

# LEADERSHIP IN THE FACE OF CHAOS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

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## ABSTRACT

The role of superintendent is complex, and it is one that carries with it the responsibilities of chief executive officer. The superintendent as the chief executive officer for the school district is often standing directly in the eye of the storm and is caught between competing interests and competing opinions regarding how to navigate moments of chaos that occur within the community and school district. This chaos may include a natural disaster that impacts the community, but it may also be a student death, an incident that raises community concerns, or, as in the case of this study, a global pandemic. This study focuses specifically on the chaos surrounding COVID-19 within school districts and their communities. The purpose of this study was to examine the lived experience of school district superintendents as they lead their districts in the face of chaos.

This study focused on the lived experiences of six school district superintendents as they each navigated their role of leadership through the chaos of the COVID-19 pandemic. This interest and focus on the lived experience of the participants lent itself to a phenomenological approach.

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## **Chapter I**

### **Introduction**

Chaos precedes change, which, in the world of education, can take many forms. Chaos may be a natural disaster that impacts the community, but it may also be a student death, a mass shooting on school grounds, a topic that raises community concerns, or it may take the form of a global pandemic. The superintendent is the chief executive officer for the school district and is often standing directly in the eye of that storm, caught between competing interests and opinions regarding how to navigate the crisis, whatever form it takes (Bjork et al., 2014b; Glenn et al., 2009; Hoyle et al., 2005; Kowalski et al., 2011; Lowery & Harris, 2002; Norton et al., 1996). The COVID-19 pandemic presented a unique set of circumstances where science, politics, and policy put district leadership, as well as school board governance, in the crosshairs of public scrutiny and partisan politics (Ansell et al., 2020; Harris, 2020; Harris & Jones, 2020; Malkus et al., 2020). The superintendency has evolved to become a very complex position. Over the course of the past one-hundred and eighty years, the position of superintendent has changed many times from the discrete roles identified by Callahan (1966) and then Kowalski (2005a) of teacher-scholar, manager, democratic leader, applied social scientist, and communicator to the version of superintendent that we see today that encompasses each of those discrete roles into a single, complex position.

The role of superintendent formally began in 1837 in Buffalo, New York (Callahan, 1966; Kowalski et al., 2011). The role and expectations around the superintendency have continued to evolve over the course of the years and decades since the initial superintendency (Callahan, 1966; Kowalski, 2005). Through the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the role of the superintendent was viewed as that of the teacher-scholar. As Kowalski et al. (2011) noted, the

idea of the common school and teachers delivering a very prescriptive and uniform set of content and courses required the superintendent to oversee and ensure compliance toward that end. The role of the superintendent continued to evolve into a more managerial role, or what Callahan (1966) would call the superintendent as a business executive, which occurred in direct alignment with the transition of the United States into a more industrial-focused society. The focus became more on time, efficiency, and a model as compared with that of the manager of a company (Callahan, 1966). Starting around 1930, the role of superintendent shifted towards the role as a democratic leader (Callahan, 1966; Kowalski et al., 2011). This change in focus towards democratic leadership for superintendents was relatively short-lived and was replaced with a focus on the superintendent as an applied social scientist and was led in part by the American Association of School Administrators (AASA), which was directly connected to universities which began to offer school administration as a field of study (Callahan, 1966; Kowalski et al., 2011). Finally, the idea of the superintendent as communicator emerged as our society moved to a more informational age from the previous manufacturing period (Kowalski et al., 2011).

When looking at the five roles of a superintendent identified by Callahan (1966) and then Kowalski (2005) of teacher-scholar, manager, democratic leader, applied social scientist, and communicator, the literature supports the notion that the role of the superintendent is complex (Adams, 2013; Lowery & Harris, 2002; Lytle & Sokoloff, 2013; Minimo & Bueno, 2022) and that the superintendency impacts all aspects of the school district system (Norton et al., 1996). Today these roles are combined as part of the complexity that is required of the superintendent (Bjork et al., 2014b). The complexity of the superintendency and the continued evolution of the role is reflected in the 2010 study of the American school superintendent by Kowalski et al. (2011) where those five distinct roles are clarified as no longer being distinct; the superintendent

today needs to not only have the knowledge and skills within each of those individual roles, but, perhaps more importantly, to also have the ability to discern which role needs to be utilized at the right moment (Kowalski et al., 2011). Ultimately, the role of the superintendent is that of a chief executive officer who is responsible for ensuring that the school district is meeting all levels of regulation, mandate, and policy from the Federal, State Legislature, State Board, State Department of Education, and Local School board (Bjork et al., 2014a). All of this is expected while also focusing on student learning, instructional programs, oversight of the district administration, and support services (Adams, 2013; Fusarelli, 2006; Lytle & Sokoloff, 2013; Minimo & Bueno, 2022; Stanford, 1999).

Hoyle (1993), in his work for the AASA Commission on Standards for the Superintendency (Hoyle, 1993), identified the following professional standards for the superintendency:

- Standard 1: Leadership and District Culture;
- Standard 2: Policy and Governance;
- Standard 3: Communications and Community Relations;
- Standard 4: Organizational Management;
- Standard 5: Curriculum Planning and Development;
- Standard 6: Instructional Management;
- Standard 7: Human Resources Management;
- Standard 8: Values and Ethics of Leadership (Hoyle, 1993).

In 1999, Educational Testing Service (ETS) was asked to develop an assessment that could be used to license aspiring superintendents. Through their work surveying and researching the job responsibilities of a superintendent, they identified six standards that describe the roles of a

superintendent (Latham & Holloway, 1999). These standards are:

- Facilitating the development of a shared vision of learning;
- Sustaining an instructional program conducive to student learning;
- Ensuring a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment;
- Collaborating with families and community;
- Acting with integrity, fairness, and ethics;
- Understanding the political, social, economic, legal and cultural context of the district.

Ultimately, it is the superintendent's role to bring together the school board, the community at large, parents, teachers, and support staff around a shared vision for the school district (Adams, 2013; Fusarelli, 2006; Lytle & Sokoloff, 2013; Minimo & Bueno, 2022; Stanford, 1999). This takes the ability to understand the culture and climate of the district and the community at large, which requires the interpersonal communication skills to navigate the intricacies of the system and to listen, learn, and respond appropriately (Fusarelli, 2006). As the role of the superintendency has evolved, some themes have emerged which include a shift toward more shared leadership and community-building practices, along with a better understanding of when and when to not exert their power or authority (Miller et al., 2009). The complexity of the job is directly connected back to the five roles that have emerged through historical analysis of the superintendent and research: superintendent as teacher-scholar, manager, democratic leader, applied social scientist, and communicator (Bjork et al., 2014b).

