

A CASE STUDY OF THE EXPERIENCES OF BEGINNING SUPERINTENDENTS

by

Devron Furr

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Approved By:

Dr. Walter Hart

Dr. Scarlett Zhang

Dr. Jamie Kudlats

Dr. David Pugalee

ABSTRACT

DEVRON FURR. A Case Study of the Experiences of Beginning Superintendents
(Under the direction of DR. WALTER HART.)

Superintendent turnover in the state of North Carolina is a concern. Through a qualitative multiple case study, the researcher's goal in conducting this study was to explore the lived experiences of eight first-year superintendents in North Carolina. Using Hambrick and Fukutomi's (1991) concept of the seasons of a chief executive officer's tenure, this study explored participants' pathways to the superintendency and professional and personal challenges while in the role. Additionally, this study sought further understanding of participants' priorities, successes, and mistakes, along with advice they had for aspiring superintendents.

Eight semi-structured interviews were used to gather data for this study. To identify themes from the eight interviews, data were analyzed using a constant comparison analysis (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). The findings of the study align with existing literature about the experiences of superintendents. Common themes from the eight participants illuminated the importance of a productive partnership with the board of education, professional relationships with stakeholders, and the need for professional networking. Additionally, participants commonly felt a sense of professional isolation and struggled to maintain work-life balance. Implications and recommendations included the need to ensure aspiring superintendents closely consider the alignment between their goals and dispositions and those of the board for which they may work. Additionally, networking and long-range planning were emphasized along with proactive measures to address the social and emotional needs of those serving in highly demanding superintendent positions.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my grandfather Thaddeus Furr, grandmother Helen Norris, father Colonel Kenneth Furr, my mother Celia Furr, my daughter Isabella Furr, my daughter Maisie Furr, my teachers Gary Moran and Cathy Senter.

Pop – You helped shape me into the person I am today. You taught me to have patience and goodwill toward everyone. I learned the value of earning a dollar and the importance of thinking differently than others.

Grandmother- Thank you for all your love and support through the years. You are a true matriarch, and you did things your way.

Dad – I am very proud to have you as my father. I learned the importance of ambition, excellence, taking risks, and serving our country. You also taught me the value of education. It is the one thing no one can take from you.

Mom – Thank you for always loving and believing in me even when I make mistakes. I learned the importance of being compassionate, respectful of everyone, and outgoing. You taught me to always have a friend group and to not exclude anyone.

Bella – I love you so much. You have taught me to be patient and understanding. I'm very proud of you. Thanks for putting up with my dad jokes.

Maisie – I love you and I'm very proud of you. Thank you for putting up with the long days and shortened weekends so that I could finish my doctorate.

Gary Moran/Cathy Senter – As much as I disliked school, you made learning meaningful and engaging. You were my favorite teachers. I learned tremendously from both of you. You saw something in me that others didn't, for which I will always be grateful.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

NCDPI North Carolina Department of Public Instruction

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

OVERVIEW

The role of the school district superintendent is very complex and rife with potential pitfalls and challenges. From heightened emphasis on state test scores to growing public oversight, the job of the superintendent has become increasingly more demanding (Hutchings & Brown, 2020; Short & Scribner, 2002). Therefore, the first year someone serves as a superintendent is especially important because it sets the tone for the district and creates the opportunity for the new leader to establish the credibility and trust needed to be successful in this arduous role (Muller, 2003). As such, most first-year superintendents feel an intense need to successfully solidify their role as the school district leader (Taylor, 2019).

There is a growing area of concern regarding the longevity of superintendents. Superintendent longevity and experience are critical to a school system's success because superintendents are expected to guide processes that enhance student learning and establish community support for schools (Cullotta, 2008). Therefore, superintendent turnover can be detrimental to school systems. When superintendents leave, school districts may experience instability and uncertainty. The continuity of programs can be disrupted, and other experienced leaders may also choose to exit the district (Cullotta, 2008).

According to Hart et al. (2022), North Carolina is increasingly seeing an exodus of experienced superintendents and a decrease in the overall tenure of superintendents. The largest number of North Carolina's superintendents in the 2020-2021 school year were serving in their first year as a superintendent. Specifically, 17 superintendents, representing nearly 15% of the state's superintendents, were in their first year in the role. In that same year, 70% of all North Carolina superintendents had completed five or fewer years of experience as a superintendent.

By contrast, only 12 of the state's 115 superintendents (10.4%) had completed more than 10 years in the role. Furthermore, there was a notable decrease in the number of superintendents with more than 30 years of service. Apparently, superintendents were retiring more readily when they completed the state-required 30 years of service for a full pension than in previous decades (Hart et al., 2022).

This inexperience among superintendents is increasing as recent communication with Jack Hoke, Executive Director of the North Carolina School Superintendents Association, revealed that the number of first-year superintendents grew to 25 (22% of all superintendents) for the 2022-2023 school year (J. Hoke, personal communication, September 26, 2022). This frequent turnover in the superintendency has almost become expected, causing some to view the position as a temporary assignment (Buchanan, 2006; Clark, 2001).

Various factors affect the exit of experienced superintendents. The retirement of the baby boomer generation and other factors have made the tenure of superintendents much lower (Grissom & Anderson, 2012). Much of this exodus of superintendents is attributed to various challenges that school leaders face in a dynamic and ever-changing world. Superintendents must contend with a highly dynamic and fluid job where the methods that used to work very effectively may no longer be viable (Buchanan, 2006). Superintendents face challenges in many forms, often dealing with controversial and politically charged issues that make the high-profile job incredibly stressful (Grissom & Anderson, 2012).

The superintendent has sometimes been socialized to accept individualistic behaviors that cause them to not be collaborative as leaders and is seen at times as the figurehead of a school district, often far removed from the practical day-to-day operations of a district (Dunn, 2001; Kowalski & Brunner, 2011). According to Kowalski and Brunner (2011), the superintendent in

the past was often viewed as someone to complain to when things were not working properly in the district or as a political figure who delegated and relegated control of the district to subordinates who did the real work. However, the role of the superintendent is critical to the success of students, teachers, and community stakeholders. For example, the superintendent sets the priorities and goals for the district in coordination with the school board. Superintendents, commonly in coordination with their hiring teams, also put people in charge of schools and critical functions within the district. These people then run schools and coordinate multiple facets of districts (Kowalski & Brunner, 2011).

Superintendents impact students' education, and quality education affects nearly everything in cities and communities (Marzano & Waters, 2009). For example, Brimley et al. (2016) noted that educated individuals enjoy a broader range of job opportunities and higher wages than their less well-educated counterparts. Quality education produces a healthier society, more informed voters, and a more productive workforce (Brimley et al., 2016). By contrast, according to the Justice Policy Institute (2007) on Education and Public Safety, failing school districts contribute to an escalation of crime, hopelessness, economic downturns, and lack of opportunity affecting everyone in the community. Therefore, school districts must ensure that schools are staffed with excellent leaders and teachers to prevent students from falling behind academically (Justice Policy Institute, 2007).

According to Mullford (2003), poor leadership from principals often hired by the superintendent creates an environment that highly effective teachers often want to avoid. Teachers hired by ineffective principals often leave after only a few years due to multiple factors associated with bad leadership. Moreover, poor principals employed by ineffective superintendents are less likely to pick up on or do their due diligence to vet out ineffective

teachers. This is true of hiring poor-quality teachers and addressing ineffective teaching within the school (Mullford, 2003).

Mullford (2003) further noted that this dysfunction contributes to a poor climate and culture within a school that further degrades learning. Taken together, students who are not appropriately educated and do not have a sense of belonging or attachment within the school are more likely to drop out prematurely. Undereducated former students very quickly find themselves without the means to support themselves due to a lack of proper education and thus experience a lack of opportunity. Additionally, students lacking literary skills find it difficult to get or perform jobs (Green & Sloan, 1994, pp. 274-275). This continues the cycle of poorly educated students who will struggle in the future due to poorly led schools that do not address students' academic needs (Taylor, 2019).

However, highly effective superintendents who are adequately trained and ready for the job can transform whole communities (Marzano & Waters, 2009). A highly effective superintendent can make decisions that improve schools in the district and create opportunities for students to learn, putting the community on the right track for improvement. By improving schools, an upward spiral ensues where students stay in school. The district becomes a place where parents want to put their students. This, in turn, causes more people to move into the school district. This may improve families' engagement with schools. More parental involvement in schools and outstanding leadership create schools where highly effective teachers also want to be. Thus, teaching effectiveness and a strong sense of belonging within schools increase. This will reduce dropouts and increase the high school cohort graduation rate (Marzano & Waters, 2009).

As students are better prepared, they are more likely to be successful following high school, whether they enter the workforce or higher education. Also, students who attain higher degrees have more earning power than those who graduate from high school (Vilario, 2016). Thus, the importance of the position of superintendent cannot be overstated.

Statement of the Problem

As the leaders of school districts, superintendents play one of the most prominent and vital roles in communities. School districts employ thousands of people and are responsible for educating thousands of students. Decisions made within school districts have far-reaching effects on students' academic achievement and the overall well-being of communities. An effective superintendent with a stable tenure can make a big difference in a school district's academic success and stakeholders' perceptions of its effectiveness (Pascopella, 2011).

A growing concern is the heightening turnover of superintendents in recent years, resulting in more novice superintendents. Between 1975 and 1999, the average tenure of a superintendent nationwide was between six and seven years (Sparks, 2012). More recently, the average tenure for school superintendents has become surprisingly short (Williams et al. 2019, pp 1-2). According to data compiled by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI), twenty-six superintendents (representing 17% of superintendents) in North Carolina were in their first or second year as a superintendent during the 2020-2021 school year. In that same year in North Carolina, 69 superintendents (60%) out of 115 were in their first three years in the role (Hart et al., 2022). This inexperience can be further illustrated by the researcher's firsthand knowledge of Stanly County Schools (North Carolina), a district that has experienced four superintendents over the past seven years.

High rates of superintendent turnover can be detrimental to school districts. Having different superintendents so often contributes to teacher and principal uncertainty (Hoyle et al., 2005). High turnover can cause the district to lack stability and overall vision as each new superintendent brings unique goals and perspectives about what it means to be successful within the district (Williams et al., 2019, p. 3). Also, the constant churn of new superintendents can create a stagnant feeling within the district and negatively affect staff morale (Williams et al., 2019, p. 3). School district employees with a sense of apathy or who may be generally ineffective may believe they can continue to do what they have done with little consequence. After all, the feeling is that all they need to do is wait, and the next leader will come in, and they get to start over (Hoyle et al., 2005).

As turnover in the superintendency has resulted in many inexperienced superintendents, it is essential to understand the experiences of first-year superintendents. Gaining insight into the challenges, successes, and strategies beginning superintendents use to administer their districts effectively may provide guidance and support for those who serve in the role. Also, giving voice to these novice leaders may help to create conditions that promote more stability in the superintendency. While some research has broadly examined the superintendency, the literature that specifically addresses the unique challenges associated with starting in the role is sparse.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to give voice to the experiences of first-year school district superintendents. Specifically, the researcher sought to explore challenges facing novice superintendents and their strategies to navigate difficult situations during their initial year in the position. The insights gained through this study led to recommendations for practice while adding to the literature.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this exploratory, qualitative study:

1. What do first-time school district superintendents in North Carolina perceive to be the significant challenges they faced during their first year in the position?
2. What do first-time school district superintendents in North Carolina perceive to be the significant successes they had in their first year in the position?
3. What do first-time school district superintendents in North Carolina perceive to be the significant mistakes they made in their first year in the position?
4. What strategies do first-time school district superintendents in North Carolina implement to promote the likelihood of success during their first year in the position?
5. What advice do first-time school district superintendents in North Carolina offer to others who are beginning in the role?

Significance of the Study

Research reveals that the role expectations for superintendents have changed since Buffalo, New York appointed its first superintendent in 1837 to ensure that schools ran efficiently (Carter & Cunningham, 1997). As reform efforts broadened the role to include instructional leadership, student academic achievement, and organizational efficiency, the role became more complex (Kowalski, 2013). Chingo et al. (2014) noted that superintendents receive tremendous credit when student test scores are high and just as much blame when they are not, with this emphasis on test outcomes resulting in some superintendents being forced out of their jobs. Despite the focus on high-stakes student testing, the most significant challenge they face is that superintendents are highly visible people charged with negotiating through bitterly

competing political interests (Glass et al., 2000). As a result, many school districts find it difficult to retain their superintendents (Kowalksi, 2003; Lamkin, 2006).

Existing research reveals that the number of inexperienced school district superintendents is rising and will continue to increase (Hart et al., 2022). More districts are being administered by superintendents who lack the institutional knowledge and familiarity in the role that fosters successful leadership. Given the critical role that superintendents play in schools and communities and the need to have more stability within the superintendent ranks, it is crucial to fully understand the circumstances that impact the experiences of beginning superintendents. If district success is affected by superintendent longevity and districts struggle to keep superintendents long-term, analyzing the experiences of novice superintendents is a salient issue.

Therefore, this research explored the successes, challenges, and strategies associated with operating a school district during a superintendent's first year. This topic was worthy of doctoral research given its salient nature and the fact that much of the existing literature fails to examine the experiences of novice superintendents specifically. This research can contribute to existing literature by solely focusing on superintendents with the least experience. Additionally, it has practical significance. Information from this study may inform the policies and practices of boards of education as they choose and interact with their superintendents. It may also inform university training programs and other professional development opportunities for superintendents. Hopefully, this study will also help novice superintendents make excellent decisions and have better operational understanding to succeed in their roles.

Conceptual Framework

This study is shaped through a conceptual framework developed by Hambrick and Fukutomi (1991) in their study about the seasons of a chief executive officer's tenure.

Specifically, they found that there are stages to a chief executive officer's effectiveness (called "seasons") that correspond to longevity in the role. The researchers found that these seasons give rise to distinct patterns of executive attention and behavior. In relation to this current study, Hambrick and Fukutomi found that the beginning period of a chief executive's tenure is spent working to develop an early track record, legitimacy, and political foothold. This focus constitutes the superintendent's or CEO's marching orders, aligns with the competencies that earned them the job, and provides the potential for demonstrating early efficiency as beginning leaders are under extreme pressure to perform (Hambrick & Fukutomi, 1991).

This framework formed the lens through which the interview questions were developed and the data were analyzed. A broader description of Hambrick and Fukutomi's framework, along with research studies about challenges facing superintendents, will be provided in Chapter 2.

Overview of Methodology

This qualitative research study used an exploratory case study design that sought to examine the experiences of novice superintendents. Qualitative research was appropriate for this endeavor because it sought in-depth understanding from the participants' perspectives as they created meaning from their lived experiences (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Purposeful sampling was used to identify eight research participants serving in their first year as a superintendent in North Carolina who had not previously served as superintendent elsewhere. The researcher conducted participant interviews during the fall of 2023, meaning that participants were in their first year of service in the role.

The researcher collaborated with the North Carolina Association of School Administrators to identify the participants for the study. The researcher included a diverse group

of participants. The researcher included participants from various regions throughout the state. Additionally, the researcher included men and women participants. The researcher could not control which districts had new superintendents or the demographics of those chosen to serve in the role. The researcher was limited to those superintendents who wanted to participate in the study.

Comprehensive, semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants to ensure a firsthand account of data collection. While a prepared set of questions was used with all participants, semi-structured interviews allowed for clarifying prompts and follow-up questions to gain additional information and clarify responses (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim to analyze the data. The researcher conducted multiple rounds of coding of the data and identified common categories and themes. A more detailed description of the methodology is provided in Chapter 3.

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

Several assumptions, limitations, and delimitations were related to this study. First, as the data were gathered via conversations with participants, it is assumed that participants responded fully, openly, and honestly. To encourage forthright responses, participants were reminded that their participation was voluntary and they would be de-identified by using pseudonyms in reporting. Also, it is assumed that the participant questions elicited responses that enabled the research questions to be examined and answered. Additionally, it is assumed that the small sample size yielded sufficiently rich data from which themes will arise.

The study was limited to a few first-year and first-time superintendents in North Carolina. Although there are many relatively inexperienced superintendents in North Carolina, the qualitative nature of this study and its specific research questions means that the focus will be on

a few first-year superintendents. While the researcher sought in-depth understanding from a few participants, the limited number of participants from one state and the fact that the data were gathered during a narrow period means that the generalizability of findings is limited. This is true of qualitative research, although the transferability of findings is not the primary goal of this study.

In addition, the researcher's biases may have served as limitations for this qualitative study. Conducting multiple rounds of coding and data analysis, keeping the focus of data analysis on the words of participants, and providing a thorough subjectivity statement that describes the researcher's positionality were used to control researcher bias.

Definition of Terms

The following terms are used throughout the study:

First-time superintendent: This term refers to any superintendent in North Carolina who has not previously served as a school district superintendent. For this study, first-time superintendents conveyed information based on their experiences in the 2023-2024 school year.

Organization of the Study

The research study is organized into five chapters. Chapter 1 provides an overview of the study, including broad issues related to the superintendency. Also included in Chapter 1 are the statement of the problem, the purpose of the study, the research questions, the rationale for the research being conducted, definitions of terms, and a brief description of the methodology. Chapter 2 reviews the related literature, establishing the context and framework for the study. This chapter explores the literature on first-time superintendents, focusing on effective leadership roles and strategies for success, issues and challenges, and preparation and support for the position. Chapter 3 will describe the proposed methodology for the study. This chapter includes a

description of and a rationale for the study's design, criteria for sample selection, the sample population, the data collection process, and data analysis. Chapter 4 displays the data collected and an analysis of data using case study and analysis. Chapter 5 summarizes the findings, their relationship to previous research, limitations of the study, implications for practice, and recommendations for the future.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The superintendency is a complex, ever-evolving occupation encompassing many different dynamics (Hutchens and Brown., 2020). The school superintendent is typically one of the most prominent leaders in a community and has a vital role in helping guide school districts to success. However, the position's challenges have contributed to decreasing tenure among superintendents (Buchanan, 2006). In today's fast-paced world, superintendents are expected to improve accountability scores with new and improved strategies. Superintendents are also expected to be excellent communicators and understand their districts well. Making the situation even more demanding is that these arduous tasks are carried out in a political context in which superintendents are expected to provide leadership to often fiercely competitive interests (Hutchens & Brown., 2020).

The history of the superintendency provides many lessons to current school leaders. Understanding how the superintendency has changed and evolved is important (Grissom & Scribner, 2012). By understanding the evolution of the role, current school leaders may gain insight into what has worked in the past and potential mistakes to avoid, as there are universal challenges that superintendents must overcome to be successful (Hart et al., 2022). Some of these challenges include maintaining good relations with the board of education and regular communication with multiple stakeholders who may have competing agendas for schools (Waters & Marzano, 2006). Superintendents also face challenges related to school academic progress or lack thereof. Superintendents are also pressured to address or fire unpopular leaders or teachers within the district (Buchanan, 2006). This may also include highly effective teachers who may not directly align with community expectations or be the warmest in the eyes of students and parents. Therefore, to inform the success of superintendents in their formidable

roles, it is essential to understand things that have been highly effective for school districts regarding the superintendency.

The following review of literature will begin with a history of the superintendency. It will then review the current demographics of superintendents nationally and in North Carolina. Next, the leadership roles of the superintendent will be explained, followed by an overview of the challenges facing superintendents. Finally, the conceptual framework that helped shape this study is described. Figure 1 summarizes the topics and research sources included in the review.

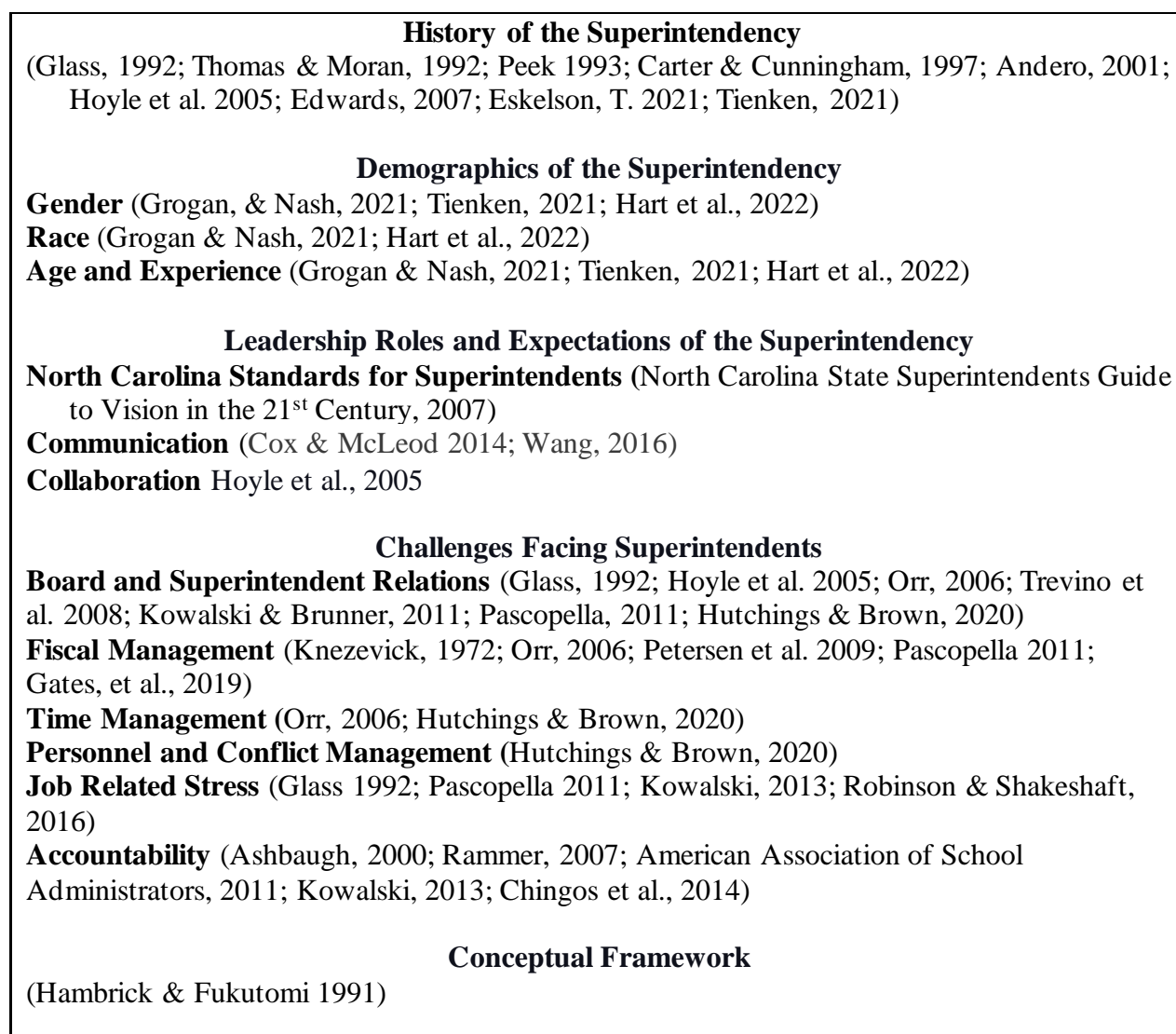


Figure 1

Identified Topics in the Literature

History of the Superintendency

Since pre-historic times, leaders have been needed in society when men and women began to group and live with others in small villages for mutual benefit and protection. Society, particularly in the early modern period, from 1500 until 1700, has benefitted from good leaders (Eskelson, 2021). The reverse can be said about poor leadership and the societal degradation that came with it.

