every graduate of a high school should be prepared for work and/or postsecondary education. Superintendent 4 provided a broad overarching statement regarding vision and strategic planning, “I think an important part of being a good leader is understanding the situation that you are walking into. Part of the school board’s responsibility is hiring somebody who can fix the issues in the district. But whoever comes in has got to figure out what the issues are.”

Communication is not only important in articulating the strategic vision of the district, it is crucial for all aspects of successful district leadership. The fact that communication was highlighted in the results for both research question 1 and 2 was not surprising. As previously noted, Jamie Dimon, CEO of JP Morgan Chase, believes that a leader can absolutely influence the culture of an organization but “it takes relentless—absolutely relentless—communication. It’s what you say and how you say it” (Duckworth, 2016, p. 253).

To effectively communicate, a leader needs to be able to listen and respond to

another person's ideas, feelings, and/or concerns. By nature, a leader must have the ability to rise through an organization by having leadership ideas, and then effectively executing those ideas. However, in the position of superintendent, it is necessary to listen and gather information. The NSPRA study led by Bagin (2007) listed communication skills on most of the 31 respondent forms received.

They [school boards] want someone who can communicate what the district could be to the community, communicate the district's needs to the community and can work well with a board as well as communicate expectations to the staff and follow up on those. (Bagin, 2007, p. 3).

Superintendent 2 succinctly stated it when he talked about the importance and difficulty of communication. He said, "the ability to communicate. Because no matter how well I ever communicated it was never enough. It was never deep enough. I think that always for me I'll view communication as a weakness, even though I view it as a strength. If that makes any sense."

In addition to being able to provide strategic leadership and communication, retired superintendents had much to say about how to deal with school boards. In order to survive and make the changes necessary to improve student experiences and achievement scores, the superintendent needed first to be able to develop a collaborative working arrangement with the board of education, and with broader elected officials. The research revealed that common factors for superintendent turnover included personnel issues, political agendas of school board members, board operational ineffectiveness, and conflict (Grissom & Andersen, 2012; Metzger, 1997). Further, frequent turnover of superintendents negatively impacts a district's ability to implement needed reforms and provide the strategic vision that will indirectly impact student

achievement (Grissom & Andersen, 2012).

As previously noted, North Carolina is not immune to this problem according to NCSSA Executive Director Jack Hoke (personal communication, September 24, 2017). He reported approximately 40% of superintendents in the state have been replaced since 2015. In the March 2018 issue of *School Administrator* (Rosenberg, 2018), former superintendent Renee Hyde shared that she left her superintendent job after five years for an assistant superintendent position. The difficulty of working with a nine-member board with multiple agendas detracted from the pleasure of being a superintendent. “Each of those board members is an individual going in nine different directions, and they’re not always pulling in the same direction. Part of the job is to navigate that. It’s exhausting and I needed to take a step back” (p. 26).

The superintendents interviewed identified several issues when dealing with their boards, namely the day-to-day management, board member relationships, and the politics of the board. The comments aligned with the document Hanover Research published in January 2014 entitled, *Effective Board and Superintendent Collaboration*. The document listed five key findings as to the relationship of superintendents and the board of education:

- 1) A strong, effective relationship between superintendents and school board members hinges upon clear definitions of each body’s duties and responsibilities;
- 2) successful board/superintendent collaboration requires frequent, diplomatic communication both in and out of official settings, 3) Board members often enter their terms with limited knowledge of the exact nature of the superintendent’s administrative role, leading to role confusion and preconceived notions of a superintendent’s abilities; 4) while underperforming urban school district boards



and superintendents face many of the same problems that other districts encounter, the extensive nature of reform required in these districts poses several leadership challenges; and, 5) politics at the board and superintendent level plague all school districts. (pp. 3-4)

Key finding number one of the Hanover Research (2014) highlighted the need for clear definitions of each body's duties and responsibilities. The research supports the efforts to manage the relationship between the superintendent and the board of education and this was confirmed by many of the superintendents interviewed. The retired superintendents shared insights about building relationships with board members as well as between the district staff and the board. "I never lost sight of who I was working for. I was pretty adamant about helping staff understand who we worked for also."