Research has established a clear connection between the role of the superintendent, district academic success, and educator self-efficacy and morale (Hart & Ogawa, 1987; Marzano & Waters, 2009; Myers, 2011). Connections have been identified between the length of superintendent tenure with student academic achievement using Third Grade reading assessment

in Kansas (Myers, 2011). The study found that of the five variables, length of tenure and years of experience as superintendent were shown to significantly academic achievement at the .05 level (Myers, 2011, p. 50). A 2009 study conducted a meta-analysis of all studies involving district leadership and student academic achievement between 1970 and 2005. This meta-analysis identified 27 studies that met their criteria of reporting a correlation between district leadership and student achievement, and that utilized a standardized measure of student achievement. These 27 studies involved over 2,700 school districts. The correlation between district leadership and student achievement was identified as statistically significant at the .05 level (Marzano & Waters, 2009). As will be discussed later, the professional standards for superintendents include instructional management, and research has found that the superintendent as chief executive officer in highly successful districts is actively involved in instructional leadership (Bridges, 1982; Cuban, 1984; Hoyle, 2002). This direct involvement also establishes in the culture of the district that the work being done by teachers in the classroom is the most important aspect of the district operations. The superintendent's actions and demonstrated priorities are a critical component of the culture of the school district. In short, where they spend their time and who they involve in decision making often determines the defined culture of the organization (Tienken, 2021). Research regarding the role that superintendents play in establishing culture, specifically a culture of trust, show that communication, honesty, and listening are fundamental and critical (Anderson, 2016). Superintendents impact academic achievement and district culture over time by understanding that they need to invest in the people doing the work in the classroom, create collaborative cultures and reciprocal accountability, facilitate the development of a guaranteed and viable curriculum, create a constant process of monitoring student learning, and develop systems for how the educators in the organization respond when students do not

learn. The superintendent cannot do all of these things alone, but their leadership and vision for this work, and prioritizing it within their district, has an impact on student achievement, teacher efficacy, and district culture (Dufour & Marzano, 2011; Dufour & Fullan, 2013).

School districts, regardless of size, are multifaceted systems; there are countless levels of competing demands on the superintendent as chief executive officer of the district (Adams, 2013; Bjork et al., 2014b; Hart et al., 2019). The superintendent has a primary charge to lead a district in a manner that increases student achievement (Myers, 2011; Bjork et al., 2014a; Hart et al., 2019). However, the competing demands extend far beyond academic concerns. A school district is often one of the largest employers in each city. It has taxing authority, an elected school board, and is subject to the same partisan politics and divisiveness as any system (Biddle & Frankland, 2021; Lutz & Iannaccone, 1986; Mitchell, 2022; Weinschenk, 2022). The superintendent is responsible for all aspects of the district operation, but in larger sized districts many of the duties are designated to other individuals such as directors, assistant superintendents, coordinators, budget officers, and human resource officers (Hickerson, 2021; Kaul et al., 2022; Kowalski & Brunner, 2011). This makes the system even more complex. As Shoup and Studer (2010) wrote in their book about complexity theory, systems are constantly seeking homeostasis, and the system is constantly making small corrections to achieve that homeostasis. This gives credence to the line “the more things change; the more things stay the same” (Karr, 1859). In education, the pendulum concept is often used to describe the idea that, if you do not like the direction or initiative being pushed out to schools, just wait because it will swing back the other direction (Jalongo, 1999; Linn, 2001; Mellon, 2014; Robinson et al., 1998; Shoup & Studer, 2010; Slavin, 2008).

The COVID-19 pandemic brought to light technical challenges of identifying needed equipment, identifying methods of measurement and data collection, and identifying specific operational challenges that needed solutions (Ansell et al., 2020; Harris, 2020; Harris & Jones, 2020; Malkus et al., 2020). Many of these technical challenges also had an adaptive nature in which superintendents needed to help individuals to make changes to their existing practices and adapt to a new normal. Superintendents were asked to take on a rapid and sharp learning curve to tackle the technical and adaptive changes needed to navigate the pandemic (Ansell et al., 2020; Harris, 2020; Harris & Jones, 2020; Malkus et al., 2020). Every aspect of the school district had to be examined through a new lens. In a study regarding the experiences leading a school district through the chaos of the natural disaster during Hurricane Harvey, researchers identified three levels of challenges that they placed on a continuum from primarily technical challenges, hybrid of technical-adaptive challenges, and primarily adaptive challenges (Hemmer & Elliff, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has created a paradigm shift in education and in how the community views education (Harris, 2020). As Hemmer and Elliff (2020) state, the superintendents were both “navigators and captains in this tumult” (p. 981). The superintendent is making constant adjustments to keep the “ship” moving in the appropriate direction (Shoup & Studer, 2010).

### **Statement of the Problem**

The complexity of the superintendency and the continued evolution of the role is reflected in the 2010 study of the American school superintendent by Kowalski et al. (2011), where the five distinct roles of teacher-scholar, manager, democratic leader, applied social scientist, and communicator are clarified as no longer being distinct and the reality is that the superintendent role is multifaceted and complex. Not only does the superintendent need to have the knowledge and skill of each of those individual and distinct roles, but they must also have the



discernment to know which roles they need to employ at the right time (Kowalski et al., 2011).

The role of the superintendent as chief executive officer comes with the responsibility of ensuring that the school district is meeting all levels of regulation, mandate, and policy from the Federal, State Legislature, State Board, State Department of Education, and Local School board (Bjork et al., 2014b)., all while focusing on student learning, instructional programs, oversight of the district administration, and support services. Ultimately, it is the superintendent's role to bring together the school board, the community at large, parents, teachers, and support staff around a shared vision for the school district (Adams, 2013; Fusarelli, 2006; Hickerson, 2021; Minimo & Bueno, 2022; Stanford, 1999). Such responsibility requires the ability to understand the culture and climate of the district and the community at large, which requires the interpersonal communication skills to navigate the intricacies of the system (Abrams, 1987; Glenn et al., 2009; Kowalski, 2005). The COVID-19 pandemic added an additional layer of focus and attention on all aspects of the superintendency as the “navigators and captains in this tumult” and their need to make the constant adjustments to navigate the school district through the storm (Hemmer & Elliff, 2020; Shoup & Studer, 2010). Gross (2004) uses the term turbulence to describe these volatile conditions and identified four levels of turbulence that school districts face. *Light turbulence* is essentially the ongoing issues of a normal functioning school or district; *moderate turbulence* is typically related to very specific issues that are identified as significant, and that need a solution; *severe turbulence* occurs in situations where the very existence of the organization is under attack. Gross (2004) states that in these severe turbulent situations, a conflict in community values was at the center of the issues. Finally, *extreme turbulence*, signals significant danger and potential destruction of the school or district (Gross, 2004).