As agriculture became more widely used, people could grow crops and not spend the majority of time gathering or hunting for food. This led to greater population, a specialization of jobs within villages, towns, and cities, and a recognition of the need to pass information on to subsequent generations. In the early modern period, kingdoms and early nation-states that embraced education had a marked advantage over those that did not. Thus, teaching and learning have existed for centuries (Eskelson, T.). Humans became more civilized as time progressed, and a need for structured education arose. Consequently, schools began to appear in Europe and many other corners of the world.

The arrival of European colonists in America did not ensure children's formal education (Glass, 1992). Instead, children who received any academic instruction during the colonial era were typically tutored by their parents or a community member with some educational expertise (Glass, 1992). This absence of formal schooling was because the focus in the early years of colonization in North Carolina was on survival rather than building schools (Glass, 1992). Indeed, North Carolina had already experienced a lost colony and had significant problems with pirates (Glass, 1992). Therefore, formal education would take a back seat to survival, and a lack of a centralized government stifled early efforts at putting together a system of education (Peek, 1993).

According to Peek (1993), there were few plans to construct schools in North Carolina during the colonial era. Many landed elite and more affluent early North Carolinians sent their children to England for education. While the Edenton and New Bern communities were the first to build public schools, state-sponsored education in North Carolina would not be endorsed until the Revolutionary War era (Peek, 1993).

The North Carolina State Constitution of 1776 provided for the education of the state's children (Peek, 1993). These schools were very simply constructed, with one room for all students in the settlement. Women would often fill the position of teacher to all students who attended school. The primary need was for students to understand how to read. This was primarily so that students could read the Bible. Some early school leaders traveled to spread the gospel (Glass, 1992). Some math and arithmetic were also taught so students understood how to count money. As settlements grew, more rooms were needed to house all the students. This led to more teachers being hired at each school, and principals were hired to provide overall leadership. As population growth caused settlements to evolve into towns and cities, the demand for education would increase (Glass, 1992).

However, North Carolina initially needed to fund education more effectively and largely had an uneducated populace (Peek, 1993). As late as 1840, nearly one in four White men and women and almost all African Americans could not read or write. North Carolina had one of the highest illiteracy rates in the Union (Peek, 1993). Thus, building more schools, particularly in higher-population areas, became necessary. The sad situation regarding the education of North Carolinians came to a head in 1825 with the introduction of the Literary Fund from the state legislature, which helped fund more school construction and teaching positions (Peek, 1993). As more schools were constructed, the need arose for oversight of these various institutions. Therefore, the North Carolina Legislature approved the Education Act of 1839, which permitted counties to raise taxes to help fund schools. This act also allowed districts to choose a group of superintendents to help create and steer school construction. This group was considered the forefather of the modern school board. Thus, as the number of schools began to increase in North

Carolina and throughout the country, the superintendent position was created so that schools could be appropriately administered.

The Buffalo, New York Common School Council recognized the need for someone to act as a formal executive in the operations of its schools. Thus, they appointed the nation's first superintendent in 1837, understanding that the superintendent would be an advisor to the board, a manager of resources, and communicate with the public (Carter & Cunningham, 1997). The position was created mainly because the residents in the growing city recognized the need for a unified system of schools rather than just having a collection of schools acting independently (Tienken, 2021). The previous system of independent schools was largely inefficient and ineffective. A central leader would be needed to create a systemic approach to educating the city's youth (Tienken, 2021).

However, the first superintendent was not an educator (Edwards, 2007). He was a layperson with more in common with the council members who appointed him than he did with the educators in the district. The school principals were paid more and regarded as more of the educational professionals than the superintendent (Edwards, 2007). Management responsibilities consumed the superintendent from that time and much of the 20th century (Thomas & Moran, 1992). Success for a superintendent was judged mainly in terms of school district efficiency (Andero, 2001).

The idea of the modern school superintendent continued to evolve through the 19th century (Glass, 1992). By 1860, there were 27 superintendents in the United States (Glass, 1992). In North Carolina, the growth of schools resulted in the state being divided into districts with different superintendents. The school board was created to oversee the state's superintendents and a citizen's mechanism of control over education. In this way, citizens could

vote on a school board that provided oversight of the superintendent. The state delegated local school boards to act on its behalf to ensure that schools were operated correctly and that all students learned (Hoyle et al., 2005).

According to Glass (1992), in the early days of the superintendency, school leaders were often seen and compared to a kind of secular clergy. They served as role models in the community, were very focused on school reform, and preached that school was the conduit to finding the American dream. Early school leaders deeply understood that a student's life prospects were not very bright without the ability to read, write, or do basic math. Workers were required to work long hours for minimal payment. School leaders understood that student illiteracy must be addressed to break these cycles of poverty. Many school leaders thought that schools could be the answer for students and young adults wanting a good-paying job, a house, and a family. Initially, school leaders were beholden to school boards that gave the principal or superintendent direction and were very involved in the school's operations. As time progressed, the superintendent and school leaders gradually gained operational authority. However, even today, this autonomy from the school board could differ widely depending on which school district is being examined (Glass, 1992).

Demographics of the Superintendency

Gender

Grogan and Nash (2021) noted a gender gap in the superintendency that appears to be slowly changing. In 2020, 26.7% of U.S. superintendencies were held by women and 75.9% by men. This represents a 2.5% increase in women superintendents since 2010. However, historical data reveal that the national percentage of women superintendents doubled from 2000 until 2020 (from 13.1% to 26.7%). Similarly, Hart et al. (2022) found that gender diversity was present but

limited among North Carolina's school district superintendents. Of 115 North Carolina superintendents in 2021, 85 (74%) were male, and 30 (26%) were women. Like national trends, North Carolina had a notable increase in women superintendents. The 15 women superintendents (13%) in 2000 doubled to 30 women superintendents (30%) by 2021. Nonetheless, researchers have noted that while women represent most of the teaching workforce, they are underrepresented in the superintendency (Hart et al., 2022).

Although gender diversity among school superintendents was limited, women were far more present in the top leadership roles in North Carolina schools and across the nation than in major corporations. By one report, only 5.4% of S&P 500 companies are led by women; similarly, women hold the top job in 5% of Russell 3000 companies (Tienken, 2021).

Race

Grogan and Nash (2021) also noted small gains in the racial diversity of superintendents nationally. Approximately 8.2% of U.S. superintendents in 2020 identified as persons of color, compared to 6% in 2010 and only 5% in 2000. Furthermore, 42% of the superintendents of color were women. Additionally, women of color comprised 12.9% of all women superintendents, while men of color accounted for nearly 7% of all male superintendents. These data reveal that the percentage of women of color nearly doubled from the 6.8% reported in 2007.

Hart et al. (2022) found that racial diversity was limited among North Carolina's superintendents in spring 2021. About three out of every four superintendents in the state were White, one out of five were African American, and one was Latinx. Specifically, 89 superintendents, representing 77% of all North Carolina superintendents, were White. Twenty-five superintendents, representing 22% of all superintendents, were African American. Only one

superintendent, representing less than one percent of all superintendents, was Latinx (Hart et al., 2022).

Hart et al. (2022) also found that males dominated superintendent positions within both White and African American racial groups. Of the 89 White superintendents, 68 (76%) were male, while 21 (24%) were female. Of the 25 African American superintendents, 17 (68%) were male, and 8 (32%) were female. The lone reported Hispanic/Latinx superintendent was female.

Hart et al. (2022) also noted that racial diversity among North Carolina superintendents has slowly changed over the past two decades. At the turn of the current century, the state had only nine (8%) African American superintendents. That number increased to 10 African American superintendents (9%) by 2010. However, more significant gains were made over the next decade. By 2021, North Carolina had 25 (22%) African American superintendents, nearly tripling from 2000. However, these increases were not seen among Latinx and American Indian superintendents. North Carolina had only one Latinx superintendent in 2021, and the number of American Indian superintendents decreased from two in 2000 to 0 in 2001 (Hart et al., 2022).

Age and Experience

In addition to small changes in the gender and racial representation among superintendents, Grogan and Nash (2021) found that superintendents are moving into the position at earlier ages. Most superintendents in 2020 (59%) were in the position by the time they were 45 years old. In 2010, only 49.5% of superintendents were in the role by that age. Of particular interest was the number of young superintendents of color and young superintendents who were women; 58% of men of color superintendents and 48% of women of color superintendents were in the role by the time they were 45. Additionally, 41% of all women superintendents were in the role by age 45, including 38% of White women superintendents.

This is a significant change from the 10.28% of women superintendents who were 45 or under in 2010 (Grogan & Nash, 2021). Thus, as individuals become superintendents at earlier ages, the experience levels of those in the role are lowered. Approximately 52% of superintendents nationally had two to eight years of experience in the position (Tienken, 2021).

Hart et al. (2022) also found changes in the ages and experience levels of superintendents in North Carolina. While North Carolina's superintendents overwhelmingly consisted of career educators who matriculated through the educational ranks, most North Carolina superintendents had limited experience in the top job. Specifically, 17 of the state's 115 superintendents (15%) were in their first year in the role. Additionally, 45 superintendents (39%) were in their first three years in the position, and 80 (70%) had completed five or fewer years as superintendent. Only 12 (10%) had more than 10 years as a superintendent in the state. Particularly notable was the decrease from 2000 to 2021 in the percentage of superintendents with more than 30 years of total experience working in education. The decrease from nearly 51% of superintendents with more than 30 years of experience in education in 2000 to only 34% in 2021 suggests more superintendents today may be choosing to retire once they accumulate 30 years of state service as contrasted with their counterparts two decades ago.

Leadership Roles and Expectations of the Superintendent

North Carolina Standards for Superintendents

According to the *North Carolina Superintendents Guide to Vision in the 21st Century* (2007), today's schools must have proactive leaders who possess a great sense of urgency to ensure that every student graduates from high school prepared for life in the 21st Century. Superintendents set the direction and expectations for school districts to ensure this happens. School superintendents must help building-level school leaders understand the importance of

developing a cycle of constant improvement within schools. Leadership must be embedded throughout the school district, from the classroom to the superintendent. School leaders should be found throughout the student body, as well as teachers, principals, and at the district level. The North Carolina State Superintendents Guide also says that the superintendent must align the leadership and learning in classrooms throughout the district to create meaningful learning. To continue this, the superintendent must develop mechanisms and embedded practices that perpetuate alignment and learning. It is also important for the superintendent to continue the path of district and school improvement along with their own improvement. The superintendent must understand that continuous personal improvement is necessary for effective leadership. The world and students are constantly changing, and the superintendent must be knowledgeable of research-based practices to meet the challenges of the 21st Century (North Carolina State Superintendents Guide to Vision in the 21st Century, 2007).

According to the North Carolina Standards for Superintendents (2007), there are seven areas in which school superintendents must be effective for schools and districts to be successful. These areas include the following: (a) Strategic Leadership, (b) Instructional Leadership, (c) Cultural Leadership, (d) Human Resource Leadership, (e) Managerial Leadership, (f) External Leadership, and (g) Micro-Political Leadership. These seven areas are described in the narrative that follows.

In the area of *Strategic Leadership*, the superintendent must cultivate a good relationship with the board of education and be a leader of positive change in the school district. The superintendent must create, model, and reinforce the district's mission and vision and bring stakeholders together from the community to create an all-inclusive strategic plan for the district.

Superintendents need a process whereby stakeholders can review and adjust the strategic plan (North Carolina Standards for Superintendents, 2007).

Instructional Leadership is another critical role for superintendents. Superintendents are effective in this area when they ensure high expectations and concrete academic goals for the district. They must also challenge staff to think deeply and reflect upon the importance of student academic achievement in the classroom. The superintendent must ensure that professional learning communities are effective in schools and that the district meets its academic targets for the year. The superintendent must set academic priorities and ensure alignment between objectives from the state, district, and schools. Effective superintendents also emphasize the importance of principals and teachers using data from formative and summative assessments to set the course for instruction. Effective superintendents also ensure that proper resources are allocated to achieve instructional goals. Also, as part of instructional leadership, superintendents provide principals and district executives with good feedback and evaluations about their performance (North Carolina Standards for Superintendents, 2007).

Cultural Leadership is another vital area for superintendents. District culture is integral to an effective school system (North Carolina Standards for Superintendents, 2007). Effective cultural leadership involves providing adequate training for new teachers and school leaders. It also involves conducting fair employee evaluations. The culture in school districts is primarily established by the superintendent, directors, and principals. Good culture and climate at the district level influence every school in the district and impact students, teachers, parents, and stakeholders. Superintendents must foster a good culture by implementing policies that keep students safe, celebrate diversity, foster excellent social-emotional learning, and use teacher

working conditions surveys to drive school improvement (North Carolina Standards for Superintendents, 2007).

Human Resource Leadership is essential for superintendents because school systems are places where people interact often (North Carolina Standards for Superintendents, 2007). It is important to use teacher working conditions survey feedback to highlight positive things being done and to look at growth areas for staff and school executives. The superintendent must be optimistic about their belief that the district can accomplish necessary goals. The superintendent should model adult learning and the belief that continuous improvement and self-betterment are critical for the success of the school district (North Carolina Standards for Superintendents, 2007).

Managerial leadership is an area for superintendents to ensure scheduling and resource allocation are done in a way that accomplishes the district's goals. This is the area where the superintendent assesses programs and budgets, and decisions are made as to whether programs should be sustained or eliminated. The superintendent must also work collaboratively with directors and school leaders for structure, rules, and safety for staff and students. The superintendent must also work with the district safety officer to ensure that school and district safety plans are updated and that drills are conducted for the safety of students and staff (North Carolina Standards for Superintendents, 2007).

External Development Leadership is where superintendents develop collaborative partnerships with the greater community and assemble processes to engage stakeholders in shaping and supporting instructional goals and achievement throughout the district. It is also essential for the superintendent to engage community members such as county commissioners and other political entities to ensure adequate resources are provided to meet district goals.

Collaboration and communication with area colleges are also important to facilitate alignment and student success. By building relationships with external entities, the school system receives additional support to ensure its success (North Carolina Standards for Superintendents, 2007).

In *Micro-Political leadership*, the superintendent is expected to promote the success of learning and teaching by understanding, responding to, and influencing the larger political, social, economic, legal, ethical, and cultural context. From this knowledge, the superintendent works with the board of education to define mutual expectations, policies, and goals to ensure the academic success of all students (North Carolina Standards for Superintendents, 2007).

Communication

Communication with the district and stakeholders is critical to what good superintendents do (Cox & McLeod, 2014). Superintendents need regular district-level cabinet meetings to disseminate new information across departments. Communication with principals, teachers, and classified staff (i.e., bus drivers, teacher assistants, and cafeteria workers) is also essential to ensure cohesion within the organization (Cox & McLeod, 2014).

However, communication both within the district to teachers and principals, as well as communicating externally to stakeholders, can be a challenge (Cox & McLeod, 2014). This is due to the many taxing demands of the superintendency and the need to tailor messages to different groups of people. Often, especially in smaller districts, there is no cabinet-level position for communication. It then falls to the superintendent to communicate with various stakeholders.

Therefore, communicating through social media is crucial to informing stakeholders, even though some superintendents struggle with digital communication and social media (Cox & McLeod, 2014). Also, communicating via social media can be time consuming, particularly if the superintendent wants to vary the message across different digital mediums (Cox & McLeod,

2014). With that challenge in mind, Wang (2016) found that the social media app Twitter was a very successful way for superintendents to utilize social media. While tracking 100 superintendents from across some of the country's largest school districts, Wang noted that the use of Twitter generated many positive communications in a very cost-effective manner. Superintendents were able to send messages to thousands of stakeholders in a small amount of time (Wang, 2016).

Cox and McLeod (2014) reported similar conclusions, noting that using social media to communicate with stakeholders has become one of the most viable and expected solutions for superintendents and school districts to communicate their message. They found that social media interfaces allow for more frequent interactions between school leaders and the community, giving stakeholders a sense that they knew what was happening in the district. Also, school superintendents reported in the study that social media allowed them to control the message, with one superintendent commenting, "I really like social media in that I can go directly to stakeholders rather than have my message filtered through teachers' unions or other media outlets" (Cox & McLeod 2014, p. 8). Additionally, social media allowed greater transparency regarding decision-making. It allowed superintendents to share more comprehensive responses and information with the public than what would usually be printed on a flyer, an edited snippet in the newspaper, or a sound bite on the radio or television (Cox & McLeod, 2014).

Cox and McLeod (2014) also found that using social media profoundly impacts the superintendent personally and professionally. Superintendents responded in the study that using social media made them feel more competent to communicate so widely with their stakeholders. Social media also connected the superintendent to the district employees, stakeholders, and the world. For example, one superintendent from the study talked about walking into a teachers'

breakroom at a school and having a great conversation with teachers who were well-informed of things happening in the district because of messages sent out on social media (Cox & McLeod, 2014).

Collaboration

While superintendents have considerable influence in policy making, they do not always make or intend to make unilateral decisions. Shared decision-making happens frequently and is expected in many scenarios faced by superintendents because they are a part of an open organizational system with thousands of students, parents, and employees (Hoyle et al., 2005). Therefore, utilizing shared decision making at the district level reaffirms the superintendent's course, direction, or actions. This also allows for course corrections or modifications to decisions to prevent potential mistakes rather than having the superintendent “going it alone” in their decisions (Hoyle et al., 2005). Also, this collaborative approach heightens the sensitivity toward meeting the needs of the many diverse cultures that come into the schools.

According to Hoyle et al. (2005), an essential part of collaboration is for superintendents to assemble the right teams to address the various problems in school districts. Superintendents put together cabinets that help shape decisions and policy for the district. Superintendents are not on an island by themselves. Most school districts employ a team of people with duties and responsibilities in different areas at the district level regarding the school district's operations. This is sometimes referred to as the cabinet or district leadership team. This team may be subdivided into different areas of responsibility to manage the team's size and ensure everyone's perspective is heard. While this leadership team composition is not uniform from district to district, the functions carried out by members tend to be similar across districts (Hoyle et al., 2005).

Challenges Facing School Superintendents

First-time superintendents have unique experiences. While beginning superintendents have much more training than their past counterparts, the job's scale and nature have become more complex (Glass, 1992; Kowalski & Brunner, 2011; Pascopella, 2011). For example, there is a need for new superintendents to transition from being primarily bureaucratic managers to becoming executive leaders, particularly in larger districts (Glass, 1992; Kowalski & Brunner, 2011; Pascopella, 2011). As leadership qualities are not always transferable, having been a great teacher or a good principal does not automatically mean that a new superintendent will be successful. Therefore, new superintendents must quickly understand the education bureaucracy and effectively manage operational expenses and resources. Simultaneously, the novice superintendent must grasp the educational functions within the district while developing relationships within the community that will garner support for the district (Pascopella, 2011). A more detailed description of the challenges facing superintendents follows.

Board and Superintendent Relations

Research has shown that another major challenge facing superintendents is the relationship with the board of education (Hutchings & Brown, 2020; Orr, 2006; Trevino et al., 2008). Generally, throughout North Carolina and the United States, superintendents are selected by the local boards of education. According to Hoyle et al. (2005), while a positive working relationship can unfold, superintendents sometimes have differences while working with the board of education. Specifically, one of the most significant challenges to the superintendency is keeping a good working relationship with every board member. In many instances, superintendents may find this to be an impossible task. Research has shown that when the relationship between a board of education and its superintendent sours, the source is almost

always related to political conflict. This is particularly true when new board members are elected who may feel they want their own person to serve as superintendent or have an agenda that is different from what the superintendent supported. Therefore, superintendents must always exhibit social skills and keen political acumen when working with their school boards. Although state statutes, regulations, and policies limit board decision making, they ultimately hire and fire superintendents (Hoyle et al., 2005).

Orr (2006) found that dealing with the board of education was the most significant of all the challenges facing superintendents. All superintendents in 23 different focus groups talked about the arduous task of balancing their expectations for the district with those of the board. This situation was particularly problematic when the board was divided. Superintendents talked about how they could not lead by responding to conflicting interests.

One superintendent commented that attempts to respond to all the little things that board members wanted only led to more little things from board members (Orr, 2006).

Research findings stress the importance of the superintendent communicating effectively with the board of education (Hoyle et al., 2005). Hoyle (2005) stated that communication with the board is critical to being an effective superintendent. He cited that although most superintendents spend three hours or more communicating with their superintendents, the most highly effective superintendents spend more than six hours a week communicating and collaborating with them (Hoyle et al., 2005).

According to Hutchings and Brown (2020), some school boards struggle to understand that their role is to serve as a policy-making, governing body rather than to provide administrative leadership. Board members sometimes overreach into personnel management, instructional programming, and daily operations. This problem can cause struggles between

boards and superintendents concerning how to implement and monitor the district's plans. As a result, some districts lack a cohesive vision, and staff members struggle to understand the specific expectations and requirements of the district. Therefore, the most effective districts have boards that understand their role as a governing body and superintendents who understand their role as the chief executive officer (Hutchins & Brown, 2020).

Fiscal Management

Fiscal management has consistently been one of the most significant challenges facing school superintendents (Gates et al., 2019; Knezevick, 1972; Orr, 2006). In a study of challenges facing North Carolina's superintendents from 1969 to 1970, school finance was the biggest worry of these district leaders, outranking the unrest caused by protests of the war in Vietnam and the monumental task of desegregating schools (Knezevich, 1972). In a study involving 23 superintendent focus groups, Orr (2006) reported that budget issues were the most frequently cited challenges facing superintendents.

Budget challenges were mentioned in all 23 focus groups. Specifically, some superintendents reported a lack of knowledge and expertise regarding budget matters. Others noted dilemmas regarding the negotiation of the budget. However, the most widely cited budget challenge related to shortfalls in funding. There was universal agreement that state and local funding was inadequate to meet pressing demands.

School funding was a prominent worry in 2011 due to a downturn in the economy (Pascopella, 2011). Not only did superintendents have the expected stresses related to ensuring equity in schools and student academic achievement, but the recession heightened the headache of school funding (Pascopella, 2011). Additionally, in many districts, the financial issues facing superintendents are accompanied by challenges related to collective bargaining with teachers

(Petersen et al., 2009). Despite the realities of shrinking budgets, expectations continue to increase along with a growing number of unfunded mandates and social issues that require increased resources (Gates et al., 2019).

Time Management

According to Hutchings and Brown (2020), the time requirements of the position are one of the most pressing problems facing superintendents. The challenges and demands on their time are never-ending. In addition to the traditional workday, they are expected to attend board meetings, community events, athletic competitions, and artistic performances. As the executive officer of a major organization, superintendents must balance these demands against the need to ensure the development of an annual budget, physical plant operations, student learning, and all daily aspects of the organization. Similarly, Orr (2006) reported that the time demands of the job created stresses on superintendents' personal lives as work commitments created significant time away from their families. Sadly, many superintendents felt that the time demands of the position created a sense of isolation from their families (Orr, 2006).

Personnel and Conflict Management

According to Hutchings and Brown (2020), personnel and conflict management are significant challenges for superintendents. This is particularly true in situations involving collective bargaining because superintendents are forced into balancing what is best for the organization, personal relationships, and financial decisions amidst often challenging fiscal conditions. In effect, when dealing with collective bargaining, the superintendent is forced to deal with the perception that someone is winning and someone is losing. Doing so requires active listening and communication skills as conflicts inevitably arise and feelings are hurt (Hutchings & Brown, 2020).

Hutchings and Brown (2020) also noted that conflict management skills are essential to effective superintendents. It is common for superintendents to manage hundreds to thousands of employees with varying work ethics, attitudes, and skills. Effective superintendents must understand and effectively manage the effects of conflict upon individuals and groups, solve problems, facilitate effective decisions, and maintain emotional composure while addressing diverse personalities and differing viewpoints. Additionally, superintendents must effectively manage change processes while maintaining organizational stability (Hutchings & Brown, 2020).