Superintendent 11 continued by discussing the need to create a team atmosphere where the board was viewed as colleagues. He felt that could make things enjoyable and draw positive people to serve on the board. The relationship dynamic between the board of education, the board's chairperson, and the superintendent was described by Superintendent 3, when he said "the quality of my work life was positively correlated with the working relationship that I had with my board chair and then how the board chair worked with the rest of the board."

The retired superintendents spoke to the need for communication with the board of education in different ways, which the Hanover Research (2014) highlighted frequently, when they discussed the diplomatic communication both in and out of meetings. Superintendent 1 tried meet at least once a month, one-on-one with board members, so that they felt a connection. He shared that "sometimes they can get jealous with the chairman, the chairperson has more access to the superintendent than others."

Both Superintendent 9 and Superintendent 4 shared the need to make all board members aware of information given to individual board members.

Superintendent 9 was advised to keep track of conversations, requests, and places he had been. “You cannot let board members think that one group is getting more attention than the other.” He shared that he produced a weekly report to provide the board with information. Participant 4 shared a similar strategy. “If a board member asks for a document, send it to every board member regardless of the situation. This keeps board members aware of what other members are dealing with or are interested in.” Superintendent 7 shared the process of sharing information was challenging and he did not want three board members feeling that they had more information than others. He attempted to treat all board members the same when sharing information. “I would give the board chair more information simply because the board had selected that person as the board chair but I wouldn't start trying to play favorites.”

The Hanover Research (2014) spoke to the knowledge of board members and the need to describe and define roles. A comment by Superintendent 3 supported this sentiment when he shared the need for a new superintendent to quickly “have a board retreat and establish some common understanding of expectations with the collective board.” The need to clarify roles was described by Superintendent 11 when he shared insight about building relationships with board members as well as with the district staff and the board. He felt that could make things enjoyable and draw positive people to serve on the board. “People wanted to join the team and board members wanted to join a good team.”

Superintendent 11 continued by discussing the need to create a team atmosphere where the board was viewed as colleagues. Superintendent 1 shared that he recognized

the need to bring the board together and he worked at unifying the board around a common initiative. Superintendent 11 found that supporting the board's governance structure was key to keeping a good relationship with the entire board. "The chair has a role. And don't take over the chair role. Force them back into doing what they're supposed to do." Superintendent 7 shared he attempted to treat all board members the same when sharing information. "I would give the board chair more information simply because the board had selected that person as the board chair but I wouldn't start trying to play favorites."

The discussion of politics and the board by the superintendents aligned with the Hanover Research (2014) that sighted "lone rangers who appease special interest factions rather than the public at large" (p. 4). Superintendent 1 shared a strategy he used by placing a board member who was acting different on an island to make them come back to the group. Superintendent 8 spoke to board members "being board members and always having one." He felt the boards always had one character when describing the different boards he worked with over his 26 years as a superintendent. In working with the board on a day-to-day basis Superintendent 6 shared, "You know that's a lot of what a superintendent does is manage politics as best you can and definitely try to manage egos."

The retired superintendents felt that visioning rested on the ability to communicate. The ability to communicate the vision, day-to-day workings of the district, and opportunities for success were paramount to managing the board of education. The ability to work with and manage the board of education's perception was imperative to the superintendent's success.

### **Research Question 3**

“Superintendents occupy the positional chair of authority and responsibility in their organization and the talents, strategies, and leadership they bring to the process will continue to be pivotal to the success of their organization” (Bird, Wang, & Murray, 2009, p. 150). The retired superintendents were reluctant to share examples of their impact on achievement and success in the district. Superintendent 1 shared that he felt when things went well, the credit should go to “we” and that when things went bad, the credit should go to “I” and the superintendent was the I. Superintendents reflected on increased student achievement, procuring resources, developing relationships with political leaders, and increasing engagement with the community.

### **Student Achievement**

The link between student achievement and the superintendent needs to be positively established by the leadership exhibited by the superintendent. Waters and Marzano’s working paper in 2006 found five district-level leadership responsibilities of which one was to establish nonnegotiable goals for student achievement and classroom instruction. The efforts of the superintendent show a positive relationship between school effectiveness and an emphasis on setting the direction of the organization (Deeboonmee & Ariratana, 2013). The majority of the superintendents interviewed shared that they believed the districts they served were better when they left than when they arrived. Superintendent 1 shared that sentiment and spoke of working to improve the academic performance of students, as evidenced by improved test scores, graduation and dropout rates, support of a challenging curriculum, and innovative programs for all students.