This study intended to identify the superintendent roles that public-school superintendents leverage or rely upon in moments of chaos. The purpose of this study was to examine the lived experience of school district superintendents as they lead their districts in the face of chaos. Navigating the COVID-19 pandemic was the lens which leadership through chaos was examined. Through this examination of those lived experience, the study aimed to identify which of the five roles of a superintendent identified by Callahan (1966) and then Kowalski (2005) of teacher-scholar, manager, democratic leader, applied social scientist, and communicator were most significant to the superintendent's leadership during the pandemic, as well as which presented the most challenges during their leadership through the pandemic.

Limited research is available that examines how leaders, specifically school district superintendents, go about the business of leading the organization amid chaos, whether that chaos is a pandemic, a challenge within the school board, a school tragedy, etc. This study aimed to identify leadership principles that come to the forefront during these times of crisis and specific principles that lead to greater success. Additionally, with the attrition rate of school district superintendents, there is a gap in the literature in helping to identify the practices that can better equip district leaders to successfully navigate the chaos and maintain their role within the district. Literature and studies abound concerning the topic of superintendent turnover as well as on the impact that superintendent turnover has on district and student achievement (Glass et al., 2000; Hoyle et al., 2005; Lutz & Iannaccone, 1986; Natkin et al., 2004). Additionally, there is a breadth of literature on the qualities needed to be an effective superintendent (Bjork et al., 2014b; Glenn et al., 2009; Hoyle et al., 2005; Kowalski et al., 2011; Lowery & Harris, 2002; Norton et al., 1996).

There is some existing research on leading in chaos; for example, a dissertation by Middleton in 2011 focused on chaos theory. That research did not focus on actual chaos within a school district and the leadership of the superintendent during that period. However, the research did identify what the researcher refers to as five emergent themes, which were purpose, accountability, stakeholder's response, re-organization, transformational leadership (Middleton, 2011). The Hemmer and Elliff study in 2020 regarding Hurricane Harvey focused more on the experiences of the superintendents and the challenges they were faced with.

Existing literature surround the topic of superintendent turnover aimed to identify the factors that contribute to superintendent turnover and found that board dysfunction was identified as a significant factor (Byrd et al., 2006; Grissom & Andersen, 2012). Additionally, difficulty in working with the school board caused the average superintendent tenure to decrease (Byrd et al., 2006). Dissatisfaction theory has been studied concerning school board and superintendent turnover (Alsbury, 2008; Iannaccone & Lutz, 1970; Lutz & Iannaccone, 1986; Sebert, 2006). In 2006, Sebert utilized this theory in studying the longevity of superintendents in the state of Wisconsin. His study found that as stress and dissatisfaction increase in the community the result may be the defeat of school board members, which may result in a political shift in the board which oftentimes results in the involuntary superintendent turnover. Sebert (2006) used the dissatisfaction theory as a predictor of superintendent tenure and turnover. The Dissatisfaction Theory is, in brief, the theory that essentially links the concept of public dissatisfaction, board of trustee incumbent defeat, and superintendent turnover (Alsbury, 2008; Iannaccone & Lutz, 1970; Lutz & Iannaccone, 1986;). Dissatisfaction theory has its roots in the superintendent vulnerability thesis from Callahan in 1966, which argued that superintendent behavior was connected to politics of their local school boards, which were directly connected to what

Callahan at the time viewed as the economic values of the businessmen in the community (Callahan, 1966; Lutz & Iannaccone, 1986).

Iannaccone and Lutz (1970) referred to public dissatisfaction as the disease that often leads to professional death for the superintendent, and that has clear symptoms and treatment often starting with significant changes within the community or perhaps a significant issue which generates greater attention or interest on the board and district decisions (Lutz & Iannaccone, 1986). When there is public dissatisfaction, special interest groups begin to increase in number and become louder and more demanding for “their way” and for specific policy changes. If untreated, these symptoms move into more aggressive tactics focused on board recall efforts in the middle of trustee terms and/or aggressive campaigning at the end of the term for a new replacement (Iannaccone & Lutz, 1970; Lutz & Iannaccone, 1986). Ultimately, for the superintendent, the research on the dissatisfaction theory has shown that when there is specifically a politically motivated trustee incumbent defeat, and/or politically motivated board member resignation due to public dissatisfaction, the next step is often removal of the district superintendent (Alsburry, 2008). Lutz (1982) discussed that superintendents should use community dissatisfaction as an early warning sign that they should create more open communication, work to revise policies to decrease dissatisfaction, and hopefully lengthen the board members' tenure. Alsburry (2008) found that school board and superintendent turnover did have a negative correlation with academic achievement, while not arguing it was causal. Alsburry (2008) did identify that student achievement did decline during these periods of public dissatisfaction leading to board and superintendent turnover. Additionally, a 2006 study showed that increasing community levels of stress and dissatisfaction over specific issues often lead to the defeat, recall, or resignation of board members. This in turn creates a political shift within the

composition of the school board. Often, as a school board turns over, the new board may want to bring in a new superintendent. The theory, then, is that board turnover is often predictive of superintendent turnover (Sebert, 2006). If school board – superintendent relations are a key factor in superintendent turnover, then dissatisfaction theory would make the case that during periods of chaos, when stakeholder discontent increases, this may put a strain on the board and then their relationship with the district chief executive officer (Alsbury, 2008; Iannaccone & Lutz, 1970; Lutz & Iannaccone, 1986).

## **Background**

The first cases of the virus that we now know as COVID-19 occurred in December of 2019, when patients began being admitted to a hospital in China, in the Hubei province. These patients were experiencing pneumonia and respiratory failure symptoms due to a novel coronavirus (Ferrer, 2020). According to the Centers for Disease Control, coronaviruses are a large family of viruses that can infect people and many animals, including camels, cattle, cats, and bats. There are many types of coronaviruses, including some that give people a common head or chest cold. Other coronavirus diseases like severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) and the Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS) are extremely dangerous but are much less widespread than colds and COVID-19. (Centers for Disease Control, 2021, p. 1).

COVID-19 was officially declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization on March 11, 2020. The first school in the United States closed because of the virus on February 27, 2020.