Job-Related Stress

There is a tremendous amount of pressure put on superintendents to perform, and superintendents often find themselves tasked with putting out fires as they arise (Glass, 1992; Kowalski, 2013; Pascopella, 2011). This is especially true for newly minted superintendents. In the case of Maria Goodloe-Johnson, Seattle's former superintendent, who was pushed out after having record-breaking academic achievement in her district, this job pressure occurred due to creating too much reform too quickly (Pascopella, 2011). She instituted strict teacher accountability as well as administrative oversight. Dr. Goodloe-Johnson also closed underperforming schools and redistricted school populations to increase academic achievement. All of this work paid off as academic achievement improved. However, the political blowback was significant, and her tenure was cut short (Pascopella, 2011).

Hutchings and Brown (2020) reported that job-related stress was the most pressing problem facing superintendents. The position is a 24-hour-a-day job in which superintendents must give of themselves constantly. Superintendents are responsible for all system outcomes as the final decision maker for challenging professional dilemmas. They are continually trying to manage change processes for often competing stakeholders.

Robinson and Shakeshaft (2016) also noted that superintendents experience stress related to maintaining a work-life balance. Most superintendents in the study reported experiencing great or considerable stress, while about one-third reported feeling moderate stress. This stress is a significant concern because individuals without a work-life balance are subject to more medical issues and more significant challenges in maintaining positive relationships with family and friends (Robinson & Shakeshaft, 2016).

Accountability

The role of the superintendent has broadened since the 1980s (Kowalski, 2013). In addition to carrying out managerial duties that had long been associated with the position, superintendents were expected to provide instructional leadership and improve student academic achievement (Kowalski, 2013). Currently, in addition to managerial and instructional duties, superintendents are expected to address an array of societal issues, including the diversification of students and staff, the explosion of technology, and the desire to meet the social and emotional needs of students and adults (American Association of School Administrators, 2011). Ashbaugh (2000) referred to this phenomenon as a change from management to instructional leadership. As a result, superintendents are considered responsible for the success or failure of schools within their districts (Rammer, 2007). While past measures of success were primarily based on the extent to which local communities were pleased with their schools, the introduction of *No Child Left Behind* shifted success norms to student performance on standardized tests (Rammer, 2007). Therefore, superintendents receive credit when test scores are high and blame when they are not. This emphasis on test outcomes has caused some superintendents to lose their jobs (Chingos et al., 2014).

Conceptual Framework

This study is shaped by a leadership framework described by Hambrick and Fukutomi (1991). Their study, “The Seasons of a CEO's Tenure,” shed light on an ongoing challenge with executive leadership that has lessons for today. The researchers found that for CEOs, tenure does matter for organizational success.

CEOs and organizational leaders experience a sort of spectrum that evolves over time (Hambrick & Fukutomi, 1991). To illustrate this dynamic, Hambrick and Fukutomi cited a study of basketball coaches conducted by Eitzen and Yetman (1972). They evaluated many basketball coaches and found that team performance and player and coach cohesion improved over time. However, after thirteen years of being a coach in the same position, team performance reduced, and in some cases, drastically reduced.

Hambrick and Fukutomi (1991) researched the seasons or phases of a superintendent's tenure. They ascertained that there are seasons of improvements and setbacks to a superintendent's effectiveness in an organization. The researchers found that these seasons give rise to distinct patterns of executive attention, behavior, and organizational performance. According to the researchers, a leader's schema is derived from cultural and family experiences, business experiences and networks, formal education, and incidental observation (Fiske & Taylor, 1984; Kotter, 1982). This schema plays a role in the seasons of effectiveness for organizational leaders.

The researchers outlined the phases of the seasons seen in organizational leaders as a response to mandate, experimentation, selection of an enduring theme, convergence, and dysfunction (Hambrick & Fukutomi, 1991). In response to mandates primarily from the board of education, the new superintendent or CEO works hard to meet the requirements outlined for

them upon taking the job (Hambrick & Fukutomi, 1991). In this early period, the superintendent works to develop an early track record, legitimacy, and political foothold (Hambrick & Fukutomi, 1991). This season constitutes the superintendent's marching orders, aligns with competencies that earned them the job, and provides the potential for demonstrating early efficiency as beginning leaders are under extreme pressure to perform (Hambrick & Fukutomi, 1991).

After early wins and gaining legitimacy, the superintendent transitions from this initial response to the mandate phase to the experimentation season of their tenure (Hambrick & Fukutomi, 1991). This period of leadership by CEOs is a time of continued repetition of effective things. However, the superintendent is much more likely to challenge the status quo, make changes, and experiment with new ideas and innovations.

The next phase of leadership seasons described by Hambrick and Fukutomi (1991) is a selection of enduring themes. In this season, superintendents examine what has worked in the past and draw upon their experience of successes to apply them to this season to ensure continued success in the future. The following season, convergence, is when CEOs and organizational leaders pick policies and directives that have been most effective. A convergence or reorientation could occur during this season if new leadership is selected in place of the current leader.

However, assuming the CEO and organizational leader continue in their current role, they will most likely continue the most effective methods for continued organizational success based on decisions from the past that had the best outcomes for the organization. The final phase of seasons is dysfunction within organizational leadership. After the CEO and organizational leaders have solidified their status through incremental or bold organizational wins, the flow of

information to the CEO tends to wane, and boredom sets in. Strategy gives way to habituation, and exhilaration gives way to apathy. The CEO tends to be more involved in company ceremonies and is less likely to take chances on new initiatives and innovations. As a result, an organization becomes less adaptive and more reliant on what has worked in the past. This, in turn, causes CEOs to fall prey to malaise, causing dysfunction within organizational leadership (Hambrick & Fukutomi, 1991).

Summary

This chapter provided a review of research literature related to the superintendency. Specifically, this review included an in-depth analysis regarding the history of the position, demographics of those who currently serve in the role, and expectations commonly associated with the role. Additionally, the review examined literature about challenges that superintendents face as they perform their complex jobs. Finally, an overview of the conceptual framework that helped to shape this study was provided.

Several themes about superintendency recur in the literature. First, the importance of the role should not be underestimated, as there is a link between superintendent longevity and organizational success. Second, the demographics of those in the role are slowly but steadily changing. While White males still largely dominate the role, the number of women and people of color who are serving as superintendents is gradually but steadily increasing. This demographic shift is also accompanied by the decreasing tenure of those in the position. Younger superintendents with less experience in the role are slowly becoming the norm. Third, the expectations for the role are multi-faceted and demanding. Superintendents are expected to ensure organizational efficiency and instructional effectiveness while garnering support for schools from stakeholders with varying interests. Finally, these circumstances result in various

stressors faced by superintendents, including managing the board of education, maintaining a work-life balance, and an array of workplace challenges.

The methods that will be used to gather data for this study are described in Chapter 3. The research design and data collection and analysis will be outlined. Additionally, measures to ensure the study's trustworthiness and the protection of participants will be delineated.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

This chapter's purpose is to describe the methodology utilized during this study. This chapter begins with an introduction of the purpose of the study and the research questions to be answered. Next, it describes the participants in the study. Lastly, this chapter delineates the data collection and analysis procedures as the researcher sought to examine the lived experiences of first-year superintendents.

Superintendents in their first year of employment need the knowledge, skills, and wherewithal to navigate the ever-changing dynamics in their school systems. There continues to be a persistent turnover of educational leaders, particularly superintendents in North Carolina. This is partly due to an older generation retiring and many other factors. Some of these factors can be mitigated given proper awareness. In some instances, educators spend their entire careers climbing the ranks, getting the necessary education, and taking on challenging positions as school leaders, only to falter during the first year as superintendent. In any event, there will continue to be a large cadre of new superintendents in North Carolina for the foreseeable future.

The first year in the position sets the stage for the successful tenure of superintendents, and it is essential that the first-year superintendent be as successful as possible. In many ways, the first year for superintendents can be tenuous, leaving the first-year superintendent in a weakened position (Cullotta, 2008). New superintendents must grapple with many difficulties, including stakeholder perceptions and possibly even imposter syndrome, which can cause anxiety and overthinking. Despite being in a highly visible and vital role, it is not uncommon for new superintendents to find some in the district who are not convinced of their abilities (Cullotta, 2008). Therefore, this study explored the experiences of new superintendents and the various ways they lead and govern in their first year in North Carolina. Doing so will add to the body of

knowledge about superintendents generally. More specifically, this study was intended to provide insights for other new superintendents as they begin to assume this challenging role.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this exploratory, qualitative study:

1. What do first-time school district superintendents in North Carolina perceive to be the significant challenges they faced during their first year in the position?
2. What do first-time school district superintendents in North Carolina perceive to be the significant successes they had in their first year in the position?
3. What do first-time school district superintendents in North Carolina perceive to be the significant mistakes they made in their first year in the position?
4. What strategies do first-time school district superintendents in North Carolina implement to promote the likelihood of success during their first year in the position?
5. What advice do first-time school district superintendents in North Carolina offer to others who are beginning in the role?

Research Design

The purpose of the exploratory qualitative case study was to describe superintendents' first year in the position by studying their lived experiences, successes, mistakes, and perceptions of being a first-time superintendent in North Carolina. The researcher found that a qualitative study would enable greater understanding because it allowed for an in-depth analysis of participants' experiences and the meaning they place on them.

Qualitative research highlights the interaction of human participants, allows a more humanistic approach to dealing with data, and affords outcomes that are more reflective of

human perspectives. Qualitative methodologies generate rich descriptions (Merriam, 1988).

According to Ravitch and Carl (2021):

Broadly defined, “qualitative research uses interpretive research methods as a set of tools to understand individuals, groups, and phenomena in contextualized ways that reflect how people make meaning of and interpret their own experiences, themselves, each other, and the social world.” (p. 2)

Qualitative research was the most advantageous way to examine superintendents’ lived experiences and their accounts of effective and ineffective decisions that affected the school district. Qualitative research allowed systematic and contextualized research processes to interpret how humans view, approach, and make meaning of their experiences, contexts, and the world. In this way, a qualitative research study allowed the researcher to identify the most important properties, particularly since the questions pertained to the lived experiences of subjects in the study (Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

In-depth interviews with eight first-time school district superintendents in North Carolina were conducted to understand the perspectives and experiences of first-year superintendents. In-depth interviews are conversations with purpose and a tool for collecting and describing narrated experiences regarding the meaning of a phenomenon that several individuals share (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). This approach allowed the researcher to gain insights into superintendents’ perceptions of challenges they faced during their first year in the position, strategies they used to address those challenges, and positive and negative decisions they made. Additionally, the researcher was able to understand areas of growth for first-year superintendents better. In this way, the researcher could hear and transcribe the deep meaning of experiences in participants’ own words.

With permission from interviewees, semi-structured interviews were audio-taped and transcribed for data recording and management and to facilitate information retrieval for analysis. The researcher believes that a qualitative paradigm, utilizing the case study genre, was appropriate for this research study. Such a research design afforded a rich, descriptive narrative of the world of the first-time superintendent. The researcher anticipated that a systematic and detailed analysis would lead to solid and thorough conclusions and recommendations. Examining the first-time superintendents required multiple perspectives from the individuals experiencing the position and the ability to assess comparisons and contrasts. Therefore, the naturalistic approach to data used in qualitative case study research was the logical approach for this study.

Subjectivity Statement

The researcher is a 45-year-old White male. He has two amazing daughters and grew up on top of Stony Mountain, North Carolina, near Albemarle. He was born to two wonderful parents. His father was a Marine Corps colonel and owned a business selling boating equipment. His mother was a supervisor at the Social Security Administration. He was taught to study and seek higher education from a very early age. Both of his parents, having grown up extremely poor in the 1940s and 1950s, understood the value of education. After graduating from Albemarle High School in 1997, he went to Appalachian State University and fell in love with teaching and a woman who would later become his wife. He received his bachelor's degree in elementary education in 2001.

His father loved growing grapes. He picked up this skill while stationed at Camp Pendleton and 29 Palms while serving in the United States Marine Corps. His family planted several acres of grapes in the mid-1990s and began making wine. In November 2000, the researcher and his parents opened a winery called Stony Mountain Vineyards.

He wanted to serve his country. However, he wanted to follow his own path and still be able to teach and make a difference in the lives of children. In December 2000, he joined the Army Reserves and attended Infantry School and Basic Training at Fort Benning, Georgia, after graduating from Appalachian State University. Upon graduating Basic Training and Infantry School in October 2001, he was sent to the 108th Training Division in Asheboro, North Carolina, attaining the rank of Specialist E-4. He drilled one weekend a month and two weeks in the summer. He gained valuable experience on how to teach soldiers during this time. The training unit in Asheboro was moved to Florida, and the commanding officer took him to the North Carolina National Guard Officer Candidate School at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. Instead of helping to train soldiers, he was enrolled in the Officer Candidate School program due to a shortage of Army Officers and the United States being at war.

Also, during this time, he became a teacher at Central Elementary School in Albemarle, North Carolina, teaching 4th grade math. After a few years, he was recruited to work at Ridgecrest Elementary, teaching fifth-grade reading and science. He taught at Ridgecrest while drilling and training with the North Carolina National Guard until he was deployed to Iraq.

Upon graduating from Officer Candidate School in 2003, he was given the rank of second lieutenant. At that time, he was sent to the Infantry Officer Basic Course at Fort Benning, Georgia. Arriving back at Fort Benning as an officer was a very sobering experience and weighed on him as he reflected on the importance of experience in leadership. He graduated from the Infantry Officer Basic Course in 2004. Soon after graduation, he was sent to Iraq to join his National Guard Unit, Charlie Company 1-120th Combined Arms Battalion, 30th Brigade in 2004. He served on staff and helped with convoys until he was given an infantry platoon of 40 American soldiers. Being responsible for so many people in a combat zone helped him further

understand the importance of training and experience in leadership. His unit returned home at the end of 2004. He was promoted to first lieutenant and was appointed executive officer of Bravo Company 1-120th Combined Arms Battalion. The executive officer is considered the second in command of an infantry company with around 160 soldiers.

Coming back from Iraq, he transitioned back to civilian life in 2005. His job at Ridgecrest Elementary was unavailable then, so he was placed at Running Creek Elementary School teaching sixth-grade reading and social studies. The following year, he was brought back to Ridgecrest Elementary School, teaching seventh and eighth-grade English Language Arts, science, and social studies. He was considered highly qualified for English Language Arts grades 6-9. However, he took the Praxis Examination to become highly qualified to teach science for grades 6-9 and social studies 6-9. At this time, he applied at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte and was accepted into the graduate program for educational leadership in 2006.

After serving as the executive officer for a couple of years, he was sent to become the mortar platoon leader for the battalion. The mortar platoon provides indirect fire using mortars that support the battalion's mission. After a year in this position, his unit was mobilized again in 2008 to return to Iraq. He graduated from the University of North Carolina at Charlotte in May 2008 with a graduate degree in educational leadership with a concentration in curriculum and instruction. Because of his education in administration, organizational skills, and combat experience, he was selected to become the adjutant for the 1-120th Battalion.

The battalion consisted of 1500 soldiers and airmen, and he was promoted to captain. The Battalion Adjutant S-1 is considered the battalion's administrative officer. Although he was not leading soldiers in a combat zone this time, he thought this to be one of the toughest experiences of his life for many reasons. He learned many valuable leadership skills. His unit lost four

soldiers, one of whom was a friend from his first tour. Words cannot fully explain the difficulty he experienced during this time; however, the experience would prove very valuable in future assignments. The unit returned home in 2010.

Ridgecrest Elementary, the researcher's home school at the time, was closed while he was deployed from 2008-2010. He was recruited by the principal at Stanfield Elementary, who recently had a seventh and eighth-grade science position become vacant. Stanfield was a kindergarten through eighth-grade school. His battalion was demobilized, and instead of taking the military leave he had accrued through his deployment, he joined Stanfield Elementary as a teacher as soon as soldiers were demobilized and back with their families.

He taught seventh and eighth-grade science at Stanfield Elementary for two years. Afterward, the district did not want kindergarten through eighth-grade schools and instead created middle schools. He was moved to the newly created West Stanly Middle School, which used to be called Running Creek Elementary. He spent two months there before being promoted to assistant principal at Central Elementary.

During this time, he began to have trouble in his personal life and found that running a school and helping his parents run a winery proved too much to continue in the military. He resigned from the military in 2011. At the time, his loyalty to family and his love of schools was more important. Operation Iraqi Freedom was winding down, the end of the war in Afghanistan was nowhere in sight, and he could not juggle so many demanding leadership positions.

He learned much about school administration as an assistant principal at Central Elementary School. It was not an easy assignment, and he was there for two years. He was very thankful to the principal he served under for giving him the authority and trusting his abilities to help run the school. Another principal in the district was asked to go to the early college, and she

had not had that kind of assignment previously. She asked the district if the researcher could accompany her as her assistant principal. He spent two years at the Early College High School before being offered the principal position at Aquadale Elementary School.

He spent three years as principal at Aquadale Elementary. During that time, he recruited and brought excellent teacher leaders with him. He also overhauled the school schedule and provided much-needed oversight and training to teachers. The researcher and his staff also worked hard to improve the culture and climate of the school. Consequently, the school was at the top of the district academically during those three years, achieving a grade of B in his first year and staying at the top for the rest of his tenure.

He was then sent to Albemarle Middle School as the principal. Albemarle Middle School, in his opinion, is one of the most challenging schools to run in the Stanly County Schools District. The school had the lowest student proficiency and growth score at a school grade of 40. He takes pride in the academic growth while at Albemarle Middle School. The school moved from nearly having an F grade to having a C. Reflecting on this experience, more leadership experience and training were critical to the school's success. Besides his second tour in Iraq, this was one of his most challenging leadership experiences. He learned much about leading a difficult school and made many mistakes. The skills he learned during the second tour in Iraq as the administrative officer would prove invaluable during this experience. He was moved to Locust Elementary halfway through the next year due to the early retirement of another principal.

He has been the principal at Locust Elementary for three years. According to end-of-grade tests, the school has been at the top of the district academically for the four years since he has been the principal. Last year, the school was at the top of the district in reading, math, and

science. The school exceeded academic growth. The school's teacher working conditions survey reflects a positive view among staff.

He remains the principal at Locust Elementary. His education and military experiences provide the impetus for this study. The military teaches soldiers always to train two levels higher than their current rank. Privates are trained to know a specialist's job. Second and first lieutenants are trained to understand the role of captain in case an emergency requires them to step in and take command. In this way, soldiers understand the difficulty of the next position and have a more global view of why decisions are made. This is why principals and district staff need to understand the role of the superintendent. It is essential to grow principals' and district department heads' leadership capacity.

Understanding the lived experiences of beginning superintendents will enhance the researcher's leadership journey while providing insights that may help other school leaders make better decisions within their respective areas.

Setting

This study took place in North Carolina and included superintendents from eight school districts. Although research points to superintendent turnover and reduced tenure in many states (Pascopella, 2011), this study focused only on beginning superintendents in North Carolina for several reasons. First, the state has experienced significant turnover among superintendents in recent years (Hart et al., 2022), meaning that there should be sufficient participants for this study. Second, the researcher is particularly interested in North Carolina because he is a native North Carolinian and currently serves as a principal in the state. Third, the researchers' professional connections in the state and proximity to potential participants may facilitate participation in the study.

North Carolina is a diverse state, with a range of rural, urban, large, small, wealthy, and economically challenged school districts. Ideally, the researcher will be able to include participants who represent the geographic and economic diversity of the state. Also, the researcher would like to be able to include participants who represent districts of varying sizes. Including these factors enriched the analysis of superintendents' experiences. While not the primary focus of the study, it would be interesting to examine the extent to which regional differences contribute to superintendents' experiences. However, the researcher acknowledges that he could not control which districts have first-time superintendents or which superintendents would be willing to participate in the study.

Participants

Purposeful sampling was used in this study. Purposeful sampling is a primary approach to sampling in qualitative research. It means that the researcher sought to include certain participants because of the knowledge they possess, the roles they hold, or the experiences they have had (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). The researcher purposefully selected first-year school district superintendents in North Carolina because these individuals are uniquely positioned to help answer the study's research questions.

The researcher sought potential participants in two ways. First, he contacted the North Carolina School Superintendents Association. This organization maintains a database of superintendents from across the state. Officials in the organization helped the researcher identify and contact potential participants by emailing all beginning superintendents to notify them of the study. Additionally, the dissertation committee chairperson helped identify potential participants based on his professional connections. The researcher then followed up with personal email

invitations to eight superintendents who expressed interest in participating in the study. Six male and two female beginning superintendents agreed to be part of the study.

Once potential participants were identified, the researcher sent them a recruitment email to introduce them to the study (Appendix A). Those who agreed to participate were sent a follow-up email (Appendix B) explaining the study's logistics. This follow-up email also included an informed consent form to participate in the study (Appendix C).

The sample size was also an issue in participant selection. The goal of qualitative research is not to generalize findings but to thoroughly answer the research questions and thereby develop a nuanced understanding of the topic of study that would not be possible through quantitative approaches (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). The sample used for this study consisted of eight participants. This number was chosen because it represents about one-third of the first-year superintendents in North Carolina.

Demographic data were gathered about participants. All participants were Caucasian. Geographically, four superintendents represented districts from central North Carolina, two superintendents represented districts in western North Carolina, and two superintendents represented districts in eastern North Carolina. The superintendents represented school districts from a population of 2,000 students to a population of 13,000 students, generally representing small to medium-sized school districts. The majority of superintendents interviewed represented rural or semi-rural districts. Several urban districts were represented as well.

Instrumentation

Two instruments were used for data collection in this study. A semi-structured interview protocol (Appendix D) was used to conduct participant interviews. This protocol was divided into six categories: (a) background, (b) challenges faced during the first year as superintendent,

(c) successes during the first year as superintendent, (d) mistakes during the first year as superintendent, (e) strategies utilized during the first year as superintendent, and (f) advice for other first-time superintendents. Individual participant questions were included with each category, thereby helping to facilitate the organization of responses. In total, there were 15 interview questions that aligned with the research questions. Additional prompts were added to seek clarification of more in-depth information.

A demographic survey (Appendix E) was administered to gather background information about participants via a demographic survey. This survey, which was emailed to participants, verified that participants were in their first year as a superintendent. Additionally, it confirmed the gender and racial identities of participants. Finally, this introductory demographic survey sought information about participants' professional backgrounds.

Data Collection

Data were collected from eight first-time superintendents following approval of the study by the UNC Charlotte Institutional Review Board. First, an introductory email was sent to potential participants to introduce them to the study and gauge their interest. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data from participants. Marshall and Rossman (2006) noted that semi-structured interviews are a practical approach to conducting interviews because they are consistent yet flexible. While all participants were asked the same questions, the interviewer sought additional insights by injecting prompts or more questions. Using semi-structured interviews, the participants were asked 15 questions about their experiences as a first-time superintendent. These interviews were conducted using the virtual platform *Zoom* because it made it easier to include participants from across the state. Additionally, with the participants' permission, the researcher used *Zoom* to record the interviews. Recording the interviews helped

ensure accurate transcriptions and allowed the interviewer to watch the interviews multiple times for greater understanding.

A pilot study was used to enhance this study. Specifically, a superintendent who would qualify for the study was asked to participate in a pilot study to examine the interview questions and protocol. This activity was used only to ensure the clarity of the processes. Data from this pilot study were not included in the data analysis.