Effective superintendents understand they are the primary instructional leader for

the district and recognize the importance of student achievement and effective instructional practices (ECRA Group, 2010; Waters & Marzano, 2007). In fact, Superintendent 7 responded, “I don’t know how successful I was. I had pretty high goals of what I wanted to do. We hit some, we did not hit a lot of others.” Superintendent 6 recognized the value of school leadership: “I empowered principals, who in turn empowered students, and the students were most successful. The growth we had, the test scores, we were top two in North Carolina.”

### **Procuring Resources**

Carter and Cunningham (1997) are often quoted in describing the management responsibilities of a superintendent regarding the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century era, where the superintendent focused on the four Bs: bonds, buses, budgets, and buildings (p. 23). Today, managerial leadership of a superintendent requires a multifaceted lens that has the ability to shift with the day-to-day demands of the superintendent’s job. Bredeson (1996) conducted a study of superintendents in a large midwestern state regarding their involvement with curriculum development and instructional leadership. He solicited survey responses from 397 superintendents and received responses from 326 regarding their roles in curriculum development and instructional leadership. The most frequent response (37.4%) was instructional support. The support was evidenced by providing financial, personnel, and material resources; system support; psychological support; and encouragement to schools.

Superintendent 4 discussed the importance of working through program evaluations, utilizing financial resources for capital and operating needs, developing relationships with the employees, and academic achievement. Superintendent 4 felt one of his significant accomplishments was managing the budget crisis of the great recession

and continuing to improve academic achievement: “One thing I felt good about was that we, after we had cut budgets and cut people, we still had a focus on academics.”

Superintendent 4 shared that during his tenure, all academic measures improved on a year-to-year basis including the graduation and dropout rate: “My commitment was to make absolutely sure that even though we were cutting, cutting, cutting, cutting we would not lose focus”; he learned “that money wasn't everything to get academic achievements up. I mean it goes a long way. But you've got to have dedicated, qualified people leading the show in the classrooms.”

The importance of managerial leadership was highlighted by Cuban (1988) when he discussed the range of responsibilities of superintendents as the chief administrators. The need to manage finances, the physical plant, and district organization is a critical role of the superintendent. The ability to successfully garner community support for passing bond issues was noted. Superintendent 8 said, “Working to pass a \$150 million bond issue. People said I was crazy that we can never do that and it passed 70% [approval].” Superintendent 10 felt “one concrete and measurable” evidence of his success was a bond issue: “I’m really proud of the \$175 million bond issue that we sold [to the public] and passed. It wasn't easy and I was in a political environment that made it more difficult.”

Superintendent 4 repeated a similar story regarding a bond issue of \$79 million in 2011:

One thing I did that I was told I was making a crucial mistake. Everybody said I was a fool to do it because it would never pass. It would be one of the first bond failures in the county and define my superintendency. We passed it with 80%, one of highest approval ratings.

A fiscally responsible superintendent must have full understanding of how finances operate, how to allocate funds to accomplish strategic priorities, and how to

anticipate the changes in funding (Edwards, 2007). Superintendent 12 spoke of developing mobile learning in 2006, before anyone else in North Carolina, and the need to identify resources for the initiative. Superintendent 12 supported the need to drive technology by stating,

When I took over and we started looking at some options. We did a smart phone initiative before smartphones were in people's hands basically. It sent a message across the community and we engaged our business leaders. The initiative was funded through Qualcomm Inc. out of San Diego, California.

Superintendent 12 described how the president and founder of Qualcomm made it a priority to be a part of the project. He would use the corporate jet to fly in to the local airport.

Everybody [was] in awe because you know people like that don't just show up in southeastern North Carolina. It kind of gave people this idea of “oh, we can do something. We can do more than just the bare minimum.” (Superintendent 12)

The bigger impact than the dollars was a shift in the district culture.