The American public education system was dramatically impacted by the pandemic, as they needed to provide a quality level of education to all students while also trying to manage the growing public health crisis (Hartney & Finger, 2020). The first public school in the United

States to be directly impacted, Bothell High School in the state of Washington, closed for two school days to conduct disinfection cleaning after the relative of an employee had symptoms and was tested. Over the next month, school closures across the country would impact over 50 million students, according to a report by Education Week (Education Week, 2020). That same Education Week report shows that the number of schools that closed their doors and paused in-person instruction went from 1,000 schools to 10,000 schools in the time frame between March 9<sup>th</sup> and March 25<sup>th</sup> of 2020. March 25<sup>th</sup>, 2020, all United States public school buildings were officially closed. The pandemic-related school closures occurred throughout the 2020-2021 school year, with some districts transitioning back and forth between remote learning and in-person learning, while many other districts and states did not re-open school for in-person learning at all during the 2020-2021 school year.

All of this occurred in a polarized political environment. President Trump “directly politicized the issue, publicly threatening to withhold funding to schools that fail to hold in-person classes and arguing that Democrats want schools remote for their electoral benefit” (Baker et al., 2020, p. 2). The politics of the pandemic entered the school district board rooms, where board meetings became hostile events with fights over mask requirements, in-person learning, and other COVID-19 related protocols (Hartney & Finger, 2020; Hernandez, 2022; Lisi, 2021; Marr, 2021; Starr, 2020; Steimle, 2021). These challenges were compounded by the emergence of an expanding level of scientific disbelief and denial, where even health care experts’ advice was questioned for validity (Brown, 2021). Additionally, school boards, and their meetings which in the not so recent past were largely non-partisan, became much more partisan during this pandemic (Hartney & Finger, 2020; Hernandez, 2022; Lisi, 2021; Marr, 2021; Starr, 2020; Steimle, 2021).

## Research Questions

This study intended to identify the superintendent roles that public-school superintendents leverage or rely upon in moments of chaos. In many ways, the superintendent sets the tone, direction, and culture for the school district (Donnelly et al., 2012; Dufour & Marzano, 2011; Dufour & Fullan, 2013; Minton, 2020; Portis & Garcia, 2007; Rueter, 2009; Velazquez, 2017). When chaos descends upon the complex system of a school district, leaders must adapt to the changing environment, make the necessary course corrections to continue to lead the organization in the correct direction, despite the chaos. The research questions for this study were:

1. What are school district superintendents' perceptions and lived experiences regarding the phenomenon of leading a school district through the chaos of the COVID-19 pandemic?
  - a. Of the identified five key roles of a superintendent (Callahan, 1966; Kowalski, 2005); which of these roles was perceived as the most significant for superintendents leading through the chaos of the COVID-19 pandemic?
  - b. Of the identified five key roles of a superintendent (Callahan, 1966; Kowalski, 2005); which of these roles presented the greatest challenge for superintendents leading through the chaos of the COVID-19 pandemic?

## Description of Terms

Specific terms and definitions are provided to allow for the reader to have a strong grasp of the terms, ideas, and concepts used within this study (Creswell, 2014). It is critical to maintain an understanding of the concepts and terms that exist within the literature reviewed as part of this study.

**Applied Social Scientist:** An applied social scientist are those within professions who seek to use the social science research and theory to improve their organization. Applied Social Scientist is also one of the five identified roles of a superintendent in which the work focused on taking a social scientific approach to problem solving and in which superintendents focus increased in awareness of issues such as poverty, equity, racism, etc. (Callahan, 1966; Kowalski, 2005).

**Bracketing:** Method used in qualitative research to minimize the effects of preconceptions that may negatively impact the research process (Alase, 2017; Gearing, 2004).

**Chaos:** A state of utter confusion, the inherent unpredictability of a system (Merriam-Webster, n.d.a).

**Chief Executive Officer:** In the world of education, this is the educational professional who is the chief administrator of the school district (Hoyle et al., 2005).

**Communicator:** A person who is skilled in conveying information, news, and ideas. Communicator is also one of the five identified roles of a superintendent in which the work focuses primarily shaping culture, increased community engagement, strategic planning, and relationship building (Callahan, 1966; Kowalski, 2005).

**Coronavirus:** Family of viruses that can infect people and animals. There are a large number of coronaviruses, including those that lead to the common cold, SARS, MERS, and COVID-19 (Centers for Disease Control, 2021, p. 1). The term comes from the word corona, which means a crown, and specifically refers to the spike proteins that are common in a coronavirus.

**COVID-19:** Coronavirus disease 2019. First recognized in Wuhan, China in 2019, and formally identified and named by the World Health Organization in February of 2020.



**Culture:** The beliefs, perceptions, attitudes, and relationships that influence how a school or school district operates. This includes the written and unwritten expectations that often govern the behavior of the individuals within the system (Donnelly et al., 2012; Dufour & Marzano, 2011; Dufour & Fullan, 2013; Minton, 2020; Portis & Garcia, 2007; Rueter, 2009; Velazquez, 2017).

**Democratic Leader:** Democratic leader is one of the five identified roles of a superintendent in which their work focuses on lobbying state and federal elected officials for funding and handling pressure from special interest groups and policy makers (Callahan, 1966; Kowalski, 2005).

**Dissatisfaction Theory:** The Dissatisfaction Theory is the theory that essentially links the concept of public dissatisfaction, board of trustee incumbent defeat, and superintendent turnover (Alsbury, 2008; Iannaccone & Lutz, 1970; Lutz & Iannaccone, 1986). Dissatisfaction theory has its roots in the superintendent vulnerability thesis from Callahan in 1966, which argued that superintendent behavior was connected to politics of their local school boards, which were directly connected to what Callahan at the time viewed as the economic values of the businessmen in the community (Callahan, 1966; Lutz & Iannaccone, 1986).

**Local School Board Governance:** The primary role of a school district board is that of governance or oversight of control and direction of the district. School boards are elected by the citizens within the community of the school district to represent the communities, ideals, values, and beliefs about the district, and the education of the students within the community. The school board primarily focuses on the policies of the school district, sets the standards for what is

expected to occur and be accomplished, and hires the superintendent to be their chief advisor and chief executive officer for the school district (Fusarelli, 2006; Hoyle et al., 1998; Patterson, 2000).

**Manager:** The manager is a person responsible for controlling or administering all or part of a company or organization. Manager is also one of the five identified roles of a superintendent in which the work focuses primarily on budget, management, and operations (Callahan, 1966; Kowalski, 2005).