Data Analysis

Marshall and Rossman (2006) acknowledged that "the process of bringing order, structure, and interpretation to a mass of collected data is messy, ambiguous, time-consuming, creative, and fascinating. It does not proceed in a linear fashion" (p. 154). They recommend seven phases typical of the analytic process: (a) organizing the data, (b) immersion in the data, (c) generating categories and themes, (d) coding the data, (e) offering interpretations through analytic memos, (f) searching for alternative understandings, and (g) writing the report or other format for presenting the study.

The organization of the data began with verbatim transcriptions of the participant interviews. This transcription occurred manually because doing so required the researcher to become more engaged with the data. A close, uninterrupted reading of each transcript followed this process. Doing so facilitated a holistic review of the data before attempts were made to code and categorize the findings. During this process, the researcher reviewed notes during the data collection phases. Also, the researcher wrote analytic memos following each reading to help organize thoughts and reflections.

The next phase in the data analysis involved the coding of transcripts. This was a process in which words or phrases were assigned to parts of the transcripts to give meaning (Marshall &

Rossmann, 2006). This was an inductive process in which the researcher stayed as close as possible to the data when assigning codes rather than previously identifying codes. This phase involved in vivo codes (participants' words are used as codes) and descriptive coding (expressions or short phrases are used to describe what is being reported by participants). A second round of coding followed the in vivo and descriptive coding. During this second round, codes were categorized according to similarities and differences. Finally, categories were examined to determine themes that emerged. This iterative coding process involved constantly comparing newly developed codes to previously established ones.

As a beginning researcher, the coding process was conducted manually. However, an *Excel* database was used as a simple graphic organizer of data. This database included the codes identified from each round of coding and the definitions of the codes. Additionally, participants' direct quotations that were particularly noteworthy were added so that they could support assertions made about the findings.

Trustworthiness

Research must be done to ensure the reader can trust the research that was collected, analyzed, and conveyed consistently and reliably (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), the trustworthiness of a study relates to the researcher persuading readers that the findings of a study are worth paying attention to. Doing so involves establishing the study's credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Several measures were used to enhance the trustworthiness of this study. First, as a beginning researcher, peer debriefing was used with the dissertation committee chairperson. This dialogue helped challenge the researcher's interpretation of findings and assumptions. Also, the study unfolded using a systematic approach in which semi-structured interviews were used to

ensure consistency. The researcher listened to the interviews multiple times, and the researcher conducted manual transcriptions and manual coding in order to ensure deeper and repeated analysis of data. Finally, member checking was used. By so doing, participants were allowed to validate the study's data.

Ethical Considerations

Protecting participants was paramount in this study, even though it posed minimal risks to participants. First, participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and that there would be no penalty for withdrawing from the study at any time. Second, all participants and data obtained in the study were protected by the researcher. Only the researcher can access the data collected, and all data are maintained on a password-protected device. Third, the researcher did not identify participants in the study. Before reporting, pseudonyms were assigned to participants. Additionally, participants' responses were not shared in an identifiable manner with their employers. Also, any demographic information that could potentially reveal participants' identities was excluded from reporting.

Finally, the researcher had permission from the UNC Charlotte Institutional Review Board and conducted all aspects of the study in compliance with the ethical expectations of the university. Potentially identifying information such as gender or ethnic identity was vetted, and permission was acquired before any public release of information. The researcher informed participants of all questions prior to the interview and adjusted the interview protocol if there were questions participants were uncomfortable answering. The researcher gave participants the final approval over any release of information.

Summary

Chapter 3 summarizes the methodology that was used in this qualitative research. The chapter describes the research design, questions, and participant selection. Additionally, procedures used to collect and analyze the data and ensure the trustworthiness of the study are delineated. An explanation of measures to protect participants and ensure ethical considerations were met is also included. The following chapter will provide a summary of the findings.

CHAPTER 4: DATA ANALYSIS

Introduction

North Carolina is seeing many superintendents retiring or simply leaving education. This leads to a drain in experience and leadership in the top positions in North Carolina's school districts. Beginning superintendents are in a precarious position due to the challenges and the associated learning curve of the position. Therefore, more knowledge and understanding about the role may enlighten those seeking to become superintendents.

The purpose of this study was to understand the lived experiences of beginning superintendents. This chapter describes the data collection and analysis of interviews with eight beginning superintendents. The interview data have been arrayed in separate case studies, followed by a section that describes the themes emerging from a synthesis of each case. Data are reported in alignment with each research question.

This research explored beginning superintendents' backgrounds and experiences that led them to their current roles. Also, this research sought to understand the successes that beginning superintendents experienced and the factors that contributed to this success. Challenges that superintendents experienced in their first year were also explored. This research also sought to understand mistakes made by beginning superintendents and their advice for other beginning superintendents.

The research was conducted with eight beginning superintendents in North Carolina. The participants were all asked the same interview questions and were allowed to describe their experiences completely. In this way, the researcher could understand participants' experiences through their own words.

Pseudonyms were used for the participants in the study to protect confidentiality. References to specific ideas, topics, locations, or individuals were deliberately disguised to protect interviewee confidentiality. The following sections describe each participant's experiences as individual case studies, followed by a description of common themes among participants.

Participant Summary

The eight participants in this study all met the study criteria. Specifically, seven were in their first year as superintendents in North Carolina at the time of the interview. One participant was in his second year. The North Carolina School Superintendent Association assisted with the identification of potential participants along with the dissertation chairperson. Participants represent eight distinct school districts in the state.

Survey data about the participants were gathered prior to the interviews. The survey gathered the following data about participants: (a) years of service as a superintendent in North Carolina or elsewhere, (b) highest degree earned, (c) age range, (d) race, and (e) gender. These data are described in each case study vignette and illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1

Participant Demographic Data

Participant	Years as Superintendent	Highest Degree	Age Range	Race	Gender
Dr. Kelly	1	Doctorate	45-49	White	Male
Dr. Williams	1	Doctorate	40-44	White	Male
Dr. Sides	1	Doctorate	45-49	White	Male
Dr. Chace	1	Doctorate	45-49	White	Male
Dr. Tucker	1	Doctorate	45-49	White	Male
Dr. Hessman	1	Doctorate	40-44	White	Female
Dr. Hitchcock	2	Doctorate	45-49	White	Male
Dr. Smith	1	Doctorate	50-54	White	Female

Case Study One: Dr. Kevin Kelly, Superintendent

Background Information

Dr. Kelly, a Caucasian male, was in his first year as a superintendent in North Carolina at the time of the interview. He has not been a superintendent elsewhere. Dr. Kelly has his doctorate and was between the ages of 45 and 49 at the time of the interview. He represented a smaller school district in central North Carolina.

Dr. Kelly started his career in education as a lateral entry teacher. He was also a coach for a sports team and athletic director at his school. He pursued his administrative degree after gaining professional experience. Dr. Kelly was then promoted to assistant principal and principal. He was later promoted to assistant superintendent and academic officer in the same district. He was subsequently named superintendent.

When asked whether he had aspirations to be a superintendent, Dr. Kelly responded:

I think if you had asked me early in my career, it was not a place that I thought that I would end up. I always knew I would be in a leadership position, and if you asked me early on, I thought I would eventually be a principal, but I had not considered superintendent.

Dr. Kelly indicated that many coaches and teacher-leaders within schools become assistant principals and principals within the district. He said that it is essential for schools to foster teacher and coach leadership because they often become the district's future leaders.

Dr. Kelly was asked what steps he took to become superintendent after he decided that that was something he wanted to do. He explained that he decided to pursue his doctorate soon after attaining his master's degree, believing that a doctorate would open doors for him. The district he served in was larger; however, it had a closeness and comradery among leaders within

the organization. He enjoyed administration and spent time learning and understanding the general functions of the district's academic officer and human resources director, who both had served as principals with him. In this way, he had access to people in critical positions within the district, and they shared their knowledge with him.

When asked how he prepared for the superintendent position, Dr. Kelly explained that the district he previously served had given him several leadership positions. He had been a high school, middle school, and elementary school principal. Since district leaders believed that he would need more experience in elementary schools to eventually move into a district leadership role, they made him an elementary principal. When he later stepped into the assistant superintendent and academic officer role, the superintendent informed Dr. Kelly, "My job is to get you ready if I decide to walk out that door." The superintendent helped prepare him by taking him to county commissioner and city council meetings. The superintendent mentored him and helped establish connections with key players and other officials external to the school system that eventually put him in a position to be ready for the superintendency.

When asked, "What aspects of the position give you the most satisfaction?" Dr. Kelly responded that he enjoys instruction and helping students. He enjoys visiting as many schools as possible monthly. Dr. Kelly loves speaking with students and teachers as he walks through schools.

Challenges Faced During the First Year as Superintendent

Dr. Kelly said that some of the challenges he faced as a new superintendent included cultural shifts. Shifting leaders within school districts is always challenging, according to Dr. Kelly. He said he wanted to focus on learning about and understanding the new district during his first few months as superintendent. However, some things needed to be changed.

While he had previously served in a district leadership position, he had not personally experienced the role of superintendent. Dr. Kelly explained that trust needs to be established when there is a change in top leadership. When describing his desire to build trust during his first months, Dr. Kelly said: “

The most popular person on the football team is the backup quarterback. When the transition happens, and you are the one making decisions, it can be challenging. There is a cultural shift that has to happen in yourself as the new superintendent. I spent a lot of time during the first few months trying to understand processes and why things were the way they were.

According to Dr. Kelly, the loss of learning created by the COVID-19 pandemic was a significant challenge to overcome. “We wanted to get back and be better than normal prior to Covid,” said Dr. Kelly. “As all of this was happening, we were trying to recover from the pandemic. So, it was important to develop a common purpose.” In addition to the challenges associated with pandemic learning loss, Dr. Kelly also talked about how important it is to get to know the district-level staff early in your tenure. He also said that a new superintendent needs to quickly understand “who the power players are.”

When asked how he overcame these challenges, Dr. Kelly described the importance of developing trust, particularly with the board of education. Dr. Kelly believed that his previous experience in the district helped foster the board’s trust in him. He considered this an advantage because “when it comes time to make challenging and sometimes difficult decisions, the board has your back. The same is true of principals and on down the line.” Dr. Kelly then shifted to the importance of patience when facing challenges. “You can’t fix everything immediately,” he said.

Patience and prioritization are critical to success, according to Dr. Kelly. He explained that it is essential to take time to develop a focus on areas where you can “make the greatest impact.”

Dr. Kelly was then asked about personal challenges he faced in his first year as superintendent. He talked about developing and maintaining interpersonal relationships, particularly with those he works with. According to Dr. Kelly, one of the most significant personal challenges was figuring out where he stood with those he now leads. He talked about how he needed to understand his strengths and weaknesses and how they aligned with his team members. “I’m very strong in certain areas, but I may need someone else to help in other areas because they have characteristics that better serve in that area,” said Dr. Kelly.

Dr. Kelly further described how superintendents may inherit a district staff that was put together by the previous administration. It can be challenging to navigate those dynamics, particularly in the first year of the superintendency. While Dr. Kelly was able to hire a couple of people that he described as “excellent,” it was equally important to understand the strengths of the team members he inherited. He said, “If you’re familiar with the color chart of personality tests, it’s important to have a rainbow on your team. My personal challenge was trying to navigate my own skill set and personality.”

Another challenge Dr. Kelly faced was confronting others and “telling them no.” “I probably told more people no in my first three weeks than in the last three years at a different district leadership position,” said Dr. Kelly. “We had to make some difficult decisions such as putting people on plans and terminating employees.” He said that those decisions weigh heavily on a superintendent.

According to Dr. Kelly, those challenges can be overcome by having a positive relationship with the board of education. He talked about the importance of effective

communication with the board while navigating the initial stages of the superintendency. He also said that knowing your team and building trust with those at the district and school levels helps overcome many challenges.

Successes During the First Year as Superintendent

Dr. Kelly was then asked about his greatest successes as a first-year superintendent. Dr. Kelly talked about efforts to respond to learning loss after the pandemic, stating:

The number one success has been repositioning our district for success after the pandemic. Districts had gone virtual or a modification of this for one to two years. The third year of Covid was difficult because students came back to school but they had to wear masks.

Dr. Kelly said schools must stop by the pandemic slide and refocus their learning. Dr. Kelly believed that he had accomplished that by reversing the academic deficits in several struggling schools in the district. Getting the district back on the right academic path was their top priority.

Dr. Kelly then discussed the importance of a shared focus and vision when addressing the learning loss. “We needed to reengage our school-based teams and teacher leadership,” said Dr. Kelly. He described how district officials spent a lot of time figuring out measurable and tangible goals. “When everyone understands what the plan is, things tend to fall in place,” said Dr. Kelly. “If no one knows the plan and the district goals, you will not have a unity of focus.”

Mistakes During First Year as Superintendent

Dr. Kelly was asked about mistakes as a first-year superintendent. As a new superintendent, Dr. Kelly said he sometimes did not know what he did not know. Sometimes, the things he was unfamiliar with were considered “sacred” in the district. Also, he talked about how

important it is to think through major initiatives, ensuring they are appropriately vetted to avoid unanticipated complications.

According to Dr. Kelly, some challenges arise that the superintendent does not have control over. Nonetheless, decisions must be made about addressing the challenge or fixing the problem despite no clear solutions. For example, Dr. Kelly talked about how superintendents struggle with unclear dilemmas, such as whether the district should cancel school for snow. Geographical and environmental factors, safety concerns, and disruptions to work for parents and teachers complicate this seemingly simple situation. However, Dr. Kelly emphasized that when mistakes are made, “acknowledge them, review them, and ensure they are not made twice.” He also said it is important to know that you will make decisions that may not go as planned. Dr. Kelly added, “If you are afraid to make mistakes, you’ll never be able to make the major decisions to carry the district forward.”

Strategies Used During the First Year as Superintendent

Dr. Kelly was asked, “What actions did you prioritize as a first-year superintendent?” Dr. Kelly said that the first thing to be done is to figure out what things must be fixed immediately and what other things can wait. He mentioned that many leaders attain their positions because they are action oriented. However, in this new role, delegating and prioritizing what is most urgent and vital are essential as superintendent.

When talking about the importance of delegation, Dr. Kelly indicated that people came to him often to solve their problems. Dr. Kelly explained that it was important for people to go where the problem could be solved and then come to him. He added, “It’s important to take the time to learn what you do not know. It’s important to take the time and learn critical processes within the district.”

Dr. Kelly was also asked if any groups influenced his decisions as a new superintendent. Dr. Kelly talked about the importance of his cabinet because “they bring important things to the forefront.” He also described the key role of the board of education in setting direction for the district. In his case, the mission and direction of the board was to get things “back on the right track post-pandemic.” He shared that he and the board discussed this issue during the interview and selection process, so he was familiar with this need when he took the position. He also talked about how school boards often select superintendents they believe align with their values. Dr. Kelly already knew the board; however, new members join the board, and the focus and direction could shift depending on their goals.

Dr. Kelly was asked, “Were there any strategies that enhanced your likelihood of success?” Creating a professional network among superintendents was the most valuable strategy during his first year. He talked about times when superintendents meet and exchange ideas and thoughts.

Advice for Other First-Time Superintendents

The recommendation from Dr. Kelly for new beginning superintendents was to find someone you can contact for advice. “Develop your network and friends of people you can call,” he shared. Additionally, he talked about becoming involved with the North Carolina School Superintendent Association. Specifically, he complimented an aspiring superintendent program and a next-generation leadership program offered by the association and recommended them for aspiring and current superintendents.

Case Study Two: Dr. Tom Williams, Superintendent

Background Information

Dr. Williams was a first-year superintendent in North Carolina at the time of the interview. He has his doctorate and is between the ages of 40 to 44. Dr. Williams represents a small- to medium-sized district in western North Carolina. He has not been a superintendent anywhere else.

Dr. Williams, a Caucasian male, started his career as a lateral entry teacher. As he gained experience, he became an athletic director. He enrolled in a master's program after realizing he wanted to help students more. He then served as a principal for several years. Dr. Williams later became the assistant superintendent of academics and had experience in human resources at the district level. Dr. Williams shared that holding various positions at the district level helped when he became a superintendent.

When asked if he aspired to be superintendent, Dr. Williams said he has always sought professional advancement but was initially unsure if he wanted to be a superintendent. Despite being content working in human resources, the superintendent encouraged him to get additional experience and pursue the superintendency. This led to him obtaining his doctorate and sparked the belief that he should pursue advancement. When asked how he was prepared for the position of superintendent, Dr. Williams said that having had much experience at the district level and having been a principal and a teacher were important. Dr. Williams also explained that his doctoral program in educational leadership opened his eyes to the possibility and gave him the training and confidence to "put myself out there for the position."

Dr. Williams was asked, "What aspects of the position do you enjoy the most or give you the most satisfaction as a superintendent?" Dr. Williams said he enjoys visiting schools and

seeing students and faculty. He said, “he doesn’t get to do it very often, but that part of the job gives me the most satisfaction.”

Dr. Williams enjoys people. The opportunity to speak with people and help solve problems provides satisfaction. Dr. Williams enjoys the teamwork and comradery within the district office. Dr. Williams said, “In a few years it might be different, but right now we are trying to develop our team and our district processes in order to support students and faculty in the district.” Dr. Williams added, “Being a good communicator is critical to success in this job. Every day, I communicate with at least ten different principals.”

Challenges Faced During the First Year as Superintendent

Dr. Williams was asked about the challenges he faced during his first year as superintendent. Dr. Williams described the challenges of dealing with a highly charged political environment surrounding schools. His district is currently in the middle of a book review with several groups. “Staff will be reviewing the books, and there will be a lot of pressure on them to influence the decision,” Dr. Williams shared. Dr. Williams said he does his best to “Keep the noise off his principals and staff.” He opined that part of his job is to help free up school administrators and staff to do their jobs without interference. He believes effective communication is the key to addressing these issues.

In addition to the heightened political environment, Dr. Williams talked about concerns about safety and trauma. He talked about the vulnerability of schools and how important it is to keep students safe in “today’s chaotic world.” He also described the emotional stress of dealing with several deaths affecting the district. “When uncommon things come up, you have to be there for your staff during these difficult issues,” Dr. Williams stressed. “You have to grieve with them.”

Dr. Williams also explained that the district struggled with low morale due to student discipline problems under the previous administration. Dr. Williams shared that he and his team revamped the discipline matrix and handbook in response to these concerns. By reworking the student discipline code of conduct, the district was able to address student discipline concerns.

When asked about his most significant personal challenge, Dr. Williams immediately discussed the board of education. He said, “I have many board members, and they might not always agree, but it comes back to the communication piece that we have spoken about.” According to Dr. Williams, “There is a pressure to keep the board of education informed. A weekly update to the board about the transition is critical. This has been important so that everyone is aware of things going on within the district.” Dr. Williams continued, “On a personal note, how can I communicate effectively with the board of education? Several times, I thought to myself, if I would have been a little more communicative with the board, I could have avoided some confusion and issues.”

When asked how he overcame these challenges, Dr. Williams reiterated that communication was key to avoiding big issues. He added that the superintendent has a duty to support school administrators and staff and must be the person who deals with a lot of external political issues. In this way, administrators and staff can focus on their schools and students without interference and pressure from external organizations or persons.

Successes During the First Year as Superintendent

When Dr. Williams was about his successes during his first year as superintendent, he said that the board of education coordinated with him, and they agreed to curtail discipline issues, improve staff morale, improve auxiliary departments, and maintain universal Pre-K programs. Dr. Williams explained that they have secured a building and applied for a school

code to open an academy to help with student discipline. Regarding auxiliary services, Dr. Williams has coordinated with directors, and they highlighted positive initiatives about auxiliary services. In this way, stakeholders can see the positive things happening in the district that might otherwise go unnoticed. Also, notes go out weekly to all stakeholders from cabinet meetings so that everyone now understands what auxiliary services are doing along with the many other successes in the district.

Universal Pre-K is still being worked on with staff at the district level. Dr. Williams said this will not be easy because the district is also opening a new alternative school. Through attrition and staff reallocation, Dr. Williams hopes to have both an alternative school and universal Pre-K. However, Dr. Williams noted that the most significant success was bringing all of those initiatives together and finalizing a strategic plan for the district.

According to Dr. Williams, many good things are happening. Dr. Williams stressed that several of these were in the works before he came in as superintendent. For example, one school was named a “Distinguished School” for students with disabilities. Three schools are identified as top schools in North Carolina.

When asked about the factors that led to these successes, Dr. Williams talked about the hard work of staff members. He also said that good communication with the board of education and all stakeholders had been vital. He believed that creating a strategic plan has helped lay the groundwork for future success in the district.

Mistakes During First Year as Superintendent

Dr. Williams was asked about his mistakes during his first year as a superintendent. He responded by saying that he makes mistakes often. “It is the nature of being in a leadership position and a new one at that to make mistakes in the job,” Dr. Williams offered. Dr. Williams

said that some of his mistakes were not getting information to the board promptly. In one of the controversial book reviews, Dr. Williams shared that he could have provided more guidance and information to the board, which would have clarified the topic.

Dr. Williams stated that it is important to regularly check in with board members to ensure “everyone is on the same page.” This can be particularly true when dealing with complicated and challenging employee situations. Dr. Williams said that sometimes school district employees make mistakes, and as the school district leader he had to shoulder the blame for those mistakes with the board. In some cases, he was unaware of the employee’s actions until it was brought to his attention. Dr. Williams said:

Part of being a good leader is that as a superintendent you are willing to stand up for your employees in the face of adversity. It is important to be willing to stand in the fire sometimes for your employees. This builds loyalty and morale among your employees.

Strategies Used During the First Year as Superintendent

Dr. Williams's top priority was setting up an executive cabinet with high transparency in its operations. He felt he needed a core team so that good decisions could be made in the district. He also reworked the organizational chart in the district. Notes from cabinet meetings were published to enhance transparency to stakeholders in the district. Additionally, principals are invited to attend any of the cabinet meetings.

Dr. Williams also wanted to protect the principals’ time by eliminating redundant demands coming from the district office. To accomplish this, Dr. Williams ordered that he be included in principal group emails from district officials so that there was appropriate oversight in protecting principals from additional work from the district. Additionally, Dr. Williams

explained that he has reduced the length of principals' meetings and the time principals are away from their schools.

When asked about groups or people that influenced his initial decisions, Dr. Williams named the previous superintendent he worked as a positive mentor from whom he seeks advice. Dr. Williams also said that he listened to other superintendents throughout the state. Dr. Williams also spends significant time communicating with the board chair and county commissioners. He also said that he pays attention to feedback from the community. All of these groups influenced his initial decisions coming into the district.

Advice for Other First-Time Superintendents

When asked about advice he would provide other beginning superintendents, Dr. Williams talked about the importance of the new superintendent choosing a district where his or her goals match the board of education's goals and vice versa. Dr. Williams said, "The superintendent needs a good fit when it comes to accepting the job offer of superintendent in a district." When describing the new superintendent's relationship with the board, Dr. Williams added, "When it comes to the board of education relationships, be genuine and honest. This creates trust and allows for a good relationship." He then talked about how crucial it is for a superintendent to have situational awareness and "getting ahead of potential issues before they become huge issues." Also, Dr. Williams highly recommended that new superintendents take advantage of professional development opportunities offered through the North Carolina Superintendent's Association. He added, "Do not always assume that because a newly-minted superintendent knows a district-level job very well, that he or she could simply step into the superintendent position and be automatically successful." In closing, Dr. Williams said, "Always keep students as the primary focus, and you will not go wrong."