We built this culture around trying something different. It's OK, it won't be perfect. We're going to hit some bumps along the road. But it's OK because we're giving our kids an opportunity to do something different and they deserve it. (Superintendent 12)

### **Developing Relationships with Political Leaders and Increased Engagement with the Community**

To be effective, superintendents must bargain and build coalitions within the district: with the school board, central office, unions, school leaders, and teachers. But because leverage over these groups is limited, and because change within the

district sometimes requires injections of financial and political resources from outside, the superintendent must sometimes also bargain for support from actors outside the district, including the mayor and city government, business, higher education, cultural institutions, state officials, and parents. (Hill & Jochim, 2018, p. 3)

Superintendent 8 shared when discussing the means and methods to completing a strategic plan that he felt it was easy to have people excited and discussing a plan in September through December:

We'll see how serious everybody is come budget time. So this is the strategy, this is the vision this community wants. If we're going to get there, it's going to cost this much. I said, we can't go from here to there. What's a reasonable start?

He was proud to add that they received a 13% increase in that first year and a commitment from the commissioners to work to the total funding over a 5-year period. Superintendent 7 was excited to mention the “Say Yes to Education” campaign that raised \$40 million for scholarships: “We were able to help so many young people when they graduated from high school to receive last dollar tuition scholarships.”

“A skilled superintendent will understand the need to identify the external forces and groups that relate to the school district, and the superintendent’s commitment to include these groups must be genuine” (Edwards, 2007, p. 65). Kowalski (1999) discussed that a superintendent must recognize the different members of a community and develop plans that meet the needs of the school district while being respectful of the education and community values. A superintendent must work to communicate effectively with all groups within that community, and the focus should be on students and their success (Edwards, 2007). The schools of today have made the superintendent’s



responsibilities more demanding and complex.

### **Lessons Learned**

One of the invaluable by-products of the study was to provide insight by retired superintendents into what they learned over the course of their tenure as superintendent. As noted in the limitations section of this dissertation, the researcher currently serves as a superintendent for one of the 10 largest districts in North Carolina and found these 10 precepts to be true and valuable.

#### **1. “You make false friends and true enemies” (Superintendent 6).**

Superintendents find themselves in a position where everyone wants something and it becomes difficult to discern individuals’ true motives. Outspoken opponents are vocal and often detract from the positive progress a district is experiencing. Superintendent 6 found people were more interested in their own benefit than that of a child. It was a foreign concept to her, and she found many perceived friends would be her first naysayers when a decision did not benefit them.

**2. All boards have challenges; if you cannot deal with it, you should not have the job.** Superintendent 9 in a follow-up meeting spoke to a group of current superintendents about the recent November elections: “So, how did Tuesday go?” One of the superintendents shared how a difficult board member had not been reelected, and another superintendent stated he had traded one problem for another. Superintendent 9 responded, “Gentlemen, you will always have one. Even though you lost that bad one, one of the others will fill the slot that is just the way it is.” The group was silent, and Superintendent 9 said, “Just the voice of 25 years of experience.”

**3. People who serve in education are not always interested in keeping children first.**

It's when the adults lose sight of who they are there for. I would often have a phrase with teachers that said, "Your decision making and your input right now is what's in the best interest of you and your colleagues in the Math Department. That's not how it works." And in so many words that pisses me off and that isn't right because you're getting paid not to feather your own nest but to take care of kids. You've lost sight of that. (Superintendent 11).

#### **4. You are not sure who you can trust.**

I think the biggest thing that surprised me was people that I saw in positions of leadership. I am talking about a few board members here and primarily though the commissioners and some other politicians, some state legislators – their duplicity. They would say one thing to you and something to another group and then something else to another group and just knowing who to trust sometimes is really tough, particularly with not so much the people that work in the schools that were your colleagues, but the people that you had to interact with.

(Superintendent 5)

**5. They all end.** Superintendent 2 shared a note he received when being named superintendent from a mentor who was a retired superintendent in North Carolina:

Congratulations on your appointment as superintendent. Think about the children every day and remember who you are and you'll do fine. And by the way, we'll talk when it is over. Because it will end, they all end. Sincerely, "John." The three lessons are: you got to think about the kids because it's damn near impossible to do so when you're the superintendent. You got to remember who you are what you stand for and you have to go in knowing it is going to end. And what "John" did not say, that I learned quickly, is they all end and whether it

looks different to the public or not, they all end badly. It's true they might look real clean and pretty on the outside; but the fact that it ended is bad. So that advice was absolutely spot on.