**Pandemic:** Pandemics are typically defined by a surge in a virus that spreads over a large area often beyond the borders of a self-contained area (Merriam-Webster, n.d.b). As compared with an epidemic, pandemics typically aren't contained within one area. The COVID-19 virus initially was termed an epidemic in Wuhan, China, but as it spread beyond the borders, and around the world it was identified as a pandemic.

**Partisan:** This is a term relating to firm adherence to a party, faction, cause, or person (Merriam-Webster, n.d.c).

**Phenomenology:** A qualitative approach to research that seeks to “explore, describe, and analyze the meaning of individual lived experience” (Marshall & Rossman, 2015, p. 17).

**Phenomenological Reduction:** Conscious effort on the part of the researcher to remain open to the phenomenon itself. The researcher listens to interview recordings and reads interview transcripts with an openness to the meaning that emerges from the participants (Marshall & Rossman, 2015).

**Semi-structured Interview:** In a semi-structured interview, the researcher sets up some general structure or framework prior to the interview that details what topics, concepts, and themes will be explored within the interview. The person being interviewed has some discretion

or latitude in how they answer and how much they provide in response to the questions. The researcher/interviewer then responds by using prompts and follow-up questions to clarify or expand upon their answers. The semi-structured interview is open to new ideas, topics, and concepts that may emerge through the responses of the person being interviewed (Drever, 1997; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

**Snowball Sampling:** A form and extension of convenience sampling in which potential participants are encouraged to share the opportunity to participate with others who would meet the criteria for participation, thus increasing the pool of possible participants (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019).

**Teacher-Scholar:** The teacher-scholar is focused on the process by which knowledge and skills are taught and provided to students, and someone who is also part of the larger community of life-long learners in a specific discipline, or area of expertise. Teacher-Scholar is also one of the five identified roles of a superintendent in which they were primarily involved with the supervision and training of teachers (Callahan, 1966; Kowalski, 2005).

### **Significance of the Study**

This study will contribute to the gap in research by looking specifically at superintendents' perceptions of the leadership skills and principles that helped them to navigate their district through chaos. The significance of this study exists to benefit current and future superintendents in their endeavors of leading school districts through the whitewater that comes in many forms, while also providing university superintendent training programs with further knowledge with which to prepare those individuals pursuing superintendent endorsement.

Previous studies have identified five distinct superintendent roles (Callahan, 1966; Kowalski, 2005) including teacher-scholar, manager, democratic leader, applied social scientist,

and communicator; the literature supports the notion that the role of the superintendent is a complex one (Lowery & Harris, 2002) and that the superintendency impacts all aspects of the school district system (Norton et al., 1996). Districts across the country have experienced an increasingly high rate of superintendent turnover, and the information from the National School Boards Association demonstrate that this was increasingly true at the end of phase two of the COVID pandemic and 2020-2021 school year. While these vacancies cannot be entirely attributed to COVID-19 and the challenges of leading through the chaos of the challenging political and operational landscape, at the very least there is an interesting correlation between the increased challenges and the number of changes that occurred throughout the state. The political landscape that has emerged during this pandemic, its impact on school board elections, and the resulting volatile school board meetings may have had an impact on superintendent turnover. The interviews conducted and research questions include a focus on the relationship between the school board and the superintendent and the strategies used by the superintendent to navigate the political side of that relationship. Research exists that points to this concept of public dissatisfaction, often starting with significant changes within the community or a significant issue that generates greater attention or interest on the school board and district decisions. This previous research makes the case that public dissatisfaction is the disease that often leads to professional death for the superintendent (Iannaccone & Lutz, 1970; Lutz & Iannaccone, 1986).

The complexity of this role and balancing the various aspects of the position during the increased politicized environment that accompanied the COVID-19 pandemic is worth continued study and review. Because of the ongoing nature of the COVID-19 pandemic, there is limited literature that examines the lived experiences of the superintendents during this unprecedented

period in public education. This study was done to help fill in the gap that exists regarding these experiences and to identify some themes that may provide insight into not only this phenomenon, but also the broad phenomena of leading through the chaos.

### **Overview of Research Methods**

For this study, a qualitative design was selected. Qualitative research “is a broad approach to the study of social phenomena” (Marshall & Rossman, 2015, p. 3). Specifically, this study which focused on the lived experiences of six school district superintendents as they as they navigated their role of leadership through the chaos of the COVID-19 pandemic, and a hermeneutical phenomenological approach was chosen. Edmund Husserl is considered the father of phenomenological research. Husserlian phenomenology is often called descriptive phenomenology in that it seeks only to describe the situation or phenomenon from the perspective of the person being studied (Ellis, 2016; Husserl, 1968, 2004). To meet these goals, the primary structure and strategy are structured and semi-structured interviews with the six participants. This interest and focus on the lived experience of the participants lends itself to a phenomenological approach which “describes the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 75).

For this study, the researcher identified three distinct phases of the COVID-19 pandemic as it relates to school district superintendents. The researcher identified six school superintendents who served in the role of the superintendent during all three “phases” of the COVID-19 pandemic. Phase One was the portion of the 2019-2020 school year from March 2020 through June 2020. This was the phase when the COVID-19 pandemic first impacted public schools in the United States. The second phase was the following school year, from July

2020 through June 2021. The third phase is the 2021-2022 school year, from July 2021 through June 2022.

Potential participants were identified for this study through some convenience sampling of reaching out to individuals in superintendent roles that the researcher had some level of acquaintance with and also some snowball sampling where the researcher asked initial candidates to pass on to their peers in the superintendency the opportunity to participate in the study. Snowball sampling is an alternative approach to convenience sampling, where participants are asked to recommend others for the study (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019).

## **Chapter II**

### **Review of Literature**

#### **Introduction**

This literature review will present an overview of the superintendency, including the role of the superintendent, superintendent turnover, as well as a review of school board governance as it applies to the superintendency role. Regarding the role of the superintendent, specific focus will be given to the concept of the superintendent as chief executive officer for the school district and to the specific standards that have been established for superintendents. Exploration of superintendent turnover and challenges of the superintendent will focus on areas where the challenges of the superintendent role coincide with factors that lead to superintendent turnover. The literature review will also investigate the role of school boards and school board governance as it relates to the challenges of the superintendency and superintendent turnover. Further, this review will explore the theoretical frameworks of dissatisfaction theory as it relates to board and superintendent turnover and trait leadership theory.