Case Study Three: Dr. Mike Sides, Superintendent

Background Information

Dr. Sides is a middle-aged 45-49 Caucasian male who leads a small to medium-sized school district in western North Carolina. He has his doctorate and has not been a superintendent elsewhere. This is his first year as a superintendent.

Dr. Sides started his career as a lateral entry teacher and did not have a degree in education. HE coached several sports, and he came to view this as a strength because it “enabled me to view the district analytically as a system.” Dr. Sides was encouraged to pursue an administrative role by a supervisor in the district who saw potential in him. He was asked to go back to school to get his administrative degree.

Dr. Sides was promoted to assistant principal while completing his administrative degree. He was promoted to principal after a few years. As principal, Dr. Sides was asked to radically change his school because of its chronically low academic performance. This meant Dr. Sides was forced to make difficult choices. According to Dr. Sides, this required letting some staff go, retraining staff in the Science of Reading, and making organizational changes that would allow the school to succeed. Dr. Sides was then moved to the principalship at a larger school with many more challenges in academics and athletics. Dr. Sides said that he spent several years there and was able to improve the school’s academic learning and fix some of the issues that were causing the school problems.

District leaders asked Dr. Sides to get his doctorate after several impressive stints as principal. Dr. Sides then enrolled in a university and attained his doctorate. After several years as a principal, he was promoted to a department head position in the district. After several years, he was promoted to superintendent.

Dr. Sides was asked if he aspired to be a superintendent. Dr. Sides replied that he did not, but “he was always trying to better himself, do a good job, and be the best in his field.” District leaders saw potential in him, leading him down the superintendency path. As such, Dr. Sides has done the same with several leaders within the district. He has asked people in the district whom he believes would make excellent leaders to go back to school. Dr. Sides says, “The people you grow into leaders today will be the future of the district tomorrow.”

Dr. Sides said he was prepared for the superintendent position by getting his doctorate and being a good building-level administrator and department head for the district. Most of his learning comes from being inquisitive and asking questions. Dr. Sides described himself as “a big proponent of looking at the processes within the district that can be streamlined to help students improve their academic performance.” Dr. Sides actively sought out high-performing teachers within the district and found out what their processes were for success. Dr. Sides said he actively looked for programs and procedures that paid huge academic dividends to help students learn and grow. Dr. Sides said what prepared him for superintendent was to be inquisitive. “Make sure you understand the process,” he said.

The aspect of the position that Dr. Sides enjoys the most is seeing the organization's success as a whole. Dr. Sides talked about several schools in his district that are very successful. He said, “The superintendent, however, is the facilitator. Teachers, students, and parents are the ones that did the groundwork for our success. Being the district’s cheerleader is what I love.”

Challenges Faced During the First Year as Superintendent

Dr. Sides was asked about his challenges during his first year as superintendent. Dr. Sides responded that there have been several tough challenges concerning human resources and employees within the district early on. These human resource issues involved the termination of

well-known veteran employees who were well liked and had many connections within the community. When describing how he dealt with these challenges, he shared:

It is important to adhere to the district's core values when problems arise at schools. By not addressing issues within the district in a timely manner, this could subject the district to legal action. Hard decisions had to be made and the job of a superintendent is not always easy.

Dr. Sides added, "We made the best decision for the school and district. Unfortunately, when decisions are made, not everyone is happy, and superintendents are not immune to people being upset. The situation is now resolved, and the district can move forward." Dr. Sides then described the importance of having principles and addressing issues when they arise, even if they are unpopular. He said, "The superintendent's job is to weather the criticism when people are not happy." In this way, according to Dr. Sides, the schools are spared from adversity.

Dr. Sides conducted a series of "listen and learn" meetings to get a "good pulse" on perceptions of the district. He wanted to make sure that he heard from teachers at each school. He met with the faculty at each school and asked everyone the same prompts: (a) "Give me one thing that I could change or do differently at the district, and it benefits kids," and (b) "Tell me something we need to start or stop doing." Dr. Sides wanted to hear from everyone, informing his staff that "we're going to listen twice as much as we speak." Dr. Sides discovered through these meetings that the district needed to give principals more authority and flexibility regarding inclement weather days, provided principals followed the law.

When describing the most outstanding personal challenges of the first year as superintendent, Dr. Sides spoke about the "spotlight that comes with being a superintendent." For example, it was not easy on his family when people criticized him or the district on social

media. According to Dr. Sides, the superintendent's job is to lead the school district. However, it can quickly “turn into a focus of negativity given that the superintendent is the face of the district.” Dr. Sides suggested that this can be overcome by staying the course and being consistent and transparent with all stakeholders.

Successes During the First Year as Superintendent

Dr. Sides faced several challenges during his first year as superintendent. Dr. Sides described leading the district when a major employer in the county closed. This meant that many families would leave the county. Also, a popular charter school opened, and this also caused declining enrollment.

Despite these challenges, Dr. Sides took a proactive approach in his first year. He believed that if he did not get out in front of these changes, others within the district would not follow. Dr. Sides and his cabinet devised several strategies to address this loss of students in the district. For example, Dr. Sides petitioned the state for spending flexibility regarding funds and class sizes. Next, Dr. Sides found a company that could accurately forecast the effects of the business closure. Also, Dr. Sides and his team studied why the district was losing students to the new charter school.

Dr. Sides discovered through his listening and learning tour that there was a negative perception of public schools; however, once students enrolled in the district, they found that the district served students well. This meant the district needed to advertise its schools more effectively and challenge the perception that public schools were not as good as charter schools. According to Dr. Sides, the district implemented a marketing campaign to change public perception of public schools. The district has done press releases and news articles discussing the positive things occurring in the district. Additionally, heightened social media efforts are utilized

to bring information to families. Dr. Sides considered this campaign a substantial success during his first year because it is essential for superintendents to constantly publicize information about how schools are performing.

Mistakes During First Year as Superintendent

When asked about mistakes during his first year, Dr. Sides replied that “mistakes are a growth opportunity” and “a way to learn and get better.” Despite not describing a specific mistake, he talked about how important it is to share information promptly. He also discussed the importance of “framing information so that it does not get misunderstood.” Finally, he discussed the importance of timely communication when dealing with a mistake.

Strategies Used During the First Year as Superintendent

Dr. Sides said that the priority during his first year was developing a connection to all staff. Listening and gathering information were priorities. He wanted to make sure that everyone in the district had a voice. He wanted the connection to be positive and foster excellent morale. He said that while it has not been easy, he is in the process of doing his second round of listening and learning sessions. He has visited schools and allowed people to meet the superintendent and gather information about how schools, students, and staff are doing.

Dr. Sides mentioned that while it was helpful to gather information, it was equally important that the superintendent and district act on it. He said it was important to “follow up and follow through.” Dr. Sides said that he and his team addressed every question given to them by teachers in the district, and they answered them one by one on a Google Form.

Advice for Other First-Time Superintendents

Dr. Sides was asked if he had advice for other first-time superintendents. He responded by saying that listening and evaluating are important. Dr. Sides suggested that superintendents

must ensure they “understand your system and why things work as they do.” He added that it is “okay to challenge old systems and put things in place to improve the district.”

Dr. Sides also stressed the importance of evaluation during the first year. He noted, “At the school level, it is easier to make decisions and get things done. However, at the district level, it takes a lot longer. It is important to take it slow and be subtle when making district-level changes.” Dr. Sides said, “Remember you are on a cruise ship, not a speed boat. Move slow your first year, and make changes incrementally.”

Case Study Four: Dr. David Chace, Superintendent

Background Information

Dr. Chace is a Caucasian male in his first year as superintendent at the time of the interview. He has his doctorate, and he is 45-49 years old. Dr. Chace has only been superintendent in his current school district. Dr. Chace leads a medium-sized urban district in central North Carolina.

Dr. Chace was a teacher for several years and was promoted to assistant principal while attending graduate school for his master’s degree. Due to some extenuating circumstances, Dr. Chace was named principal of the school he was working at as an assistant principal after an accident caused the principal to be out. He spent several years as a principal and was then hired as a district department head in a neighboring district. Dr. Chace spent four years in that role. He was then named assistant superintendent of instruction in the district. He was offered a superintendency in the district where he worked but instead accepted a superintendent position in the county where he lived.

Dr. Chace replied “no” when asked if he had always aspired to be a superintendent. However, he worked with an excellent leader who saw potential in him and pushed him to get his

doctorate. He decided to pursue his doctorate because that could create the opportunity to work at a university when he retired. He wanted to stay as a district-level department head because he saw firsthand the difficulties of being a superintendent. He decided not to pursue the superintendency unless it was the right time and fit for him.

Dr. Chace took several steps to prepare for the role of superintendent. He had been a teacher and a principal. He believed that serving as principal would give him the respect of principals. Holding district-level leadership positions allowed Dr. Chace to have a micro-political view and be prepared for the role. For instance, having to present to the board of education as a district department head and interacting with the board during work sessions meant he was familiar with board operations. Additionally, Dr. Chace said he was prepared for the superintendent position by the university he attended. Finally, Dr. Chace worked for different leaders and learned from them all. Through previous district leaders, Dr. Chace developed a network that helped him understand the nuances of the superintendent role.

Dr. Chace was asked what part of the role of superintendent gives him the most satisfaction. Dr. Chace enjoys meeting with curriculum leaders and helping the district find the direction for success. Dr. Chace enjoys visiting schools. He likes to visit at least two schools a week. He likes visiting classrooms and seeing teachers. According to Dr. Chace, teachers within the district are finally getting used to the superintendent walking through their school occasionally.

Challenges Faced During the First Year as Superintendent

Dr. Chace said that some of his challenges in his first year were gaps in his professional knowledge of finance and operations. He had experience being a principal, but “there is a steep

learning curve between managing one school and many schools.” For Dr. Chace, “It was much simpler working with a single school’s budget versus an entire district’s budget.”

Dr. Chace also described challenges related to working with an elected board. Dr. Chace said, “One of the most difficult things is helping keep the board informed and meeting their intent. Some board members want things to move in a certain direction and it is difficult when other members want to move in a complete opposite direction.” Trying to navigate differing opinions from the board and how to move forward has been challenging. Board members want to ensure that their voices and intent are heard. Dr. Chace said he often coordinates and communicates with the board to convey the rationale for decisions and processes.

According to Dr. Chace, another challenge for a new superintendent is differences of opinion among district-level department heads and cabinet-level supervisors. Sometimes, people do not always share the same vision and expectations. This tension will cause people to adapt or leave.

When asked how he overcame these challenges, Dr. Chace replied, “Schools are in the people business.” He recommended “being on the same page with the board of education.” He spends significant time with board members. He hears from a board member daily. He meets in person with each board member once a month and before board meetings. Dr. Chace said that he occasionally gets complaints, but it is vital to communicate and stay close with your board so that everyone is on the same page. Dr. Chace sends the board a bulletin on what he has worked on each week. “It’s important to have the boards backing on new initiatives, it’s not worth moving forward without their support,” said Dr. Chace.

Work-life balance was a significant personal challenge for Dr. Chace, particularly having adequate time with family because of the never-ending demands of the job. Also, Dr. Chace

talked about the unanticipated challenge of having his spouse working in the district. He talked about people attempting to use the spouse to access the superintendent. Additionally, Dr. Chace found that personnel actions within the district can sometimes have negative consequences for his family. For example, his wife was acquainted with an employee he had to address regarding performance, and the situation became awkward for his spouse.

Work-life balance issues also affected Dr. Chace's children. One of the things that Dr. Chace did not expect was how his children were treated within the district. Dr. Chace said his children "are either treated very well or very poorly." This was something that Dr. Chace had not thought of when he stepped into the role of superintendent. For instance, teachers have singled out his children by saying, "This is Dr. Chace's son. We're glad to have them with us." This attention automatically created an awkward classroom dynamic for his children. Dr. Chace explained that his children are the most important thing to him, and decisions at the district level can sometimes affect his children at school. Dr. Chace said he greatly underestimated the family dynamic that comes with the role.

Successes During the First Year as Superintendent

When Dr. Chace was asked about his greatest successes during his first year as superintendent, he described "bringing a sense of direction and focus to the district that was needed following the pandemic." Using a steering committee and a consulting agency, he worked to identify areas where the district could improve and created a strategic plan. To ensure broad input, they conducted fifteen focus groups and two surveys. The team also met with parents, students, and teachers. In the end, they had built a very robust strategic plan, according to Dr. Chace.

Dr. Chace said the district had too many areas that it was trying to fix at once. With the new strategic plan, the district will focus on four areas. These include (a) maximizing student achievement, (b) maintaining safe, healthy, and happy schools, (c) recruiting and retaining quality teachers, and (d) building a positive district culture. Schools were asked to update their improvement plans to align with the four district focus areas to ensure a coordinated effort. The four focus areas are to maximize student achievement.

The next challenge is to execute the plan. Dr. Chace wants to ensure that schools and the district monitor the implementation of the district and school improvement plans to ensure they are implemented with fidelity.

Mistakes During First Year as Superintendent

Dr. Chace was asked about mistakes he made during his first year as a superintendent and what he would do differently. He responded, “He did not know what he did not know.” He then described specific actions.

Dr. Chace talked about being uncertain about how quickly to enact changes when he became superintendent. He believed that incremental and slow change would be best, and he wanted to ensure that he listened to lots of feedback from stakeholders about the districts’ needs. He needed time to learn about the district and reflect on its needs. He also acknowledged lacking confidence to act boldly because he was in a new role and “feared people would think I was a dictator.” However, he said this slower pace of change meant that he missed opportunities to address some issues quickly. “If I could go back, I would’ve acted quicker,” said Dr. Chace. He said he should have interacted with political leaders outside of school more frequently because “county commissioners and civic leaders are important to school districts, particularly when it comes to funding.”

Dr. Chace said one thing he needed to do differently was to allow his team members to take the lead on issues related to their strengths and experiences. Dr. Chace said his nature is “to lead,” and he is highly task-oriented. He went on to describe the potential pitfalls associated with this orientation:

As a superintendent, you cannot micromanage everything. Trust your team to complete tasks. I need them to complement my skill set. I do not do the touchy-feely things well. But, I have staff members that love to plan Christmas parties and other things. So, allow your team to help you with various things. Have a team that complements your weaknesses.

Finally, Dr. Chace regretted not being more proactive in dealing with external policymakers when he first became superintendent. He said he should have interacted with political leaders outside of school more frequently because “county commissioners and civic leaders are important to school districts, particularly when it comes to funding.”

Strategies Used During the First Year as Superintendent

Dr. Chace was asked about his strategies and priorities as a first-year superintendent. Relying heavily on feedback from past leaders with whom he worked, his own experiences, and a mentor from the North Carolina School Superintendents Association, his responses suggested that relationship-building and strategic planning were his initial priorities. Dr. Chace said he prioritized being visible in schools and the district. Dr. Chace also said he needed to focus on meeting county and civic leaders. He spent much time in schools and attended many school events. It was important to him to be seen and be accessible.

Dr. Chace then talked about the district’s strategic plan. Even though he knew the district fairly well, multiple conversations with various stakeholders helped shape the district's direction.

He asked every employee he met with about their perceptions of what made it great to work in the district, what was challenging, and what they would want him to do over the next six months.

Advice for Other First-Time Superintendents

When asked about advice for other new superintendents, Dr. Chace said, “Vet the board of education you will be working with well. It is important to know what you would like to accomplish and make sure the board of education matches your goals.” Dr. Chace added that if the superintendent’s and board’s goals do not match, “You will be miserable. Understanding what you are okay with and can live with regarding the board of education is important. Constant friction with the board hurts the entire school district.” Dr. Chace continued, “If someone is simply looking to be a superintendent, that is okay. However, if you want to be a true leader, it is important that you find a board of education with similar values and direction.” Dr. Chace recommended watching board meetings in the district to understand how they operate. Dr. Chace concluded, “The board of education are your bosses, and it is important to be in sync with them.”

Case Study Five: Dr. Chad Tucker, Superintendent

Background Information

Dr. Tucker is a Caucasian male in his first year of the superintendency at the time of the interview. He is 45-49 years old and has his doctorate. Dr. Tucker has not been a superintendent elsewhere, and his district is a medium-sized district in eastern North Carolina.

While he did not initially start his career as a teacher, he worked as a part-time athletic coach and fell in love with the idea of teaching. Dr. Tucker then became a high school teacher for several years, leading to additional leadership opportunities. After a short period leading a grant-funded program, his principal was reassigned to another school, and Dr. Tucker was brought with him as assistant principal. He spent two years as the school’s assistant principal and

finished his administrative degree. Dr. Tucker was then promoted to principal and spent eight years in the role. Following his principalship, Dr. Tucker was assigned to the district office as a department head. This led to several years of various district roles, culminating in the role of chief of academic instruction. From there, Dr. Tucker was named superintendent.

Dr. Tucker mentioned that he learned much from working in various roles and for multiple superintendents, particularly his last superintendent. That superintendent, according to Dr. Tucker, “Shared a lot with me on how to be a successful superintendent.” When Dr. Tucker felt the time was right, he began looking for superintendent jobs and found one in a place that reminded him of home. So, he accepted the position.

Dr. Tucker stressed that he initially had no intention of becoming a superintendent. However, by having mentors who pushed him along the way and gave him opportunities to grow as a leader, he came to believe that he could become a superintendent. Dr. Tucker credits leaders who mentored him and plans to do the same for others.

Dr. Tucker said he was also prepared for the position through his higher education doctoral program. The program utilized a cohort model, which worked very well for him and those in the program. Also, the experiences throughout his tenure as an educator helped shape his leadership, even going all the back to coaching sports. Dr. Tucker said:

I’m still that ball coach trying to guide my team to success. Great ball coaches make mediocre players into good players and good players into excellent players. Great coaches hold players to higher standards, build relationships with them, and model expectations for the team.

Dr. Tucker was asked about the aspects of the superintendency enjoys the most. He shared that he enjoys the challenge of leading a school district. He enjoys the strategic thinking

and planning that comes with the position. As a leader, Dr. Tucker said building on your strengths and identifying a district's weaknesses are important.

Challenges Faced During the First Year as Superintendent

Dr. Tucker was asked about the challenges he faced during his first year as superintendent. Dr. Tucker quickly responded that nearly half of his schools were considered low-performing. "Now that is a major challenge," said Dr. Tucker. Much of his focus has centered on finding resources and strategies to improve outcomes in those schools.

Dr. Tucker also added that the board of education can be a major challenge. Since he has been superintendent, there have been some changes in the board's makeup. That means his current board does not include all the board members who hired him.

Dr. Tucker explained how important it is to get to know the board members and their personalities. He also said that the superintendent must remain impartial when dealing with the board:

The superintendent cannot have allegiances. The superintendent works for every board member and must stay neutral when board members disagree on topics, policy, or direction of the school district. If the board is not unified, this can cause angst and can be problematic for the superintendent.

Dr. Tucker added that he trains his team to remain neutral when dealing with disagreements among the board.

Adding to his challenges, the county commissioners have not adequately supported the schools. He talked about the challenges of working in a charged political environment where schools have become subject to hyper-partisan politics. He noted that he was not fully aware of the complexity of the political environment until he became superintendent.

Finally, Dr. Tucker said that many directors and department heads retired or left when the previous superintendent retired. This caused Dr. Tucker to hire a new team of people to help him lead the district. Dr. Tucker has spent much time learning about his team and their strengths and weaknesses.

Dr. Tucker said he relies heavily on a network of other superintendents to meet these professional challenges. He explained, “Other superintendents may not tell you what option to take, but they can offer similar situations that they have experienced and what actions were taken and the outcomes.”

Some of Dr. Tucker’s most significant personal challenges so far have been related to work-life balance. He talked about missing time with his family because he relocated to his new district before his family could move. Not only did he miss them, but he regretted the strain his absence put on his family. He mentioned that his family was left to deal with seemingly little things like household chores or yardwork that he usually would complete. This has put some strain on the family. In addition to his absence, he talked about worrying about the impact of social media. He was concerned that his children saw positive and negative things about him and the district on social media. He copes with this challenge by using *FaceTime* to interact with his family, hoping to maintain normalcy.

The visibility of the superintendent was surprising and challenging for Dr. Tucker. He said that while he was accustomed to being recognizable as a principal, he was much less noticeable in the community when he worked in the district office. However, that changed when he became superintendent. He noted that people who become superintendents need to understand that they will lose their anonymity.

Successes During the First Year as Superintendent

Dr. Tucker said his greatest successes came from the listening and learning tour that he conducted in the district. Dr. Tucker spent an entire day in every school in the district, attending professional learning community meetings and meeting students and teachers. He met with the entire faculty at the end of each visit. He consistently asked stakeholders what they loved about the district, what needed to change, and what should not be changed. He was encouraged because these visits build goodwill in the district.

Dr. Tucker also led several new initiatives. He prioritized purchasing more software-based curricula for students and accompanying training for teachers. The district also established a bonus compensation program using federal funding to support teacher retention. Dr. Tucker is also developing a leadership program for assistant principals to support their professional growth. Also, principal meetings were reorganized to focus on training and development while minimizing the time principals had to be away from their schools.

Mistakes During First Year as Superintendent

Dr. Tucker was asked about the mistakes made during his first year as a superintendent. Dr. Tucker said that he mismanaged an upset board member. Specifically, some of his leaders were admonished by a board member. He explained that he should have spoken with the board member because the superintendent must “weather those things for your staff.” Dr. Tucker shared that if there is an issue between a board member and an employee, the best thing is to have the board go through the superintendent directly. Unfortunately, this situation created some hard feelings at the time; however, things have improved moving forward.

Dr. Tucker said that another mistake was trying to move the district too quickly in a direction without adequately vetting the problem and training those who would be impacted.

Specifically, Dr. Tucker described a decision to mainstream some self-contained exceptional children back with general education students. In Dr. Tucker's opinion, this happened too quickly, and there was pushback from teachers and parents who had not experienced those types of disabilities. While he believed the decision was appropriate, additional training and support were needed before moving the students. In the future, Dr. Tucker said he will ask for a more thorough explanation when significant changes are proposed and ensure the proper amount of time to implement the change.

Strategies Used During the First Year as Superintendent

Dr. Tucker prioritized several strategies during his first year. Listening and learning from stakeholders was a top priority. He said, "It is important to do these because the new district's goals and path forward is determined by what was learned by getting out in schools and finding things the district needed to improve." In addition to multiple meetings with faculty and staff, Dr. Tucker also created a parent and student advisory council.

Supporting principals was also important. Dr. Tucker believed he needed to help them become better leaders and be cognizant of their time. Principal input was also important when selecting new curriculum materials and allowing them to have input in the district's direction. Also, the district created a handbook for principals to help them manage monthly tasks. It contained reminders and protocols to be followed.

Dr. Tucker also emphasized that the district has several low-performing schools, and they needed to develop a plan to address the needs of those individual schools. He also mentioned that they need to finalize a strategic plan. Given that the district had minimal support for beginning teachers, they needed to continue to nurture a beginning teacher support program he commissioned.

Advice for Other First-Time Superintendents

Dr. Tucker said the first thing to do as a new superintendent is to get to know the other district leaders. “Understanding everyone’s experiences and where they can be most helpful is important,” said Dr. Tucker. It may also be necessary to have some oversight over district leaders who are relatively new to the position. During these initial stages, Dr. Tucker emphasized that knowing your core values and being true to them is also key to a superintendent’s success.

Case Study Six: Dr. Susan Hessman, Superintendent

Background Information

Dr. Hessman was a first-year female Caucasian superintendent in North Carolina at the time of the interview. She is between the ages of 40-44 and she has her doctorate. She leads a smaller rural school district in central North Carolina. She has not been a superintendent anywhere else.