**6. Being a good communicator means being a good listener first.** Covey (1989) wrote, “seek first to understand, then be understood” (p. 237). The skill mentioned by the superintendents as the area of growth was listening. The participants believed one thing that goes hand in hand with being a good communicator is being a good listener. As a high school principal, Superintendent 5 felt he was able to listen to different stakeholders and sift through the data gathered. He would develop common themes. As he became a superintendent, Superintendent 5 capitalized on the ability to “listen to what people had to say and sort of put that into common themes and narrow it down.” Many identified struggling to find the time to be in a position to listen. “One of the things that I would certainly do differently; I would have spent more time out in the community with folks that I cared about in terms of their opinions” (Superintendent 2). Superintendent 2 continued that the job demands you work a lot, and your calendar is full. You have intentions to get out of the building, but the volume of other urgent issues that arises makes you never make it out. “When I did make it out, it tended to be more the events that I needed to attend. I didn't purposefully go out spend time one-on-one with people that I believed had the best interest of the community and the schools in their heart on a regular basis.”

Listening is a critical skill to master for a superintendent. As Superintendent 7 shared, “trying to make myself available to listen and learn from others.” Superintendent 4 emphasized, “what I learned to do was keep my mouth shut and listen and try to be responsive in some form or fashion [to] the needs of the county and the employees.”

**7. “Where you stand depends on where you sit” (Miles, 1978, p. 399).**

Superintendent 10 used this statement to describe dealing with people inside and outside his organization: “You will find a person expressing a complex argument or upset about an issue and wonder why. You will then learn of how the decision or problem is effecting them and realize that is the source of their behavior.” Rufus E. Miles, Jr. served in several presidential administrations including Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson; and he authored a paper in *Public Administration Review*, 1978, describing the origins of his quote:

The basic lesson of Miles' Law was that there was no such thing as pure objectivity in the arena of budgeting or public policy making in general. Every person has a function to perform and that assigned responsibility markedly influences one's judgment. Examples of Miles' Law abound. Not surprisingly, the more conscious one becomes of its operation, the more frequently its effects are noticed. (p. 400)

Perspective is difficult to maintain. You must be willing to see the situation from multiple sides and evaluate all the options. Superintendent 9 related a skill that came from his teaching experience:

I think I was successful because I can analyze and solve problems. And that was a lot of good background. I actually attribute some of my science work and physics study. It just sort of a little more analytical. And I think I was good at that.

Superintendent 8 shared, “I was always able to check my ego and I think that's where some of our colleagues get in trouble. That they will pick any hill to die on. That you've got to win every battle.”

**8. Being too loyal to individuals may keep you from making decisions that are in the best interest of moving the district forward.** Good leaders hold teammates accountable both for their personal behavior and for strategic outcomes and create an environment where individuals have ownership and interest in the organization succeeding. Accountability means you let people know where they stand, providing an honest assessment of not only what they do but how they do it.

Superintendent 9 felt that

in education we are hesitant to face poor performance. We will move people around and give them a chance. I think that sometimes with the people that are inside the organization we give them almost way too many chances, we tolerate a lot of poor performance before we're willing to act.

**9. Make the hard and right decisions, even when they are not popular.**

Superintendents are in a position where they are perceived to be in control and able to make the rules, at least when it comes to the day-to-day operation of the schools. They can and are expected to set goals and expectations for their team and the system. They can hire, fire, promote, or demote employees. They can add or eliminate programs. As Ralph Waldo Emerson said,

Whatever course you decide upon, there is always someone to tell you that you are wrong. There are always difficulties arising which tempt you to believe that your critics are right. To map out a course of action and follow it to an end requires courage. (Knell, 2017, p. 1)

**10. Be first and foremost true to yourself.** Superintendent 6 spoke to receiving advice as she became a superintendent from a retired superintendent:

He said, "You be yourself. Not everybody will like you. Not everybody will hate

you, but you be yourself.” And I was 53, getting ready to be 54 when I became superintendent and I was pretty comfortable in my own skin. That advice made the most sense of anything to me.