#### **The Evolving Role of the Superintendent**

The superintendency as a formal role began in 1837 when the city of Buffalo, New York named their first school superintendent (Callahan, 1966; Kowalski & Brunner, 2011). The trend of hiring superintendents progressed along a similar line as the development of public-school systems in the United States, with a relatively slow start and then the rapid expansion beginning around 1870 (Callahan, 1966; Kowalski et al., 2011). Over the decades since the superintendent position had its beginning, there has been an evolution in the roles and expectations of the superintendent (Callahan, 1966; Kowalski, 2005). Through the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the

superintendent was viewed, both by others and by themselves, as a teacher-scholar. As Kowalski and Brunner (2011) noted, the idea of the common school and teachers delivering a very prescriptive and uniform set of content and courses required the superintendent to oversee and ensure compliance toward that end.

The role of the superintendent continued to evolve into a more managerial role, or what Callahan (1966) would call the superintendent as a business executive, in direct alignment with the transition of the United States becoming a more industrial-focused society. The focus became more on time and efficiency, a model compared with that of the manager of a company (Callahan, 1966). This was a large change from the previous role in that previously the administration and teachers were not considered to be separate entities, but rather the superintendent was considered a part of the teaching profession and working alongside their teacher peers (Kowalski et al., 2011). This concept of adopting a business model and the idea of scientific management all directly aligned with increased immigration after 1900 (Callahan, 1966). Due to rapid growth and the need for increased spending on school facilities and resources, there became a desire on the part of the community to be more efficient and to run school systems from the business model mindset (Callahan, 1966; Kowalski et al., 2011). As Kowalski et al. (2011) details, the primary roles during this period for a superintendent were focused on budget, operations, personnel, and facilities.

Starting around 1930, the role of superintendent once again began to shift, this time towards the role as a democratic leader (Callahan, 1966; Kowalski et al., 2011). Now the superintendent was viewed as someone that could lobby for funds, and this became a more necessary function with reduced resources available after the depression. This focus on democratic leadership for superintendents was relatively short-lived and was replaced by a focus



on the superintendent as an applied social scientist (Callahan, 1966; Kowalski et al., 2011). The American Association of School Administrators was an active part of this shift. This new focus on social science was directly connected to universities that began to offer school administration as a field of study (Kowalski & Brunner, 2011) and the Kellogg Foundation which spent over seven million dollars in grants for educational administration (Callahan, 1966). Finally, the idea of the superintendent as communicator emerged as our society moved to a more informational age from the previous manufacturing period (Kowalski et al., 2011).

While the historical review of the role of superintendent provides a glimpse into the discrete roles and the evolution of the position, today all these roles are combined as part of the complexity that is required of the superintendent (Bjork et al., 2014b). The complexity of the superintendency and the continued evolution of the role is reflected in the 2010 study of the American school superintendent by Kowalski et al. where those five distinct roles are clarified as no longer being distinct; “the contemporary superintendent is expected to wear five different hats, and she or he is expected to know when to transition among the roles” (Kowalski et al., 2011, p. 5).

In 1993 the American Association of School Administrators presented a report based on the work of the Commission on Standards for the Superintendency. Chairman John Hoyle and 100 leaders across education, government, and business, contributed to the final report and the standards within. The 1992 study conducted by Glass, which looked at the American school superintendency, was a contributing document that led to the development of these standards. In that study, Glass found that individuals leading larger-sized school districts identified with the comparison to a CEO in the business world. However, as Glass notes, most superintendents work in small districts with fewer than 3,000 students (Glass, 1992). The AASA Commission on

Standards for the Superintendency (Hoyle, 1993) identified the following professional standards for the superintendency: Standard 1: Leadership and District Culture; Standard 2: Policy and Governance; Standard 3: Communications and Community Relations; Standard 4: Organizational Management; Standard 5: Curriculum Planning and Development; Standard 6: Instructional Management; Standard 7: Human Resources Management; and Standard 8: Values and Ethics of Leadership (AASA Commission on Standards for the Superintendency, 1993). Each of these eight standards has specific indicators that help the superintendent better understand the nature of the work and how to best demonstrate their mastery of those standards. When looking at these standards along with the five roles identified by Callahan (1966) and Kowalski (2005) of teacher-scholar, manager, democratic leader, applied social scientist, and communicator, the literature supports the notion that the role of the superintendent is a complex one (Lowery & Harris, 2002) and that the superintendency impacts all aspects of the school district system (Norton et al., 1996).

Based on a study published in 2009 by Glenn et al. which investigated the skills that school boards value in their superintendents based on the perceptions of those search firms that are used to help hire the next superintendent, school boards value those that have conceptual skills for planning and decision making, technical skills directly related to the position of superintendent, and human relation skills (Glenn et al., 2009). Fullan and Quinn (2016) identified the concept of The Coherence Framework and applied that work to school and district leadership. The Coherence Framework of focusing direction, cultivating collaborative cultures, securing accountability, and deepening learning (Fullan & Quinn, 2016) has implications for the superintendent role but is also later used by Fullan and Gore in describing a model of board governance.

This continued view of the complex role of the superintendent as a chief executive officer appears in the work of Hoyle et al. (2005) in their book *The Superintendent as CEO*. This work directly references the Hoyle (1993) Professional Standards for the Superintendency and builds upon it for implications for superintendent preparation for what they describe as the “complex role of education CEO” (Hoyle et al., 2005).

In the 2020 decennial study conducted by the AASA, superintendents were asked for their perception as to why they were hired for their current superintendency, and the most common answer at 76.1% related to personal characteristics such as honesty, integrity. The ability to communicate with the different stakeholders in the community was 59.2%, and the ability to be an instructional leader was 57.8% (Tienken, 2021). Over the years, studies produced by the AASA have asked questions regarding why the board hired the superintendent they chose. In 1980, the most common response was around the concept of personal characteristics, with 65.6% respondents providing this answer. In 2006, that same response only occurred 21.7% of the time. Conversely, instructional leadership was the most common response in 2006 with 49.2%, 59% in 2020, and that same response only showed up 11.6% of the time in 1980 (Glass & Franceschini, 2007; Tienken, 2021).

A study conducted in the spring of 2022 by the Rand Corporation and the American School District Panel aimed to examine 291 district and charter superintendents’ job satisfaction and short-term career plans. When asked if the job of the superintendent has gotten harder over the past decade, 95% answered in the affirmative. Ninety-eight percent believed that schools are expected to do more than they were in the previous decade. With all of that being said, the job satisfaction for those respondents was 85% (Schwartz & Diliberti, 2022).