Dr. Hessman taught for several years and then got her master’s degree. Dr. Hessman then became a school-based administrator for a time. From there, Dr. Hessman transitioned to the district office, where she worked as a director in the curriculum department. After several years, she became the assistant superintendent of curriculum and eventually became the superintendent. While Dr. Hessman would have preferred to remain in the curriculum department, she transitioned to the superintendency when the position became vacant.

Dr. Hessman shared that professional organizations like the North Carolina Association of School Superintendents helped her prepare for the superintendency. Also, she watched and learned from her superintendent and gained many valuable lessons through her experiences as an assistant superintendent.

When asked what she enjoys most about her work as superintendent, she stated that she enjoys making a difference in students' lives. She enjoys the processes, initiatives, and hard work that ultimately help increase academic achievement. She also enjoys being in the schools, visiting students, and interacting with teachers. She likes seeing faculty and students outside the office at football games and other less structured events. She has been a part of her district for many years and is proud that the students she taught are now bringing their own children to the district.

Challenges Faced During the First Year as Superintendent

Dr. Hessman commented that difficult personnel decisions were the most challenging for her. Being in the district for an extended period has allowed her to become close with many employees. As superintendent, she has to make difficult decisions about employees based on what is best for the district. Sometimes, this can involve terminating the employment of someone she knows well. She discussed the emotional turmoil of firing an employee she had known for years.

Dr. Hessman has also realized that employees may have close relationships with board members. Even when the superintendent is doing the right thing by addressing employee behaviors that violate school policy, it can be difficult and stressful when the person in question is also friends with a board member or county commissioner. This creates another problematic dynamic. Through no fault of her own, the superintendent may create enemies while simply enforcing district policy.

Dr. Hessman described the stress generated by dealing with employee discipline. She noted that while being consistent when enforcing board policies is expected, superintendents are subject to criticism about personnel decisions because they cannot publicly explain the

circumstances. By statute, employee records are confidential in North Carolina. “This opens up the possibility for criticism where I cannot defend the decision,” said Dr. Hessman. “I just have to take the criticism and move on. The number of personnel matters wears on you, and it may be why superintendents don’t last that long.”

Dr. Hessman said it is possible to overcome these challenges by holding to one’s core values. She emphasized, “I ask myself. Can I put my head on the pillow and know that I have followed the policy and treated people fairly? If the answer is yes, then I’m okay, and I can rest easy.” She added that there is a tendency for superintendents to worry about being fired if they make the wrong person mad. Dr. Hessman asserted that she had to let go of that fear and focus on enforcing board policy: “Superintendents cannot spend time worrying how their decision is going to effect the political landscape. They have to follow board policy and stay true to the district’s and their personal core values.”

Also, Dr. Hessman maintained that having a solid support group is critical for superintendents. The support team at the district level is helpful, but it is also important to have superintendents and friends in other districts. Dr. Hessman stressed that your family also needs to be supportive because “This is a hard job, and you do not leave it at the door. You are always on as a superintendent. People think that being a superintendent is a glamorous job, and it is not. It is very stressful.”

Dr. Hessman asserted that substance abuse and divorce rates are high among superintendents due to the loneliness and stress of the job. Dr. Hessman declared that there are easier ways to make money if someone is unsure why they are doing this work. “No one fully understands the job of superintendent until someone actually does the job,” she said.

Dr Hessman also talked about the emotional toil associated with the death of a staff member or student, noting that these situations can be very stressful. Being there for the family as they make difficult decisions following the death of a loved one has been very taxing, according to Dr. Hessman. When describing the death of a staff member, Dr. Hessman said:

Nothing prepares you for the loss of someone in the district. The newspaper printed a story about one of the deaths that was factually inaccurate. We contacted the paper, and they printed a retraction of the inaccurate story.

Working with her staff, Dr. Hessman ensured things were handled properly for the family so that everyone could have closure.

Dr. Hessman was asked about the personal challenges associated with the role of superintendent. Dr. Hessman responded that work-life balance is difficult. She said, “Trying to be a mom, a friend, and a wife is difficult while serving as superintendent. There are many night activities, and it is a very busy job.” Dr. Hessman described bringing the stresses of the job home and how it can impact her relationship with her family.

Dr. Hessman talked about the constant visibility of the superintendent role. “People are always watching whether you realize it or not,” said Dr. Hessman. This can add stress for her and her family. She shared:

It can be difficult on the kids as well. It is one thing to be the teacher’s child, the assistant principal or director’s child, but when someone is the superintendent’s kids, they are picked on and looked at sometimes in an entirely different way even if everything is going well.

Maintaining personal health was another concern reported by Dr. Hessman. Due to excessive meetings and stress, it can be challenging to stay healthy. In order to address these

issues, Dr. Hessman recommended regular exercise. She also recommended finding “safe places to talk with a good mentor because it is important to get it out rather than keeping it in and allowing it to fester.”

Successes During the First Year as Superintendent

Dr. Hessman explained that the Covid-19 pandemic was complicated for the school district. Time away from schools impacted learning, and over fifty percent of schools were considered low-performing based on standardized test results. Under her leadership, the district was able to pull several schools out of low-performing status, and now the district is not considered a low-performing district. She said, “That was a huge success.” She attributed this success to new accountability initiatives from the district to help schools stay on track and to ensure research-based approaches were being implemented in schools.

Dr. Hessman has also worked diligently to cultivate trusting relationships within the district. Dr. Hessman set the expectation that she wanted to meet as many people in the district as possible. While many knew her, they did not know her as the superintendent. By meeting with multiple stakeholders, she demonstrated that she cared about them, and they began to see her as superintendent.

Mistakes During First Year as Superintendent

Dr. Hessman described that when she initially became superintendent, she was “still learning how everything works pertaining to the superintendent.” One of her significant mistakes was not delegating responsibilities to appropriate subordinates. She continued to do many of the tasks of the assistant superintendent role because they were familiar to her. She said, “You cannot fix everything. It is important to delegate. The superintendent has to allow others to do

their jobs.” She wanted to be involved and inadvertently did more of someone else’s job than she should have been.

When asked about things she would change if she could go back in time, Dr. Hessman shared that she has grown professionally through her mistakes. She noted that a staff member told her she needed to delegate more. She followed that recommendation and allowed her team to lead more initiatives. She then talked about how she had to learn to trust her team more and accept that they might not always do things exactly as she would. Additionally, she talked about overcoming “imposter syndrome” and accepting that she could do the job successfully. This acceptance meant that she would have to accept that she might not be able to please everyone on the board of education. It also meant that she had to let go of the fear of being fired from her job.

Strategies Used During the First Year as Superintendent

The first thing that Dr. Hessman prioritized was to observe district operations. It was important to resist the urge to change things when first entering the superintendent role. Dr. Hessman said that her priority was to meet staff and understand their perspectives about things that needed to be changed. Decisions were made after meetings with faculty, parents, and stakeholders. Dr. Hessman said that it may be necessary to conduct the meetings again in the future. She explained:

Superintendents sometimes make the mistake that the world is a static place and that things do not change significantly, especially when it comes to people’s perceptions and opinions. Continuously understanding and addressing the needs of the district creates future success.

Dr. Hessman worked closely with her board chairperson during her first year as superintendency. Despite having worked previously in other district roles, she knew that she

needed to develop a “different relationship” with the chairperson now that she was superintendent. She frequently had lunch with the chairperson so they would have time to talk and plan. She talked about how important it was to coordinate with the board of education and ensure mutual understanding. She believed that doing so helped establish trust with the board.

Advice for Other First-Time Superintendents

Dr. Hessman discussed the importance of professional networking and mentoring when asked about advice for other first-time superintendents. Dr. Hessman shared how important it was to have a trusted mentor and how grateful she was for the support from her mentor. She then offered advice for first-time women superintendents.

Dr. Hessman shared how helpful it was for her to have a network of women superintendents. She explained that despite a lengthy career in education, she never experienced misogyny until becoming superintendent. “This is the first job where it felt different because I am female,” she offered. She continued, “I am used to getting questions about decisions that a man would not have to explain. It is different for guys than for women.” She then emphasized how important it is for women superintendents to have a network of other women superintendents for collaboration, advice, and support.

Case Study Seven: Dr. Fred Hitchcock, Superintendent

Background Information

Dr. Hitchcock was a second-year superintendent at the time of the interview. However, his responses reflect his first year as superintendent. He has his doctorate and is between 45 and 49 years old. Dr. Hitchcock is a Caucasian male in a medium-sized eastern North Carolina school district.

He began his career as a teacher and coach and later returned to graduate school to obtain his master's degree in school administration. Later, he obtained his doctorate in educational leadership. After serving as a principal for several years, he was promoted to deputy superintendent. This eventually led to him being named interim superintendent and then superintendent.

Despite a lengthy career in school administration, Dr. Hitchcock did not aspire to be superintendent. The job came open, and he was promoted to the position. He shared that his favorite job was being a high school principal and that he joined the district office staff because he "just had a passion for educational leadership." However, the previous superintendent supported and encouraged Dr. Hitchcock and helped prepare him for the superintendency.

Dr. Hitchcock explained that he was prepared for the superintendency by having excellent mentors and various leadership experiences. Dr. Hitchcock appreciated having excellent supervisors who allowed him to "learn and grow and make mistakes." As deputy superintendent, Dr. Hitchcock developed a thorough understanding of district operations by overseeing six departments and several schools. Additionally, he participated in a training program for aspiring superintendents through the North Carolina School Superintendents Association. He spoke positively about the professional learning and networking in this program.

Dr. Hitchcock said that what he enjoys most as superintendent is "seeing the district be successful." He talked about setting the conditions that help improve academic performance for students and that "it is important to be a servant leader." Dr. Hitchcock also described how he loves being in schools and interacting with staff and students. The most satisfying thing about his job is removing obstacles or figuring out a way to improve the district for the benefit of students.

Challenges Faced During the First Year as Superintendent

When asked about the challenges of his first year, Dr. Hitchcock immediately began talking about working for an elected board. “There are times when recommendations are made, and the board decides not to accept the recommendations or votes down an imitative,” he shared. “If it’s not a hill to die on, you move on,” said Dr. Hitchcock. He further explained that learning how to work with the board and being proactive can be incredibly challenging “if all of the board is not moving in the same direction. It is important to navigate this so as to not let the board know you’re playing favorites.”

Dr. Hitchcock described himself as an educator rather than a politician. However, he has learned to navigate the political landscape in order to become a successful superintendent. In addition to his board of education, he also had to develop relationships with the county commissioners and county manager “to set the district up for success.”

Dr. Hitchcock said that to overcome these challenges, “I have to be me.” He added that being relational and “leaning on your strengths while being aware of weaknesses can help.” Dr. Hitchcock added that it is helpful to be transparent when dealing with the board of education, open to constructive feedback, and willing to understand and support the board’s sentiments even when they do not always agree with him. He added that continually building relationships with board members, primarily those new to the board, benefits himself and the district.

Like other participants, Dr. Hitchcock described work-life balance as a significant personal challenge. He worries about his health, sharing that he has gained weight since becoming superintendent. While his family is a priority, the demands of the position pull him away from his family on many evenings. He talked about the importance of establishing a work-life balance, even as he acknowledged that he is not always “good at it.” He mentioned that he

focuses on his family when away from work, tries to exercise, and uses a network of other superintendents for support and guidance.

Successes During the First Year as Superintendent

Dr. Hitchcock happily shared positive news about the local budget when asked about successes during his first year. He reported that the district secured a large increase in local funding from county commissioners. Working with county commissioners, Dr. Hitchcock developed a long-range plan whereby the school district would receive a percentage of local taxes collected yearly rather than an arbitrary amount. He believed doing so would make the budgeting process more predictable in coming years. He explained that developing a budget had been difficult because the district often was unsure how much local funding they would receive.

Dr. Hitchcock also shared how happy he was that there had been improvements in outcomes at several low-performing schools. He made improving achievement in these schools a priority. Happily, several schools improved their letter grades on the North Carolina school report card. Despite these improvements, Dr. Hitchcock added, “It is important to keep pushing and ensuring schools are working hard to improve student academic achievement.”

Finally, Dr. Hitchcock shared that he was pleased with the district team he put together. He talked about how the team members complement one another and have the skills needed to move the district forward.

Mistakes During First Year as Superintendent

Dr. Hitchcock explained that some of his mistakes as a first-year superintendent related to communication difficulties with the board. “Communicate with the board and communicate often,” said Dr. Hitchcock. He described situations where he inadvertently failed to share sufficient information with the board. He said that decisions needing the approval of the board

should be discussed thoroughly with board members. This way, board members are properly informed, and district-level decisions are vetted for future success.

Dr. Hitchcock also said that he should have studied district-level problems more closely and made some school and district-level changes more quickly to improve academic success at a faster rate. Specifically, he felt he should have made changes to the leadership team in several low-performing schools sooner. He believed that making those changes early on could have led to better outcomes.

Dr. Hitchcock also described his reactive rather than long-range mindset as a mistake during his first year. He said that the job can cause someone to focus too much on immediate problems rather than being more reflective and planning for long-range improvements. It is important, according to Dr. Hitchcock, “to be forward-thinking, plan, and help guide and create policies that allow the district to move forward instead of spending all of your time focused on current issues.” According to Dr. Hitchcock, it is important for the superintendent to guide the system rather than being stuck in a reactionary mode. He added that it would have been helpful for him to delegate more to subordinates rather than “getting bogged down.”

Strategies Used During the First Year as Superintendent

When asked about strategies used during his first year as superintendent, Dr. Hitchcock said he “prioritized being seen as a superintendent.” Because he is originally from the area and had so much professional experience in the district before becoming superintendent, he felt he needed to make sure “folks knew me as superintendent.” He talked about how important it was that he be viewed as the “ambassador for the school system to the community.” Therefore, he spent lots of time visiting schools and interacting with teachers, students, and parents. He sought

feedback from stakeholders about their perceptions of the district and areas for improvement. He described his goal as “being proactive, communicating, and building relationships.”

Advice for Other First-Time Superintendents

Dr. Hitchcock said his advice for new superintendents is to “be authentic, and every district is different.” He added that an aspiring superintendent needs to “understand the political context of the board dynamics when interviewing for superintendent positions.” Like other participants, he described how crucial it is to align the new superintendent’s goals and those of the board of education. Other bits of advice related to the importance of building relationships by seeking input from multiple stakeholders and making sure to promote positive developments in the district. He said, “Listen to what people think you do well and what they think you do not do well. Also, do not be afraid to advertise the things that are happening through the media and local newspaper.” Finally, he discussed the importance of building a solid team to complement the superintendent.

Case Study Eight: Dr. Sarah Smith, Superintendent

Background Information

Dr. Smith, a Caucasian woman, was a first-year superintendent in North Carolina at the time of the interview. She is between the ages of 50-54 and she has her doctorate. This is her only superintendent position. Dr. Smith leads a smaller urban district in central North Carolina.

Dr. Smith began her career as a teacher and later became a curriculum specialist for the district where she now is superintendent. While serving as a curriculum specialist, Dr. Smith obtained her master’s and doctoral degrees in school administration.

Dr. Smith was asked by her superintendent to become the principal of a small elementary school, and she agreed. She very much enjoyed being a principal. Following several years at the

elementary school, she was assigned to serve as principal of a low-performing middle school. While there, she was able to raise test scores and get the school out of low-performing status. Her success as middle school principal resulted in her promotion to a neighboring district's middle school director. Several years later, she returned to her original district as superintendent.

Dr. Smith said that she did not always aspire to be a superintendent. However, she realized the positive impact she could make on students and saw the good she could do as superintendent. She felt a calling to lead the high-poverty district she had grown to love because of her previous work there. She knew the district had experienced instability in the superintendency over the previous few years, and she believed she could make a positive difference.

Despite being a demanding job, Dr. Smith loves being a superintendent. She said she was prepared for the job, noting that her work as an elementary and middle school principal and district director provided great learning experiences. She also credited her doctoral program with preparing her for the challenge along with excellent guidance from a previous superintendent.

Despite feeling prepared for the position, Dr. Smith recognized that there were job functions with which she had experience and expertise and others for which she needed support. For example, she felt comfortable in the areas of curriculum and personnel because of her work experiences. However, she was concerned about managing a district budget because her experience with fiscal management was at the school level. Additionally, she felt unprepared for the political nuances of the position. Despite not considering herself a politician, she found herself competing with other government departments and agencies for resources. Doing so requires political savviness and acumen that she did not anticipate.

When asked what she enjoys about the superintendency, she described how rewarding it has been to serve the district she “grew up in.” She talked about how much she enjoys interacting with people in the district she previously taught or with whom she had a friendship. She also talked about how fulfilling it is to interact with students and witness their successes. She said, “Interacting with the students, it gives me motivation to keep working hard and making students ready for their futures.”

Challenges Faced During the First Year as Superintendent

Dr. Smith was asked about the professional challenges she has faced as superintendent. She said that one challenge is that people “have to view you as the superintendent and not in your previous roles in the district.” This challenge has been most pronounced when holding previous peers for whom she is now the supervisor accountable for their performance. “It is not always comfortable,” she explained. Additionally, there are “difficult personnel decisions” that have to be made as superintendent. Dr. Smith described this dynamic:

It can be challenging to motivate people sometimes to have a sense of urgency. Most people will rise to the occasion, but it’s not always easy being the pusher. It is important to become comfortable with a certain level of pressure. Moving forward despite the difficult circumstances is important when considering what is best for students.

Dr. Smith suggested two main strategies to combat professional challenges. The first relates to a resilient attitude. She explained:

I embrace that there will be mistakes, and there will be hard times. Part of the position is understanding that tough times will come and go and this is okay. Things will always get better and you have to stay true to who you are as a leader.

The second strategy she referenced for addressing professional challenges was to utilize the expertise of others. “The key is to surround yourself with good people,” said Dr. Smith. She then discussed how appropriately delegating to others with expertise increased the likelihood of effectively resolving professional dilemmas.

Like others, Dr. Smith asserted that work-life balance was a significant personal challenge. She emphasized how the highly visible nature of the position creates a loss of privacy for her and her family. She said, “This job is highly visible. There is a huge spotlight on superintendents. It is difficult on families as well.” This challenge is heightened for Dr. Smith because her child is a student in the district. She worries that her child could face negative repercussions because of the decisions she makes as superintendent.

To overcome these challenges Dr. Smith said it is important to be situationally aware. “If you are out to dinner with friends or even shopping for groceries on the weekend, always assume people know who you are and are watching. Be polite and professional with everyone.” Also, she insisted that social media can be problematic. She urged caution with the use of social media because “people will draw conclusions about you based on what you like and comment. It is important to stay neutral, polite, and professional when you are in this role.”

Dr. Smith also described the challenges associated with being a woman superintendent. Specifically, she said that despite over two decades as an educator, she never experienced gender bias in a professional context until becoming superintendent. She described her first experience with gender bias, which occurred shortly after becoming superintendent:

I was attending a conference. I walked into the room that was filled with men superintendents. Someone looked at me and asked me what my role was. I could tell that they did not think I was one of them. Obviously, the room was for superintendents only.

Successes During the First Year as Superintendent

Dr. Smith described her major challenge and success as reorganizing roles and responsibilities among the district office leadership team. She has added key leadership positions with the board's approval and support. For example, the district did not have anyone specifically assigned to provide leadership and oversight of curriculum and instruction. Dr. Smith described this as "a major deficiency" and was able to hire a veteran principal to serve as the assistant superintendent for curriculum. Additionally, job descriptions of existing district leaders were modified. Clarifying and defining roles helped in several ways. For example, someone was responsible for each primary work function, district leaders could focus on their areas of responsibility, and role ambiguity was eliminated.

Dr. Smith explained that the board expected her to "be an active superintendent." The district went through a period of leadership instability before her arrival, and the board wanted the new superintendent to provide clear direction. She knew she had to make changes to foster improvements. As a result, the district has rewritten its mission statement and is developing a strategic plan. However, Dr. Smith understood that for meaningful improvements to occur, the organization of leadership roles in the district office needed to be revamped.

Mistakes During First Year as Superintendent

Dr. Smith explained that the most significant mistake she made as a first-year superintendent was not being explicit enough with her communications to staff and the community. For example, she described a situation where what was supposed to be a regular school day had to become a remote learning day (students remain at home and receive virtual instruction) because of excessive employee absences. Some parents and community members complained because they did not understand the circumstances. Dr. Smith explained that this

problem could have been mitigated if she had communicated the reasons for the dilemma more thoroughly and if she had involved more parents on the decision-making committee to help explain the circumstances. Additionally, she added that she needed to be more precise in communicating expectations to employees. She said that “they will find loopholes” around unclear directives.

Strategies Used During the First Year as Superintendent

Dr. Smith described strategies during her first year as superintendent. First, Dr. Smith prioritized restructuring of the district office. According to Dr. Smith, the roles and responsibilities of all district officials were not clearly defined. Also, there were other duties and responsibilities in the area of curriculum and instruction that were not assigned to a specific person. According to Dr. Smith, clarifying roles and responsibilities and adding a new assistant superintendent to coordinate curriculum and instructional programs has improved efficiency and eliminated ambiguity at the district and school levels.

Second, Dr. Smith said making improvements to academic achievement was a top priority given that the district had a few low-performing schools. To further this end, Dr. Smith said it was important to have a district-level official in charge of curriculum and instruction. Third, Dr. Smith also prioritized creating a strategic plan for the district. While not finished, preliminary work on the plan had begun at the time of the interview.

When asked about people that influenced her priorities for the district, Dr. Smith talked about meeting with the board chairperson to discuss the direction of the district shortly after being hired. However, Dr. Smith noted that the board deals mostly with policy, and the superintendent manages the day-to-day operations. She added that things work smoothly when

these roles align. She described a positive working relationship with her board and this has been instrumental in the district's success so far.

Advice for Other First-Time Superintendents

When asked about advice for other first-time superintendents, Dr. Smith shared the following:

It is important to listen to your team. You need people who will tell you the truth. Be true to who you are as a superintendent. Every situation is different, so get the facts. And respect local politics and find out what folks value.

Summary of Themes from the Case Studies

While there was variation in participants' responses, commonalities occurred. Analysis of these commonalities led to the identification of themes that were aligned with the research questions. These themes are discussed in the following sections and noted in Table 2.

Table 2

Themes Aligned to Research Questions

Background and context	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participants had extensive experience as educators. • Participants sought professional challenges. • Participants saw themselves as servant-leaders.
RQ1. Challenges	Professional Challenges <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dealing with the board of education was stressful. • Participants felt the need to solidify themselves as superintendent. • Participants felt a sense of isolation.
RQ2. Successes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participants established productive relationships. • Long-range planning was successful. • Political support was garnered.

Table 2 *Themes Aligned to Research Questions (cont'd.)*

RQ3. Mistakes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participants did not communicate effectively enough with their boards. • Establishing the appropriate pace for change initiatives caused problems.
RQ4. Strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The importance of relationship building • The need to understand organizational protocols. • The need to restructure the formal hierarchy.
RQ5. Advice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seek alignment with the board. • Establish professional networks.

Background Information

Several themes emerged from the background questions asked of participants. First, all participants had extensive experience as teachers and school and district leaders before becoming superintendents. Second, all participants described a strong passion for personal improvement, leading them to accept more challenging roles throughout their careers. Third, the passion for personal challenges was not accompanied by the ambition to become a superintendent. Instead, participants described themselves as servant leaders who are passionate about working with children and teachers. Participants' words implied that their ascension to the superintendency was based on a desire to help others more than the need to fulfill professional ambition.