### **Delimitations and Limitations of the Study**

While minimal, there are two identified delimitations of this proposed study. Foremost, the researcher is a current superintendent in North Carolina. Second, the researcher has worked in North Carolina public schools for more than 20 years.

Retired superintendents may have been inactive in the public school arena since retirement. The amount of time between retirement and the interview could impact the recollections and perceptions of their experiences within their respective districts and therefore be reflected in the interview. The limitation of being a retired North Carolina superintendent may or may not make the information less relevant on a national basis. There are a number of other variables which were not utilized as determining factors in the study to include gender; age; race; years of experience as a superintendent; level of education; and rural, suburban, or urban school district. For deeper research and exploration of data, the participant pool of 12 could be expanded to a greater number.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of retired superintendents who served in North Carolina public schools and the reflective thoughts they have amassed regarding leadership traits which contribute to success. The hope was to gather findings that could benefit new superintendents and aspiring superintendents. The interviews yielded “real life” perspectives on serving as a superintendent and the demands faced by individuals who served as superintendents.

The role of the superintendent is one that is ever evolving and changing. The

landscape today is different from the landscape of 5, 10, and 20 years ago. The future research could explore several areas identified in the findings of this report.

The reflections gathered regarding superintendent relationships with school boards is an area that future study would benefit. The participants cited the change in the types of board members serving, the qualifications, and motivations. A future study could explore the experience and qualifications of school board members over the past 50 years.

In addition, the past 10 years have seen an increase in the number of board elections that are required by North Carolina general statute to be partisan. The participants discussed issues that had existed in past elections related to party politics but felt the influence was greater now that members filed by party affiliation. A future study could explore the impact of partisan politics on the public school board environment and leadership.

The literature related to nontraditional superintendents has begun to grow, but there is opportunity for further exploration. Organizations such as the Broad Foundation are preparing nontraditional candidates as well as some university programs. Future research could investigate the tenure and impact of nontraditional superintendents.

The researcher learned during the interviews of the varying undergraduate degrees the 12 retired superintendents had completed. The background of superintendents prior to entering school administration is an area that could be studied. A researcher could see if a certain type of educator was more prominent than others and explore the traits and attributes that may lead to these individuals becoming superintendents.

Research could be conducted with a change in the defined variables. A researcher could interview retired superintendents in other states and explore the same interview

questions. A researcher could continue the study in North Carolina but utilize demographic, ethnicity, or gender as differentiating factors.

What is important is to continue the study of the superintendent role. Today, we see educators entering the administrator role at a younger age and with less experience. As Superintendent 3 stated, “from what I see, the challenges are getting greater and greater and the people seem to be less competent or less developed overall.” The need to provide current information regarding the superintendent role is critical.

### **Conclusion**

Leaders need to be able to set goals and expectations. Without the ability to clearly communicate goals and expectations in a way that is understood, little will get accomplished. In fact, unless one is a good communicator, it is unlikely that he/she will be successful developing relationships or building trust within his/her organization. It is impossible to inspire people without articulating the vision in a clear, concise, and confident manner.

The role of a 21<sup>st</sup> century educator is changing at a rapid pace, and the demands of serving as a superintendent continue to grow. The concerns about qualified and capable candidates seeking the position of superintendent are highlighted in trade journals and news reports. Despite the increasingly challenging environment, the retired superintendents believed that their contributions made a difference to the children they served and the communities in which they lived, and this realization brought a real sense of satisfaction and accomplishment. As Superintendent 5 remarked,

It is a tough but fulfilling job. But I will tell you this and you won't realize this until you're retired but it's very satisfying to see things that are going on in the school district and you know that happened on your watch or started on your



watch. It is still in place and it's grown. And you'll see your successor take it and carry it forward even further. But I see things all the time and hear things all the time that I know that started on my watch and that's satisfying to me. These things that started were either my ideas or the ideas of my staff who I was smart enough to cut loose and get out of their way.