## **Challenges of the Superintendency**

Studies on the role and challenges of the superintendency have become increasingly common, with more and more focus on the nature of the board/superintendent relationship as it aligns with superintendent turnover. A 2012 phenomenological study detailed the job of a superintendent as one that is defined by conflict and political and public scrutiny (Antonucci, 2012). Part of this political pressure and scrutiny is attributed to the increasingly partisan political nature of school boards and school board meetings (Gadarian et al., 2021; Hartney & Finger, 2020; Lutz & Iannaccone, 1986; Trevino et al., 2008). Additionally, the challenges of the superintendency have evolved over the past 30 years with school boards becoming more and more involved in daily operational decisions as opposed to the purely policy-focused role that is typically understood for a school board (Fusarelli, 2006). As school boards “overreach” into the daily operational details, the line of authority and responsibility can begin to blur (Bjork et al., 2002).

When asked to rank the problems they face in their role as superintendent, financial issues have been the top ranked option going all the way back to 1950, and sustaining as the top ranked issue in every decade study since. Not coincidentally, when asked about the factor that most inhibits their ability to be effective, inadequate financing was the top ranked issue in every study going back to 1960 (Glass & Franceschini, 2007, p. 6-7). The 2020 study on the superintendency in the U.S. asked participants to answer questions about their working conditions, areas of greatest stress, and issues that consume the most of their time. Financial management, personnel management which includes the collective bargaining process, and

conflict management were the three most common responses, followed just slightly by board relations (Tienken, 2021, p. 43).

Looking through those *Professional Standards for the Superintendency* (Hoyle, 1993) and then the work by Hoyle et al. (2005), there exists an alignment with these standards and challenges that begin to face superintendents. For example, in Standard 1 the superintendent is charged with creating the future vision for the district, academic rigor, excellence, empowerment, and problem-solving. This blend of goals, procedures, and high expectations, along with the ability to empower the staff, is a complex issue, and that is just within the first standard (Hoyle et al., 2005). Policy and Governance, which is Standard 2 (Hoyle, 1993), has been an area identified by others (Byrd et al., 2006; Grissom & Andersen, 2012; Natkin et al., 2004; Norton et al., 1996) as a challenge for superintendents and an area that contributes to superintendent turnover. Superintendent and board relations have been called the cornerstone of the superintendents' success (Eller & Carlson, 2008). Ultimately, it is the superintendent's role to bring together the school board, the community at large, parents, teachers, and support staff around a shared vision for the school district (Fusarelli, 2006; Stanford, 1999). This takes the ability to understand the culture and climate of the district and the community at large, which requires the interpersonal communication skills to navigate the intricacies of the system and to listen and learn and respond appropriately (Fusarelli, 2006). A 2009 study on the power and role of the superintendent identified some emergent themes around the evolving role of the superintendent and their leadership (Miller et al., 2009). These themes include a shift toward more shared leadership and community-building practices, along with a better understanding of when and when not to exert their power or authority. The complexity of the job is directly connected back to the five roles that have emerged through historical analysis of the

superintendent and research: superintendent as teacher-scholar, manager, democratic leader, applied social scientist, and communicator (Bjork et al., 2014b).

While this study focuses on superintendent leadership during chaos, it is important to recognize that, even in the calmest of moments, superintendents are confronted with difficult and challenging dilemmas. Foster (1986) said the following: “Each administrative decision carries with it a restructuring of human life: that is why administration at its heart is the resolution of moral dilemmas” (p. 33). The challenge of the superintendency is often defined by being asked to solve large, significant problems within an increasingly turbulent climate, filled with special interests on both sides, both pushing their agenda and their opinions on the leader of the school district (Homer-Dixon, 2000).

### **Superintendent Turnover**

Superintendent turnover and the factors that lead to it have been studied to some depth, but more research is needed (Hoyle et al., 2005). In 2000, in the 10-year study directed by Glass et al. on the American School Superintendency found that the average tenure of a superintendent was between five and six years (Glass et al., 2000). This average tenure remained stable as reported by AASA in 2006, where mean tenure for a superintendent is five to six years and the average turnover rate for superintendents is 14 – 16% annually (Glass & Franceschini, 2007).

Existing literature, in both quantitative and qualitative studies, surrounds specific factors that contribute to superintendent turnover. The dissatisfaction theory, which I detail later, is shown to have a direct connection to turnover at the superintendent level (Lutz & Iannaccone, 1986). Studies citing the factors influencing superintendent turnover specifically identify the issues that arise as board member interference in management, conflicts with staff, cultural clashes between board members and superintendents hired from outside the district, sports-

related conflicts, as well as others (Natkin et al., 2004). According to the 2000 study by Glass et al., school finance remains the number one problem that faces superintendents. This along with assessment and testing concerns rose to the top of the long list of competing challenges that superintendents identified (Glass et al., 2000).

When looking at superintendent turnover, the 2000 study of American school superintendents found that just under 38% left to move to a larger district, while just under 15% left due to a conflict with their school board (Glass et al., 2000). The study also indicates that board conflict and superintendent turnover are more frequently linked in smaller districts than in larger districts. Researchers have made the case that the issues between the board and superintendent consistently arise when the board attempts to reach into the day-to-day operational aspects of running the district rather than limiting themselves to the governance aspects (Fusarelli, 2006; Hoyle et al., 1998; Patterson, 2000). In a 2012 phenomenological study, the theme of superintendent turnover emerged with the participants indicating that being superintendent in one district is no longer viewed as a position of longevity, and rather that, depending on the district that is being served, the fit of the superintendent within the community is a large factor (Antonucci, 2012). Another study from 2008 worked to articulate the differences in the challenges faced by superintendents by district location and by tenure. In the study, the researchers found that the longer a superintendent stayed within a school district, the organizational, economic, and personnel challenges were reduced compared with superintendents with shorter tenure (Braley et al., 2008).