The superintendents interviewed in the study overwhelmingly had school and district leadership experiences that propelled them toward the superintendency. All participants reported starting as teachers with additional leadership responsibilities at the school. Some were athletic directors. Others were grade-level chairpersons or had other duties assigned to them by their principals. Three out of the eight superintendents came into education through lateral entry, starting as coaches of sports teams and then transitioning to teachers and athletic directors.

All of the participants reported that they had an internal drive to improve and challenge themselves constantly. Seven of the participants served as assistant principals and then principals. All participants had district-level leadership positions and experiences as either department heads or directors. Nearly all the participants were either assistant superintendents or deputy superintendents. All participants credited a mentor or a superintendent who believed in them with helping them gain the experience needed to apply for the superintendent job.

None of the participants reported that they started out in education with the intention of becoming a superintendent. Nonetheless, all the participants obtained their doctorate from an accredited institution, and they credited higher education for helping prepare them for the role of superintendent. However, every participant reported that the position of the superintendent is unique, and there are only so many trainings that can be done to prepare. The participants credit having a peer group of superintendents as well as the North Carolina Superintendent Association for helping them solve major problems.

The participants in the study consistently reported being in schools and around students and faculty as the part of their job that they love the most. The participants shared that they enjoy making a difference and improving the district's academic performance. They enjoy seeing their hard work and planning come to fruition. Interestingly, six out of eight participants reported that their favorite job in education was something other than superintendent. They reported that being the principal at a particular school they loved was their favorite job in education. However, none reported that they wished to return to the role.

Challenges Faced During the First Year as Superintendent

Professional Challenges

Challenges facing first-year superintendents were divided into two categories: professional challenges and personal challenges. Three themes emerged as professional challenges. First, working for an elected board is taxing. Second, solidifying oneself in the role of superintendent is challenging, particularly if the first-year superintendent previously worked in the district. Third, feelings of isolation were common.

All participants described working with their board of education as one of their main professional challenges. All participants believed that communication with the board was vital to their success, with several participants reporting that keeping the board of education updated was difficult. Four superintendents reported that board communication was ongoing and took a significant amount of time. It was also suggested that larger boards are more taxing for the superintendent.

Conflict with the board was also a stressor for participants. This was particularly true for three superintendents who were working with different board members than the ones who hired them. All participants contended that even if they disagreed with the board, it was important to find ways to accept the board's decisions. One participant was adamant, "If it's not a hill you are willing to die on, do not allow a different direction by the board to bother you." Four of the participants reported that conflict among board members was a major stressor for the superintendent. All of the participants stressed that the superintendent must remain neutral no matter their personal feelings about school board policies or direction.

Having weekly or monthly meetings with board members and keeping them constantly informed are ways participants enhance relationships with the board. One superintendent suggested that when new board members are elected, he "makes contact with them quickly." Four participants reported the need to remind staff that they should remain neutral when dealing

with board issues. Six of the participants declared that although the board of education supervises the superintendent, she/he must ultimately protect employees and do what they feel is right. When describing this dynamic, one superintendent said:

You get to a point where you have become comfortable with the possibility that you could lose your job. You were hired to lead a school district and make the best decisions for the district as an educational leader. You have to put the fear behind you. If a decision causes me to lose my job, then the job simply was not meant for me here. I'll have other opportunities.

Another superintendent reported that it is not good to live in fear, stating, "The superintendent is hired to lead school districts and that is what superintendents must do."

Another theme was the need to be viewed as the superintendent or solidifying oneself in the role. Three of the superintendents discussed challenges associated with being superintendent in the district where they previously served in other roles, claiming that people continued to view them in their previous positions. The superintendents reported the need to get out and meet as many people as possible, including those who knew them prior to becoming superintendent. Meeting with staff and stakeholders can solidify a superintendent's new position, the participants reported.

A third theme was that feelings of isolation were common. Six out of eight participants reported feelings of loneliness. Therefore, all eight participants stressed the need to have a network or a core group of friends that they can confide in, which are usually other superintendents and mentors. All eight superintendents recommended the North Carolina School Superintendents Aspiring Superintendent Program as a way to build supportive relationships with other superintendents and gain insight into best practices.

Personal Challenges

Three themes arose related to personal challenges. The first was that participants struggled with work-life balance. This included a negative impact on their health, stress in their family lives, and a loss of privacy because of the high-profile nature of the job. The second theme related to the emotional impact of traumatic events. The third theme related to two participants. Both women superintendents experienced misogyny. Given the sensitive nature of some responses to this topic and the desire to ensure confidentiality, even the pseudonyms will not be reported in this section.

The challenges of work-life balance impacted participants' health, family dynamics, and loss of privacy. Four participants reported health concerns related to the high-stress job. One participant had to start taking medications to manage stress. Another participant reported gaining weight and not exercising regularly. One superintendent reported that the job is so stressful that they worry about substance abuse and divorce rates among superintendents.

Family dynamics were reported as a personal challenge among all superintendents, with the job increasing stress in their family life. Three participants reported that their children in the district were treated differently, with two participants saying similar things, such as "My kids are either treated very well or very poorly. There is no in-between." Another participant described the stress of moving to the new district before his family could relocate. Participants consistently said that a helpful way to combat stress is to have a support group of people and to make the family a primary focus.

Four superintendents shared concerns about the superintendent's constantly high visibility. One participant illustrated this point, stating, "You're always on. You're always in the limelight. You may be out to dinner and do not recognize anyone in the restaurant, but chances

are people do recognize you.” All participants talked about how they have to be very careful about using social media or what they say or do openly.

Student or staff deaths were also very personally challenging, according to three superintendents. One superintendent reported a student collapsing on the playground and she was able to arrive at the school quickly. The student did not pull through, and the superintendent reported how difficult the situation was for the student’s family, her district, and her on a personal level.

Both women superintendents reported that despite lengthy careers in education, they had not experienced gender bias until becoming superintendents. Since becoming superintendents, both women participants felt they needed to over-explain decisions to staff members and the community because they received more skepticism than their male counterparts. Also, one female participant recalled being in a room full of people when someone asked, “Where is the superintendent? I would like to meet him.” However, both women insisted their respective boards were very supportive, and both were adamant that the gender biases they had experienced were generally from people external to the school district. All the same, both were surprised to experience this phenomenon, given they had not experienced misogynistic behaviors in their previous roles.

Successes During the First Year as Superintendent

Three themes arose from questions about the successes participants experienced during their first year. The first was building positive relationships with stakeholders. The second was related to long-range planning. The third was garnering political support for the district.

Participants' success in establishing productive relationships with stakeholders was a common theme. Six superintendents said that one of their successes in their first year as superintendent was building trust and mutual understanding throughout the district by visiting every school or meeting with many students, faculty, parents, and stakeholders. Participants consistently described how helpful this feedback was in understanding the district's needs. A participant reported “You don’t know where you’re going if you have no idea where you are as a district. In order to move the district in the right direction, you have to understand where you need to improve.”

Another theme related to initial success pertained to long-range organizational planning. Five superintendents said creating a shared vision and mission in the district was a major success. Six superintendents reported that their districts either created a strategic plan, were currently developing one, or a strategic plan would be a primary focus the following year. Participants agreed that developing a strategic plan was needed to guide improvements.

Three superintendents described successes related to the political arena. They reported securing more funding for their school district from county commissioners or city officials as a major success. “In order to keep our district competitive for the future, school districts need to be funded” noted one superintendent.

Mistakes During First Year as Superintendent

Two main themes arose regarding mistakes made by superintendents during their first year. First, participants consistently perceived that they had not always communicated

sufficiently with their boards of education. Also, participants perceived that they had not always managed the pace of change adequately.

All participants discussed the importance of adequate communication with the board of education. Four participants mentioned ineffective communication with the board as a mistake on at least one occasion. Examples included not providing adequate information about personnel issues, not providing information promptly, and not sharing problems that were likely to be addressed during the public comments portion of board meetings. One participant reflected on this issue: "Do not be afraid to over-communicate with your board. They do not like surprises." Another superintendent commented, "Communicate, communicate, communicate with your board. It is one of the most important things to do as a superintendent."

Managing the pace of change was another theme regarding mistakes during the participants' first year. Participants reported trying to move the district too quickly or not examining and vetting a district-level change thoroughly enough prior to implementation. One superintendent commented:

Remember, the school district is not a school. The school district is a large ship and the school is a jet ski. It takes time to get the ship turned. Understand that running a school and running a school district is very different.

By contrast, three other superintendents mentioned they were too cautious and should have made necessary changes more quickly. One superintendent commented, "I knew there was an issue, and I addressed it, but it should have been addressed more quickly."

Participants talked about viewing mistakes as opportunities for professional growth. Two superintendents acknowledged that they are better now because of their mistakes. They insisted that mistakes are necessary and are growth opportunities. One participant added, "I wouldn't

change anything. The mistakes I made allowed me to improve as a superintendent.” Another superintendent commented, “You can’t be afraid to make mistakes. This job is so demanding that everyone will make mistakes. When they occur, learn from them and use them as a way to learn and grow as a superintendent.”

Strategies Used During the First Year as Superintendent

Three themes arose from questions about strategies that first-year superintendents used. First, participants consistently discussed the importance of building relationships. Frequent meetings with stakeholders were used to gain valuable insights. Second, participants discussed their focus on understanding organizational protocols. Third, several participants restructured the formal organizational hierarchy.

Five superintendents mentioned that interacting with teachers, students, and parents was their top priority. They wanted to gain insights about perceptions of the district. Three superintendents conducted a “listening and learning tour” throughout the district. Four participants said they also coordinated with the school board and the board of education chair to highlight priorities within the district. Three of the superintendents said communication with previous colleagues and other superintendents also influenced their priorities.

Three superintendents said their top priority was to understand district operations fully. They mentioned doing a thorough analysis of district policies and procedures. One superintendent illustrated this theme, “If you understand the system well. You’ll be able to make changes to improve the system.”

Three superintendents made restructuring the formal organizational hierarchy a priority. Dr. Smith illustrated this priority when discussing how her district did not have anyone directly

responsible for curriculum and instruction. “This has been very successful in streamlining district-level processes and procedures,” one superintendent commented.

Advice for Other First-Time Superintendents

Three themes arose when participants were asked about the advice they would give to other first-time superintendents. The first was to seek alignment between the vision of the board and the superintendent. The second theme was establishing a rapport with the board and other stakeholders. The third was to have a network of trusted colleagues that could be relied upon for advice and support.

Four superintendents mentioned that aspiring superintendents should seek to work for boards of education whose priorities align with theirs. Participants consistently asserted that there must be a good fit between the new superintendent and the board. This meant learning as much as possible about the board of education before and during the interview process. Two superintendents suggested that the superintendent and the board must have similar goals and aspirations. “If this is not the case,” Dr. Willimas commented “you’ll be miserable.” Participants suggested that aspiring superintendents should refuse job offers if they do not feel like their priorities align with the board because it is important to be true to oneself.

Another theme was establishing rapport with the board of education and other stakeholders. Five superintendents reported communicating with the board of education often if not daily. Half of the participants prepared weekly updates on things happening in schools specifically for the board of education. Three superintendents said they communicate with every board member via telephone once a week with two participants reporting they meet individually with every board member at least once a month over lunch or coffee. In this way, the board of

education is well-informed, and trust is prominent between the superintendent and the board of education.

Two superintendents also said that quickly getting to know school, district, and political leaders was important for future success. Whether a need for additional funding arises, or creating goodwill within the community, participants reported that getting to know city and county leaders was helpful. Participants consistently discussed the importance of visiting schools and interacting with teachers, students, and parents. Five superintendents listed speaking with students, parents, and teachers and asking important questions as one of the most important things first-year superintendents can do to be successful. This interaction gives the superintendent insight into stakeholder's perceptions of the district and what direction to take for district-level improvements.

Several superintendents said developing a personal and professional support network was critical for success. Being a member and collaborating with the North Carolina Superintendent's Association was consistently cited as necessary for beginning superintendents. Dr. Kelly illustrated this sentiment, stating, "Develop your network of friends you can call if you have questions. They are likely the only ones that can understand your situation."

Summary

The interviews described in this chapter are from eight first-time superintendents in North Carolina. The participants were asked about their background, experiences, challenges, successes, and strategies during their first year as a superintendent. Although the participants' experiences and perceptions were unique, there were many commonalities and similar experiences. The interviews provide the reader a glimpse into the complex role of the beginning superintendent and the ways it has been navigated.

The next chapter discusses the implications of the study along with recommendations for future studies and practice.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION AND SUMMARY

This final chapter presents a culmination of the study's purpose and research problem, questions, and the methodology and data collection used. This chapter will also address key findings, implications for practice, and the study's limitations. The research's key findings are examined in relation to existing research about the superintendency. Recommendations for practice and future research are presented.

School district superintendents have a crucial role in schools and the community. The superintendent sets the school district's direction and tone, the effects of which often have widespread impact. Therefore, having a stable and effective superintendent can have a positive effect on academics and community perception (Pascopella, 2011).

School superintendents have a demanding job, from increased oversight to a pressing need to show academic success via test scores. They also contend with many pressing issues that occur daily (Glass, 2001). First-year superintendents commonly find themselves navigating a difficult path, balancing the needs of the district with pressures from internal and external stakeholders with competing interests (Cullotta, 2008). Beginning superintendents are particularly vulnerable as school districts' academic, cultural, and stakeholder perceptions can vary significantly. Some beginning superintendents begin their careers in high-functioning, well-organized, self-sufficient school districts. However, some superintendents arrive in districts that are highly dysfunctional and must make immediate changes (Hutchings & Brown, 2020).

According to several researchers (Buchanan, 2006; Hart et al., 2022; Hutchings & Brown, 2020), beginning superintendents have varying levels of experience, knowledge, and preparation. Many superintendents have been teachers, coaches, mentors, curriculum specialists, assistant principals, and principals. Superintendents have typically worked at the district level as

department heads or assistant superintendents. Most beginning superintendents have earned their doctoral degrees, and many earned their degrees specifically in educational leadership (Buchanan, 2006; Hart et al., 2022; Hutchings & Brown, 2020). Despite preparation and prior leadership experience, the school superintendent's job remains difficult (Buchanan, 2006). The first year is critical for the superintendent and the district (Buchanan, 2006).

The purpose of this qualitative case study of beginning superintendents was to understand their lived experiences during their first year in the role. The research gleaned in this study will add to the literature surrounding the experiences of beginning superintendents. The following research questions guided this inquiry:

1. What do first-time school district superintendents in North Carolina perceive to be the significant challenges they faced during their first year in the position?
2. What do first-time school district superintendents in North Carolina perceive to be the significant successes they had in their first year in the position?
3. What do first-time school district superintendents in North Carolina perceive to be the significant mistakes they made in their first year in the position?
4. What strategies do first-time school district superintendents in North Carolina implement to promote the likelihood of success during their first year in the position?
5. What advice do first-time school district superintendents in North Carolina offer to others who are beginning in the role?

The methodology used in the study was a qualitative case study of beginning superintendents. Data collected in this study were gleaned from online semi-structured interviews with eight beginning superintendents. The researcher asked the North Carolina Superintendent's Association for help identifying participants. They emailed beginning

superintendents in North Carolina on the researcher's behalf to introduce the study. This gave the researcher familiarity with potential participants and likely contributed to the willingness to participate in the study. The researcher followed up with a direct email to each potential participant, inviting them to participate in the study. After eight superintendents agreed to join the study, a time was agreed upon between the researcher and the participants for an online interview. Upon meeting the participant, the researcher asked the participant questions from the demographic survey. Afterward, with the participants' permission, the researcher audio-recorded the interview. The participants responded to the interview questions in the same order, with minor follow-up questions and prompts for clarification. Interview transcriptions were made available to all participants. The demographic survey and interview transcriptions generated data that the researcher studied to create findings in the study.

The researcher followed ethical principles and guidelines outlined by the UNC Charlotte institutional review board (IRB) process. The researcher maintained ethical principles throughout the study, ensuring participants were always protected. The researcher ensured voluntary consent to participate by providing participants with written and verbal communication to ensure they knew that participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any time. Even though the nature of the study created minimal threat to participants in the form of physical or psychological harm, they were told several times during the interviews that they did not have to answer any questions that made them uncomfortable. Additionally, participants were assigned a pseudonym to protect their identities. Also, while the narrative describing participants' responses accurately portrayed their meaning, some parts were left vague to protect participants' identities. Additionally, no information about the participants was shared with anyone outside of the research project. All study data were stored in secure cloud storage through UNC Charlotte.

The researcher used strategies to ensure appropriate trustworthiness in the study. The researcher collaborated with the dissertation committee chairperson to ensure proper oversight and that the academic research was conducted with proper due diligence. The interview protocol included a pre-determined set of semi-structured questions, and responses were recorded. Member checking allowed participants to ensure the accuracy of transcriptions. Participants also had access to the researcher for further clarification of any responses or changes needed. Additionally, thorough descriptions of the research protocol and participants' narratives were provided.

There were limitations in the study. First, while studies broadly explore the superintendency, limited research pertains explicitly to beginning superintendents. Second, as is common with qualitative research, the findings are limited in generalizability because of the limited number of participants from one state. The eight participants in this study represent about one-fourth of North Carolina's 30 new superintendents.

The conceptual foundation for the study centered around a framework developed by Hambrick and Fukutomi (1991) about the cycles of a chief executive officer's tenure. The researchers described various "seasons" or stages in a chief executive's tenure and how each stage includes different behaviors, strategies, and dispositions. This study focused on the initial stage, which Hambrick and Fukutomi described as developing a successful track record, building legitimacy, and developing a political foothold. They suggested that beginning leaders focus on following mandates from governing boards and feel heightened pressure to perform well.

The study results align with salient research (Glass, 1992; Hambrick & Fukutomi, 1991; Kowlaski & Brunner, 2011; Pascopella, 2011) about the demands of executive leadership. Participants' responses consistently suggested that the job was very challenging despite having

terminal degrees and a wealth of experience. Participants viewed their boards of education very favorably but found the political dynamics stressful. This finding aligns with Hoyle et al.'s (2005) assertion that superintendents must always exhibit social skills and political acumen when working with their school boards. Additionally, feelings of isolation were common, and participants struggled to maintain a healthy work-life balance. They also found the responsibility for making highly impactful decisions to be taxing. Despite the challenges, participants viewed themselves as helpful servant leaders who were motivated by professional challenges.

Participants felt a sense of urgency to solidify themselves in the superintendent role within their respective districts, a finding that aligns with Hambrick and Fukutomi's (1991) research. There were many successes, but getting to know district and community stakeholders and building trusting relationships were emphasized. The participants reported that professional relationships, particularly with their board of education members, were critical for superintendent success. Many participants focused on long-range planning and initiated strategic planning initiatives, although some needed to quickly overhaul part of the district to improve efficiency. The focus on making changes was accompanied by concerns about determining the appropriate pace of change. Some participants reported feeling they moved too slowly, while others shared that they should have been more deliberate. Finally, in a finding that aligns with Hambrick and Fukutomi's assertion that new chief executives focus on mandates from their governing boards, participants consistently reported the need to frequently update their boards of education and seek their input.

Discussion of Findings

The following sections discuss the findings of this study. The findings are aligned to the study's research questions.

Background: Describe Your Path to the Superintendency.

All participants reported having terminal degrees and much experience in school and district-level leadership positions. They followed a familiar path to the superintendency, having served as teachers, assistant principals, principals, district-level department heads, and assistant superintendents. Despite their educational training and previous experiences, participants described being perplexed by professional dilemmas for which there was no policy to follow or the existing policy was vague. In these instances, participants consulted with others, often their school district attorney or other superintendents. Participants emphasized the need for a support system of other superintendents, and they praised the North Carolina Association of School Superintendents for its leadership in mentoring beginning superintendents.

Participants' words suggested they are servant leaders who focus on helping others rather than fulfilling professional ambitions. This finding aligns with Jim Collins' (2001) concept of a Level 5 leader who is passionate about organizational successes but humble about personal accolades. All participants were drawn to the role of superintendent as part of natural matriculation through the educational hierarchy despite not having service as superintendent as a professional goal. They reported a passion for learning and improving systems and schools. They liked making decisions that would improve achievement, and they felt that they positively impacted others. They enjoyed interactions with teachers and students.

RQ1: Challenges During the First Year as Superintendent

The job of school superintendent has many challenges in today's ever-changing world. A recurring theme was that while participants reported that while their governing boards were supportive, working with the board of education was one of their most significant challenges. This finding aligns with findings from Cox and McLeod (2014). They felt the need to update the

board and seek input from board members frequently. Understanding the board's priorities was a primary focus, a finding that aligns with Hambrick and Fukutomi (1991). In so doing, participants consciously aligned their work with initiatives they believed would be supported by their governing bodies.

Dealing with conflict between board members was stressful but inevitable. Participants cautioned against taking sides in the conflict within the board, believing that the superintendent's role was to remain neutral. Participants suggested that the superintendent works for every board member and must stay neutral and communicative. Again, this finding aligns with Hambrick and Fukutomi's (1991) assertion that beginning leaders will defer to governing bodies for professional self-preservation.

Another theme was participants' need to solidify themselves as the superintendent. Several participants reported that they previously worked in the district where they are currently the superintendent. While coming to a new district as the chief executive is challenging, the participants who previously worked in their districts were concerned that subordinates did not view them as the superintendent. There is a need for beginning superintendents to be very visible and speak with many stakeholders to ensure people know the new superintendent, a theme in this study that occurs throughout the literature. Participants reported that this also fosters trust between the superintendent and community stakeholders.

Another theme that aligns with the literature was the sense of isolation accompanying the superintendency. Superintendents need trusted confidants, and participants often mentioned the importance of a network of other superintendents. Participants mentioned the North Carolina Superintendent Association as a helpful network to join.

Participants in this study frequently used language to describe high levels of stress. This theme was echoed in this study and previous research (Robinson & Shakeshaft, 2016). Robinson and Shakeshaft (2016) reported that at least one-third of superintendents frequently experienced high levels of stress. Participants in this study explained that the sedentary nature of the job magnified the negative impact of stress. Participants reported having to sit for long periods in meetings and planning sessions. Long days, poor diets, high stress, and limited physical activity caused some participants to gain weight. Others shared that they began using medication to address high blood pressure or stress.

The need for a work-life balance to offset the stress of the position was a recurring theme. Participants shared that family dynamics were often challenging. In addition to spending lots of time away from their families, superintendents' spouses were in awkward situations when people expected them to share information. Additionally, the participants believed their children were treated differently, with heightened attention because of their parent's position. Participants also reported that peers or adults sometimes questioned their children about the rationale for their parent's professional decisions.

Women participants in their first year of the superintendency also report a level of misogyny that they had not experienced earlier in their careers. They felt like the public watched them closely while at work and out in the community after work hours. Although both women participants felt supported by their boards of education, they felt they were more highly scrutinized for their decisions than their male counterparts. They experienced the same challenges as the male participants but also experienced gender-based discriminatory treatment.

RQ2: Successes During the First Year as Superintendent?

Several themes arose in response to inquiries about participants' successes during their first year. Successes during the first year as superintendent included relationship building with stakeholders, long-range planning, and obtaining more political support in the district.

Participants prioritized building relationships with students, parents, faculty, and community members. They scheduled time away from their offices to interact with teachers, students, and parents. They sought input from these constituents to help understand the district's culture and to guide planning initiatives.

The participants' high visibility aligned with expectations of North Carolina's evaluation process for superintendents and served a symbolic and pragmatic function. The visibility fostered trust and mutual respect. Also, it helped participants to understand organizational dynamics. Therefore, participants felt more secure in their planning efforts by purposefully seeking feedback from constituents about their perceptions of the district.