The 12 superintendents interviewed by this researcher left their mark on public education in North Carolina. In reviewing and pondering the lessons learned by these retired superintendents, a quote by Art Williams came to mind and is something that I currently remind my senior leaders – “I’m not telling you it’s going to be easy, I’m telling you it’s going to be worth it” (Hyatt, 2015, p. 1). Public education needs articulate, visionary leaders who are able to inspire others to focus on the reason one chooses education – to make a difference in the lives of children – and that is worth it.

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## Appendix A

### Email to Participant Regarding Participation

## Dissertation Interview

From: William J. Booker (wjbooker@bellsouth.net)

To:

Date: Sunday, October 21, 2018, 9:46 PM EDT

Good evening,

Thank you for taking the time to speak with me about my pursuit of a doctoral degree in education leadership. In order to perform my research, I am interviewing individual former superintendents. I am attaching three documents to this email:

- A) The Participant Consent Form for Gardner-Webb University IRB
- B) Background questionnaire
- C) Interview questions

### **The Participant Consent Form for Gardner-Webb University IRB**

The attached Participant Consent Form for Gardner-Webb University IRB requires you to execute a copy as evidence of your consent to participate. You will read the document contains a description of step one being a review of the North Carolina Superintendent Evaluation Process. In working with my dissertation chair, Dr. Stephen Laws, I will not be utilizing that instrument. Instead, a background information sheet containing six questions has been developed.

### **Background questionnaire**

I am asking that you complete the background sheet and provide it to me prior to our interview. This will allow me to begin compiling the information and facilitate the interview discussion.

### **Interview questions**

The interview questions are provided to enable you to be familiar with the content of the interview.

I recognize you are busy and I appreciate you sharing your time and knowledge with me. I look forward to our interview.

Jeff



Booker IRB \_ September 3 2018.docx

15.8kB



Background Questionnaire\_ Booker Dissertation.docx

11.9kB



Interview questions\_Booker Dissertation.docx

13.4kB

Appendix B  
Participation Consent Form

Participant Consent Form  
Gardner-Webb University IRB  
Informed Consent Form

Title: Wisdom gained in the Superintendency: A study of leadership skills retired superintendents wished they had possessed as a new superintendent.

Researcher:  
William Jeffrey Booker  
Candidate, Doctor of Education

**Purpose**

The purpose of this study is to examine the experiences of retired superintendents who served in North Carolina public schools and the reflective thoughts they have amassed regarding leadership traits which are contributory to success (or nonnegotiables for success). Additionally, this study seeks to explore the potential development of lessons learned through the experiences of the retired superintendents.

**Procedure**

Upon approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Gardner Webb University, this research will be conducted among retired superintendents who served in the North Carolina public schools. Up to twelve retired superintendents will be interviewed.

Participants will be contacted in person or through the use of an online meeting product to discuss the purpose of the research and to explain the qualitative case study process. The participants will be asked give their consent to participate in the study.

The data collection process will be as follows:

1. Following the initial contact, all participants will be given a copy of the North Carolina Superintendent Evaluation Process. Participants will be asked to review the Superintendent Summary Evaluation Worksheet found on page 21 of the document. The worksheet provides an overview of the framework of the evaluation process and the seven areas of the evaluation.
2. Following the distribution of the North Carolina Superintendent Evaluation Process to all participants, the researcher will conduct and record individual interviews with all retired superintendents.
3. Interview data will be outsourced to a transcriptionist to be transcribed into print form.
4. Once in print form, data will be analyzed for common themes or experiences. Data will be delineated into manageable themes correlating to the research questions. The analyzed qualitative case study data will be used to answer the three research questions. The Leadership themes will be identified.

**Time Required**

It is anticipated that the study will require about 90 minutes of your time. The review of the North Carolina Superintendent Evaluation Process may take 30 minutes to review. The individual interview is estimated to take no longer than 60 minutes.

**Voluntary Participation**

Participation in this study is voluntary. You have the right to withdraw from the research study at any time without penalty. You also have the right to refuse to answer any question(s) for any reason without penalty. If you choose to withdraw, you may request that any of your data which has been collected be destroyed unless it is in a de-identified state.

**Confidentiality**

The information that you give in the study will be handled confidentially. Your information will be assigned a code. The list connecting your name to this code will be kept in a secure location. The audio files and the transcription of the audio files will also be kept in this location. When the study is completed and the data have been analyzed, all information in the secure location will be destroyed. Your name will not be used in any report.