Participants also reported success with organizational planning, another function of the evaluation process for superintendents. The participants' words highlighted the importance of strategic planning for creating shared goals and strategies. They believed that having a long-range plan would create organizational alignment and focus.

The final theme related to participants' successes illuminated the political environment in which schools operate. Participants purposefully engaged with elected officials, particularly members of their boards of education and county commissions. They needed the support of both groups to ensure their initiatives could become a reality. Therefore, they spent significant time and energy communicating with both groups. In some cases, these efforts led to additional funding for their districts, which they considered vital to their district's success. Without proper funding, schools are subject to failure (Gates et al., 2019).

RQ3: Mistakes During the First Year as Superintendent?

The first theme arising from inquiries about mistakes during the first year as superintendent illuminated the need for effective communication between the chief executive and the governing board. Some participants alluded to the mistake of not providing their boards with sufficient information or not providing it promptly. Some mentioned failing to notify the board about a potential problem that might arise, which then led to the board being needlessly surprised. All participants emphasized the need for effective and consistent communication with the board, a theme echoed in other studies. Effective communication with the board promotes organizational cohesion, better relationships between the superintendent and board members, and more informed policymakers (Cox & McLeod, 2014; Hoyle et al., 2005; Orr, 2006).

The second theme from inquiries about mistakes illuminated the challenges associated with managing the pace of change. Participants consistently reported that they should have handled the pace of change better. Some participants reported moving too quickly when introducing new district-level initiatives. This led to inadequate implementation and confusion at the school level. Other participants regretted delaying difficult decisions related to academic improvements or personnel because they feared making changes too quickly.

All participants talked about their approach to responding to their own mistakes. They described the importance of viewing mistakes as inevitable because the superintendent deals with professional dilemmas often wrought with high levels of ambiguity. There is often not a perfect solution. Therefore, the superintendents advised using a reasoned approach to decision-making and allowing oneself the grace to learn from mistakes.

RQ4: Strategies Used During the First Year as Superintendent

The first theme from inquiries about priorities illuminated the importance of interpersonal relationships and understanding organizational norms for the chief executive. Participants

reported that their top priority was building relationships and understanding the district's needs. Participants reported that they first went to schools and met faculty, students, and parents. Many also held question-and-answer sessions with faculties to learn about the district's strengths and opportunities for growth. For those superintendents who were entirely new to their districts, these meetings also provided the opportunity to build relationships and trust with constituents. For those superintendents who were promoted from within, these meetings helped establish them in their new chief executive role. They believed doing so was essential because of the symbolic nature of the position.

These meetings with constituents also helped these new superintendents develop a keener understanding of their districts. Several participants commented that academic data from end-of-year standardized exams and other summative assessments were readily available along with teacher working conditions survey results. However, they felt this data did not fully convey all the superintendent needed to understand. These trust-building meetings also served the pragmatic purpose of gathering feedback that was later incorporated into long-range improvement plans.

Another focus for participants was understanding organizational protocols because every school district operates somewhat differently. While some departments, such as personnel or curriculum, are common across districts, roles and responsibilities within those departments vary. Therefore, participants sought to understand processes and procedures and the distribution of duties and responsibilities within the school district.

Participants also reported that after they understood the organizational systems and hierarchy, they had to decide if adjustments were needed. For example, one participant needed to hire an academic officer to oversee curriculum and instructional programming. Other participants

reassigned duties. Those who made changes believed that doing so would increase organizational efficiency.

RQ5: Advice for Other First-Time Superintendents

The theme from the final question illuminated the importance of the relationship between policymakers and the chief executive. Participants consistently said that alignment between the vision of the board of education and the superintendent was vital to the district's success. This concern led to participants urging potential superintendents to carefully analyze the boards of education for which they might work. Participants stressed that in the interview process, it is important for those wishing to be hired as superintendents to interview the board for whom they will work. Having similar goals and dispositions with the board of education makes a challenging job less stressful and heightens organizational effectiveness.

Participants also urged new superintendents to always be mindful of the need for effective communication with the board. They attributed some of their mistakes to the failure to communicate adequately. Participants talked about how clear understanding must be provided for the board to support new superintendents' initiatives. Participants stressed that constant communication about the district to the board of education from the superintendent and having mutual understanding helps everyone in the district and increases the superintendent's efficacy.

The importance of interpersonal relationships was a theme that surfaced again when asked for advice participants would provide to aspiring superintendents. The superintendents in this study took time to develop trusting relationships with teachers, parents, students, and community leaders to build goodwill toward the school district. Participants again talked about the symbolic nature of the position, noting that the superintendent is the face of the school

system. The superintendent's trustworthiness, accessibility, and transparency help foster community support.

The final theme to emerge from this inquiry illuminated the need for superintendents to have a professional network of trusted colleagues. The superintendent position is inherently challenging, and participants described feelings of isolation as they managed arduous tasks. Therefore, participants suggested that one of the most important things to do as a new superintendent is to develop a strong network of trusted colleagues who can be relied on for help and support. They suggested having veteran superintendents as part of this network was especially helpful. They praised the North Carolina School Superintendents Association for developing professional networks for aspiring and current superintendents.

Implications

While there is no recipe that will ensure the success of beginning superintendents, the findings from this study have several implications and recommendations for practice and future research. While the path to superintendency is unique for each person, it was clear from this study that having experience in various leadership roles in the educational hierarchy was beneficial. Additionally, the disposition of superintendents seemed to make a difference when they came into the position. The participants in this study came to the superintendency to serve others rather than to fulfill professional aspirations. This servant-leadership approach seemed to help them as they weathered the position's challenges.

The findings of this study make it clear that beginning superintendents need a support system and a network of other superintendents to enhance their staying power. The North Carolina Superintendent's Association was mentioned frequently as a way to develop support networks. Beginning superintendents should avail themselves of the opportunity to interact with

veteran superintendents who can offer guidance and support. By building strong professional networks, the superintendent can break away from a sense of isolation and have a network to allow the free flow of information and ideas. This recommendation leads to the opportunity for additional research about the impact of professional networks on superintendents.

This study also illuminated various challenges related to the superintendency that should be researched further and can inform aspiring superintendents. First, aspiring superintendents must understand the importance of alignment with their boards of education. It would be a mistake to assume that every board is the same. Therefore, participants strongly suggested that aspiring superintendents carefully analyze the boards they consider working for. Second, aspiring and practicing superintendents must work diligently to constantly keep their boards informed. Participants noted that some of their mistakes stemmed from not providing adequate information to their boards in a prompt manner. Keeping the board of education members updated and included in district-level decisions improves superintendent efficacy and enhances their staying power.

This study also illuminates the importance of relationship building to the superintendency. High visibility and frequent interactions with stakeholders are needed for several reasons. First, doing so helps build trust that leads to support for the district. Second, accessibility creates the opportunity to gain knowledge and insights about the district that are especially useful in long-range planning. Third, fulfilling the superintendent's symbolic function helps new superintendents solidify themselves in the position. This leads to the potential for additional research focusing on relationship building and the superintendency.

This study uncovered personal challenges facing beginning superintendents that lead to recommendations for practice. The superintendent's job does not exist apart from the family

dynamic. Superintendents have spouses and children who may attend or work in the school district of which the superintendent is the leader. Therefore, professional decisions and initiatives often impact superintendents' families, leading to stressful situations for spouses and children. For example, spouses are sometimes put in situations where they have to defend district policies or decisions with coworkers, and superintendents' children may receive different treatment than their peers. These challenges could weigh heavily on the superintendent, and careful thought should be given to the best time to step into the role. Becoming a superintendent means one's spouse and children are thrust into more visible roles. Therefore, good communication, resiliency within the family, and time devoted exclusively to family matters must accompany the superintendency.

This study also found that the stresses of the position can adversely affect the well-being of superintendents. Several participants described the emotional toil of the position contributing to health problems. This led to some participants seeking medical help to cope with the stress of the position. Therefore, superintendents need to take proactive measures to support their health. For example, routine exercise, a proper diet, and a support network can all be productive ways to cope. This finding and recommendation lead to a research opportunity focusing on stress in the superintendency.

Another recommendation from this study's findings is related to the importance of long-range planning for beginning superintendents. With a strategic plan based on stakeholders' feedback, beginning superintendents found that policymakers were much more willing to help their districts. This was especially true for garnering financial support. One beginning superintendent commented to county commissioners, "This is our plan. These are our steps for future success; we need your help to get us there financially." Therefore, beginning

superintendents need to develop a long-range plan with community input to create the sense of organizational focus and direction needed to drive improvements. Such a plan will also help prevent the district from lurching from one initiative to another, a common complaint in some districts.

The final recommendation arising from this study relates to managing change. Some participants cautioned against changing too quickly, while others cautioned against making changes too slowly. Given the context-specific nature of change initiatives, perhaps both groups were correct. Beginning superintendents must consider that the unwillingness to act can lead to missed opportunities. However, hasty actions that have not been adequately vetted can be damaging. In either case, a superintendent's bad timing around a change initiative is often highly visible. This leads to the recommendation that immediate safety concerns must be addressed immediately. Other significant change initiatives should unfold more slowly, using deliberate and reasoned approaches with input from those affected.

Conclusion

The importance of North Carolina school superintendents cannot be overstated. They arguably have the most challenging job in school districts. There are currently 30 beginning superintendents in North Carolina, representing over one-fourth of the state's school districts. Superintendent turnover is clearly a challenge for school districts. Measures must be taken to ensure the effectiveness and longevity of those who accept this demanding position.

By interviewing eight beginning superintendents, the researcher explored the challenges, successes, mistakes, priorities, and advice from beginning superintendents. Although every participant had a different experience with varying successes and challenges, several themes arose. These themes highlighted the critical relationship between superintendents and their

governing boards. High visibility of superintendents was necessary, as participants used frequent interactions with constituents to build trust and support and to gain insights used in planning. This study also highlighted the symbolic roles that superintendents play as the faces of school districts. Finally, the need for superintendents to have a professional support network was emphasized. This also helps with the superintendent's social-emotional needs because participants indicated that the job can be very lonely.

Decisions made by district superintendents have far-reaching consequences. The superintendent's job is not easy to learn, and constant superintendent turnover drains the efficacy of school districts within the state. By understanding the challenges, mistakes, and successes of beginning superintendents, it is hoped that the state will have more veteran superintendents and that this study will add to the literature on this important issue.

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APPENDIX A: RECRUITMENT PROTOCOL

“A Case Study of the Experiences of Beginning Superintendents”

Devron Furr / UNC Charlotte / Educational Leadership Department

Hello _____, this is Devron Furr, a UNC Charlotte Doctoral Student, and I am completing a research study entitled “*A Case Study of the Experiences of Beginning Superintendents*.” The purpose of this research study is to give voice to the experiences of first-year school district superintendents. Specifically, the researcher seeks to understand the challenges faced by novice superintendents and the strategies they employed to navigate difficult situations during their initial year in the position. The insights gained through this study may lead to recommendations for practice while adding to the literature.

In your role as a public school superintendent, I would like to ask you to participate in an audio-taped interview on this subject. You have been selected because of your status as a first-year school superintendent.

Your participation in the project will take approximately 45 minutes-to-1 hour, to allow time for demographic survey completion and the interview. Each of your responses will be recorded verbatim by me following the interview and an interview transcription will be created and shared with you via email. You will also have the opportunity to verify your comments as they appear in the final work product or to follow up on any details. I will also take a few field notes during the interview to ensure clarity and understanding. If you choose to participate, you will be one of approximately six (6) participants in this study. I am happy to arrange the interview at a time and place selected by you to ensure comfort.

To ensure confidentiality, information about your participation, including your identity, will not be shared. The data collected by the researcher will not contain any personal identifying information or reveal your participation in this study. Also, I request that you not use identifying information of fellow school district colleagues, immediate co-workers, students, parents or others during the interview to ensure anonymity. Please let me know if you have any questions.

At this time, you have three options. First, if you are ready to agree to participate in the study, please confirm with me now. Second, if you would prefer not to participate in the study, please confirm with me now. Third, if you have questions or need additional time to consider participating in the study please confirm with me now. For the third option, I can email you the consent form that outlines study participation, to provide you with time to review it and help you make an informed decision. You would then be free to follow up with me via phone and/or e-mail to indicate your choice.

APPENDIX B: POST-RECRUITMENT, PRE-INTERVIEW FOLLOW-UP EMAIL SCRIPT

Department of Educational Leadership
9201 University City Boulevard, Charlotte, NC 28223-0001

“A Case Study of the Experiences of Beginning Superintendents”

Devron Furr
UNC-Charlotte
Educational Leadership Department

Thank you for agreeing to participate in the study, *A Case Study of the Experiences of Beginning Superintendents*.

The purpose of this research study is to give voice to the experiences of first-year school district superintendents. Specifically, the researcher seeks to understand the challenges faced by novice superintendents and the strategies they employed to navigate difficult situations during their initial years in the position. The insights gained through this study may lead to recommendations for practice while adding to the literature.

Please note and review the Informed Consent Form that is attached to the body of this email prior to our interview. You are welcome to reach out to me directly with any questions you may have via email or phone. Additionally, I will bring a hard copy of this Informed Consent Form to our interview session for you to personally sign.

Researcher

Devron Furr
dkfurr@uncc.edu or (704) 796-6647

If you have any concerns regarding this study, please contact the faculty advisor of the researcher.

Faculty Advisor

Dr. Walter Hart
walter.hart@uncc.edu or (704) 687-8539

APPENDIX C: CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY

Title of the Project: A Case Study of the Experiences of Beginning Superintendents

Principal Investigator: Devron Furr, UNC Charlotte

Co-investigator: N/A

Study Sponsor: N/A

You are invited to participate in a qualitative research study. Participation in this research study is voluntary and the information provided is meant to help you decide whether or not to participate. You are welcome to ask questions at any time.

Important Information You Need to Know

- The purpose of this research study is to give voice to the experiences of first-year school district superintendents. Specifically, the researcher seeks to understand the challenges faced by novice superintendents and the strategies they employed to navigate difficult situations during their initial years in the position.
- I am asking first-year school superintendents who are employed in North Carolina to complete a simple demographic questionnaire, a 1-on-1 interview about the study topic and a brief follow-up email transcript confirmation.
- Some of the questions I will ask you may be considered as personal and sensitive given your connections to public school superintendency. For example, I will ask you about topics related to your lived experiences regarding your first year as a superintendent. Your responses will inform the study about the challenges faced by novice superintendents and the strategies employed to address problems during your first year. These questions are personal, and you might experience some mild emotional discomfort. You may choose to skip a question you do not want to answer. You may not personally benefit from taking part in this research, but our study results may help in better understanding first-year superintendents' challenges and strategies to address difficult situations.
- Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before you choose to participate in this research study.

Why are we doing this study?

The purpose of this research study is to give voice to the experiences of first-year school district superintendents. Specifically, the researcher seeks to understand the challenges faced by novice superintendents and the strategies they employed to navigate difficult situations during their initial years in the position. The insights gained through this study may lead to recommendations for practice while adding to the literature.

Why are you being asked to be in this research study?

You are being asked to be in this study because you are a first-year superintendent in a North Carolina public school district.

What will happen if I take part in this study?

If you choose to participate, you will complete a simple demographic questionnaire followed by a 1-on-1 interview about the study topic. The demographic questionnaire will ask you demographic questions (leadership experience {specifically, the superintendency}, education level, age, race, gender, service years, preparatory programs, and parental education level) and the 1-on-1 interview will ask you questions about your knowledge base regarding the role of superintendent, and how this construct relates to professional practice. I will audio record our interviews and take brief field notes to ensure I capture your words accurately. If at any time during our interviews you felt uncomfortable answering a question, please let me know, and you are free to skip the question. You also can choose to answer a question and elect to not have your answer recorded. I would simply turn off the recorder. If at any time you want to withdraw from the study, you can let me know, and I will erase the recordings of our conversations. Your total time commitment if you participate in this study will be approximately one (1) hour.

What benefits might I experience?

You will not benefit directly from being in this study beyond contributing to the field of research related to understanding the lived experiences of first-year superintendents and the challenges and strategies used to navigate difficult situations during your first year as a superintendent.

What risks might I experience?

You may find some demographic or interview questions to be personal or sensitive, as they pertain to your understanding of your own experiences as a public school superintendent. For example, I will ask you about the challenges you have experienced during your first year as superintendent. These questions are personal and you might experience some mild emotional discomfort, although I do not anticipate this risk to be common. You may choose to skip a question you do not want to answer.

How will my information be protected?

You are asked to provide your personal email address as part of this study. I will use your personal email address to deliver to you the Informed Consent Form and provide you with the interview transcript one week after the interview. To protect your identity and ensure confidentiality, I will assign a study ID code to your questionnaire responses. Once completed, I will delete the email address from the questionnaire responses so the responses will only have the study ID code. I will use a digital audio recorder to record our interviews. Immediately following each interview, I will transfer the audio file from the digital recorder to university password-protected cloud data storage, and I will delete the audio file from the recorder. Upon conclusion of the research study, I will delete the audio files from the password-protected data storage. Each interview will be transcribed verbatim by the researcher or by using word processing software. The transcriptions will be stored in password-protected data storage and

will be deleted after the research study is completed. While the study is active, all data will be stored in a password-protected database that can be accessed by the primary researcher. Only the researcher will have routine access to the study data. With approval from the Investigator, other individuals may need to view the information I collect about you including people who work for UNC-Charlotte and other agencies as required by law or allowed by federal regulations. However, that information will be coded for anonymity.

How will my information be used after the study is over?

Following study completion, study data may be shared with other researchers for use in other studies. Your consent will not be asked for again if study data is needed as part of publishing our study results or used for other studies. The data we share will NOT include personally identifiable information.

Will I receive an incentive for taking part in this study?

You will not receive a financial incentive for taking part in this study.

What are my rights if I take part in this study?

It is your choice to participate in this research study, as participating is voluntary. You have the right to cease participation at any time during the study. You also are not required to answer any questions you do not want to answer.

Who can answer my questions about this study and my rights as a participant?

For questions about this research, you may contact:

Devron K. Furr

dkfurr@uncc.edu or (704) 796-6647

Dr. Walter Hart

walter.hart@uncc.edu or (704) 687-8539

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, or wish to obtain information, ask questions, or discuss any concerns about this study with someone other than the researcher(s), please contact the Office of Research Compliance at (704) 687-1871 or uncc-irb@uncc.edu.

Consent to Participate

By signing this document, you are agreeing to participate in this study and that you understand what the study is about. You will receive a copy of this document for your records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team at the information provided above.

I understand what the study is about and my questions so far have been answered. I agree to take part in this study.

Name (PRINT)

Signature

Date

Name & Signature of person obtaining consent

Date

APPENDIX D: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Project Title

A Case Study of the Experiences of Beginning Superintendents

Structure

This is a semi-structured one-on-one interview with five open-ended background questions and fourteen open-ended interview questions aligned directly with the research questions. The interviewer may ask probing questions if needed for clarification or to gain additional information from the interviewee during the interview process.

Procedure

1. The researcher will find a secure, comfortable, and appropriate space and meet the interviewee at the time and location selected by the interviewee to conduct the interview.
2. The researcher will ask the interviewee to complete the 11-question demographic survey (see Appendix E).
3. The researcher will ask if the interview may be audio recorded and if field notes may be taken by the researcher.
4. If the participant verbally provides his/her consent (paperwork has already been collected), the recording will begin.
5. The researcher will ask the interviewee questions found in the protocol as well as additional probing questions if needed.

Interview Guidelines

Thank you for agreeing to participate in an interview as part of this research project. The purpose of this study is to give voice to the experiences of first-year school district superintendents. Specifically, the researcher seeks to understand the challenges faced by novice superintendents and the strategies they employed to navigate difficult situations during their initial years in the position. The insights gained through this study may lead to recommendations for practice while adding to the literature. I will ask you a series of questions. Your name will not be reported to ensure confidentiality. You are not required to answer any questions that you do not feel comfortable with and you are encouraged to answer freely as there are no wrong answers. You may choose to decline to participate in the study at any time before, during, or after the interview with no penalties applied. Following the interview, I will transcribe the interview, by typing verbatim both of our statements and responses. Do you have any questions? Please confirm that you understand the interview guidelines and that you are ready to proceed.

- If the interviewee states no, the researcher will stop the interview and ask whether the participant is willing to be interviewed at another time.
- If yes, the researcher will continue the interview according to the protocol.

Interview Questions

Background Information

Describe your career path leading to the superintendency.

Have you always held aspirations for the position of superintendent?

If yes, what steps did you take to ensure you achieved the position?

In no, how did you wind up in the position?

How were you prepared for the position of superintendent? Please share both formal and informal preparation experiences.

What aspects of the position do you enjoy the most or provide the greatest amount of satisfaction?

Challenges Faced During the First Year as Superintendent

What are the most significant professional challenges you faced during your first year as superintendent?

How did you overcome these professional challenges?

What are the greatest personal challenges you face in the face in the role of superintendent?

How do you overcome these personal challenges?

Successes During the First Year as Superintendent

What are the greatest successes you have experienced during your first year as superintendent?

What factors contributed to these successes?

What strategies did you use that contributed to these successes?

Mistakes During the First Year as Superintendent

What mistakes did you make during your first year as superintendent?

What factors contributed to these mistakes?

If you could go back in time, what would you handle the situation you are describing as a mistake differently?

Strategies Used During the First Year as Superintendent

What actions did you prioritize during your first year as superintendent? Why?

What groups or individuals helped you to determine priorities during your first year as superintendent?

What strategies did you use during your first year as superintendent to enhance the likelihood of success?

Advice for Other First-Time Superintendents

What advice would you give to someone who was starting as a first-time superintendent?

APPENDIX E: DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY

This survey was designed to collect demographic information pertaining to current first-year public school superintendents in North Carolina. Data collected from this survey will be used for dissertation research purposes only.

- 1) How many years have you served as a superintendent? ____
 - A. 1-3 years
 - B. 4-5 years
 - C. 6-10 years
 - D. 11-15 years
 - E. 16-20 years
 - F. 21-25 years
 - G. 26-30 year
 - H. Over 30 years
- 2) How many years have you served as a superintendent in North Carolina? ____
 - A. 1-3 years
 - B. 4-5 years
 - C. 6-10 years
 - D. 11-15 years
 - E. 16-20 years
 - F. 21-25 years
 - G. 26-30 year
 - H. Over 30 years
- 3) How many years have you served as a superintendent in your current district? ____
 - A. 1-3 years
 - B. 4-5 years
 - C. 6-10 years
 - D. 11-15 years
 - E. 16-20 years
 - F. 21-25 years
 - G. 26-30 year
 - H. Over 30 years
- 4) Indicate your highest level of education achieved:
 - A. Bachelor's Degree
 - B. Graduate Teaching Certificate
 - C. Master's Degree
 - D. Doctorate Degree
- 5) How many of your graduate preparation program courses, if applicable, included topics related to the superintendency?
 - A. 0
 - B. 1
 - C. 2

- D. 3
- E. 4 or more
- F. I did not participate in a graduate program.

6) Indicate your age range:

- A. 20–24
- B. 25–29
- C. 30–34
- D. 35–39
- E. 40–44
- F. 45–49
- G. 50–54
- H. 55–59
- I. 60–64
- J. 65+

8) Regardless of your answer to the prior question, please indicate how you identify yourself. (Select one or more)

- A. American Indian or Alaska Native
- B. Asian
- C. Black or African American
- D. Hispanic or Latino/a/x
- E. Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
- F. White
- G. Other: _____
- H. Choose not to disclose

9) What gender do you identify with?

- A. Male
- B. Female
- C. Other: _____
- D. Choose not to disclose