**Risks**

There are no anticipated risks in this study.

**Benefits**

There are no direct benefits associated with participation in this study. The study may provide insights from retired superintendents that may benefit future North Carolina public school superintendents. The reflective thoughts and lessons learned may aid in the preparation of superintendents. The Institutional Review Board at Gardner-Webb University has determined that participation in this study poses minimal risk to participants.

**Payment**

You will receive no payment for participating in the study.

**Right to Withdraw From the Study**

You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. If you choose to withdraw from the study, your audio (or video) tape will be destroyed. If you want to withdraw from the study during the interview process, tell the interviewer to stop the interview. There is no penalty for withdrawing. If you would like to withdraw after your materials have been submitted, please contact William Jeffrey Booker.

**If you have questions about the study, contact the following individuals.**

William Jeffrey Booker  
 Department of Education  
 Gardner-Webb University  
 Boiling Springs, NC 28017  
 XXXXXXXX

Dr. Steve Laws  
 Department of Education  
 Gardner-Webb University  
 Boiling Springs, NC 28017  
 XXXXXXXX

**If the research design of the study necessitates that its full scope is not explained prior to participation, it will be explained to you after completion of the study. If you have concerns about your rights or how you are being treated, or if you have questions, want more information, or have suggestions, please contact the IRB Institutional Administrator listed below.**

Dr. Sydney K. Brown  
 IRB Institutional Administrator  
 Gardner-Webb University  
 Boiling Springs, NC 28017  
 XXXXXXXXXXXX

**Voluntary Consent by Participant**

I have read the information in this consent form and fully understand the contents of this document. I have had a chance to ask any questions concerning this study and they have been answered for me.

- \_\_\_\_\_ I agree to participate in the confidential survey.  
 \_\_\_\_\_ I do not agree to participate in the confidential survey.  
 \_\_\_\_\_ I agree to participate in the interview session(s). I understand that this interview may be audio recorded for purposes of accuracy. The audio recording will be transcribed and destroyed.  
 \_\_\_\_\_ I do not agree to participate in the interview session(s).

\_\_\_\_\_  
 Participant Printed Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
 Participant Signature

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

You will receive a copy of this form for your records.

Appendix C

Background Questionnaire

Thank you for agreeing to participate in the case study for my dissertation. As we discussed, the topic relates to retired superintendent's experiences and what they wished they had known when they first became superintendents. You have two documents. The first is a series of background questions for you to complete prior to the interview. The second document is the interview questions so you may review them prior to our interview.

Background Questions:

What is your educational background? Please list degrees and institutions.

How old were you when you first became superintendent?

(<30) (30-35) (36-40) (41-45) (46-50) (51-55) (56-60) (61>)

What was your professional work experience prior to becoming a superintendent?

What was the position you were serving in previous to being first hired as a superintendent?

Please list each district you served as superintendent. Please include for how many years you served, the student enrollment, any demographics you recall, and if you would describe the respective district as rural, urban, or suburban.

How long has it been since you retired?



## Appendix D

### Interview Questions

### Interview Questions

- 1) As you reflect on your first superintendency:
  - a. What surprised you?
  - b. What advice were you given that was most helpful?
  - c. What is the lesson you would want to share with a new superintendent?
- 2) What leadership traits do you think were:
  - a. your strengths?
  - b. your weakness?
- 3) As you reflect, can you determine what leadership traits were necessary for your success as a superintendent?
- 4) How did you set goals and expectations for the district?
- 5) How did you communicate the goals and expectations for the district?
- 6) What was your most significant achievement as a superintendent?
- 7) What was your lowest point as a superintendent?
- 8) What was your “sword” you were willing to “die” on as a person serving as a superintendent?
- 9) What was your experience like with the Board of Education of the district (s) your served as superintendent?
- 10) What is something that if you went back you would do differently?
- 11) What is something that if you went back you would do the same?
- 12) Were there any factors that you feel contributed to your longevity as a superintendent?
- 13) How do you think the role of the superintendent has changed from when you first became a superintendent to today?
- 14) Is there anything else you would like to add?