Regarding the idea of superintendent turnover, the superintendents surveyed as part of the AASA Decennial Study in 2020 were asked about their career plans for 2025. Only 42.5% stated that they planned to be in their same position, within the same district in five-years (Tienken,

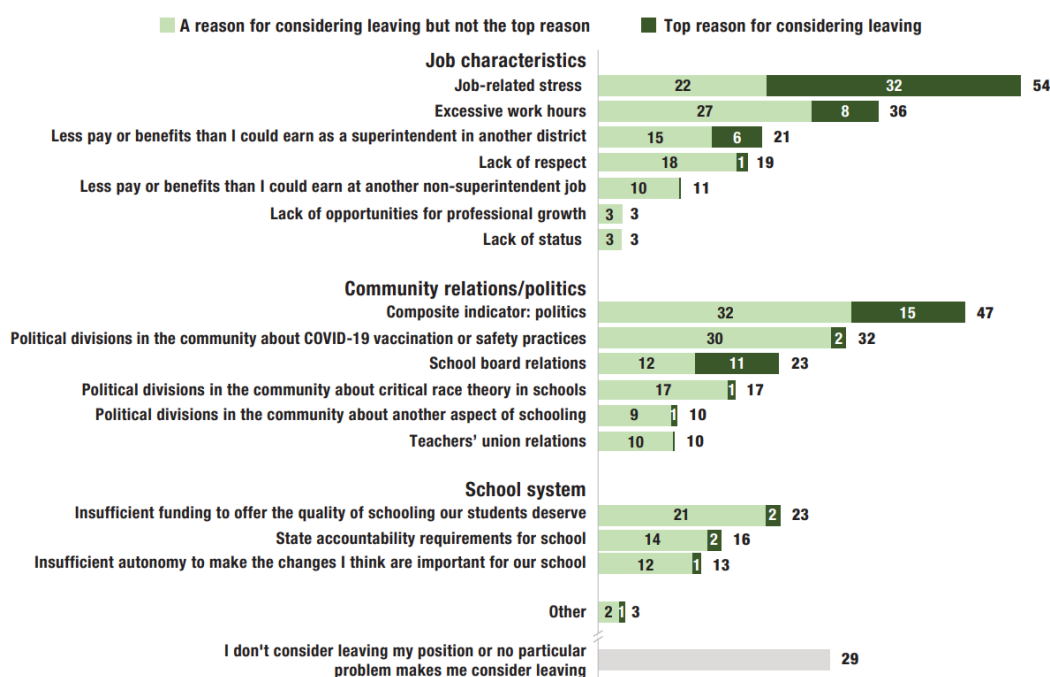
2021, p. 36). While these vacancies cannot be entirely attributed to COVID-19 and the challenges of leading through the chaos of the challenging political and operational landscape, at the very least there is an interesting correlation between the increased challenges and the number of changes that occurred throughout the state.

There are various conflicting reports regarding the turnover rate as of this study. According to the American Association of School Administrators, 25% of superintendents have left their role within the past year. The National Superintendents Roundtable released a report regarding the struggles of superintendents that are members of their organization. Their report found that 63% of respondents indicated they had considered leaving their role during the 2020-2021 school year. Of those, 83% made the decision to stay in their jobs for at least the 2021-2022 school year (National Superintendents Roundtable, 2021). However, 13% of respondents to a 2022 study on superintendent's job satisfaction indicated that they planned to leave their position by the end of that school year, which is a similar rate to that prior to the pandemic (Schwartz & Diliberti, 2022). Perhaps more importantly, when examining their reasons for considering leaving, job-related stress and politics were at the top of those considerations. Figure 1 shows that job related stress, and politics were two of the largest factors leading to superintendents consideration to leave their current role.



**Figure 1**

*Percentage of Superintendents Who Said the Following Problems Make Them Consider Leaving Their Position as of Spring 2022*



NOTES: Respondents were asked, "Which of the following problems, if any, make you consider leaving your current position?" and were instructed to "select all that apply." The survey question also included a mutually exclusive response option—"N/A; I don't consider leaving my position or no particular problem makes me consider leaving." Those who selected one or more reasons for considering leaving their current position were also asked, "Which of the following problems that you selected is the most important reason that makes you consider leaving your position?" This figure depicts combined response data from these two survey questions ( $n = 222$ ). Only respondents who indicated that they were the superintendent saw these questions. The composite "politics" bar includes superintendents who selected at least one of the five reasons we list under the category of "Community relations/politics." Bars might not sum to totals because of rounding.

*Note.* From "State of the Superintendent--High Job Satisfaction and a Projected Normal Turnover Rate. Selected Findings from the Fifth American School District Panel Survey," by H. L. Schwartz and M. K. Diliberti, 2022. CC BY 4.0.

Earlier in 2023 during a panel hosted by The School Superintendents Association, the challenges related to politics were discussed and clearly impact even the best of leaders. The

panel included the four finalists for National Superintendent of the Year, and each indicated that partisan politics and political divisiveness “shifts the focus away from students and their academic needs” (Peetz, 2023, p. 1).

### **School Board Governance**

Local school board governance is a critical component of the American democratic process (Campbell & Fullan, 2019). McAdams (2005) wrote that governance is steering while management is rowing. This concept of steering the district, pointing it in the decided direction, aligns with those fundamental characteristics of good board operations and setting the vision for the district. The concept of board governance and the role of the board has been examined in several books (Alsbury & Gore, 2015; Campbell & Fullan, 2019; Hoyle et al., 2005; Walser, 2013), articles, and studies (Carver, 2000; Land, 2002; Mulvey et al., 2018; Resnick, 1999).

Five major themes of good governance are examined by Campbell and Fullan (2019). These themes are, in short, commitment to good governance, shared moral imperative between the board, superintendent that drives the direction of the district, boards who govern with a unity of purpose, trustees and superintendent with a governance mindset, and leadership from the middle of the system (Campbell & Fullan, 2019). In Land’s (2002) review on the research that has been conducted regarding effective school boards, identified characteristics included a focus on student achievement and policy, effective management without micromanagement, a trusting and collaborative relationship between board and superintendent, conditions and structures in place to allow the superintendent to truly function as chief executive officer and instructional leader for the district, mutually agreed-upon criteria for superintendent evaluation, effective board communication with the community, effective board/superintendent communication, board retreats for goal setting, and monthly meetings with an agenda set by the superintendent. Land

contrasted these characteristics with those that represent poor governance, such as board micromanagement, role confusion between the board and the superintendent, and limited commitment by the board or members of the board to improving governance (Land, 2002).

Walser outlines the work done during the Lighthouse inquiry into school board leadership and the identified five roles of a school board; setting clear expectations for outcomes, holding board and staff accountable for meeting those expectations, creating conditions for success, building the collective will to succeed, and learning together as a board team (Walser, 2013). In terms of this concept of governance, the National School Boards Association has identified ten fundamentals of good board governance which include setting the vision, focusing on student learning and achievement, providing a structure for success, advocating for education, involving the community, accounting for results, empowering the staff, fulfilling the policymaker's role, collaborating with other agencies, and committing to continuous improvement. Resnick (1999) states that the idea of providing a structure for success begins with creating the environment that “allows the superintendent to function as the district’s chief executive officer and as the community’s primary education leader” (p. 19).

In the book *The Governance Core*, the authors argue for the importance and essential nature of board governance, that effective governance is a critical component of school district success, and that it is the “least understood and most underutilized component” (Campbell & Fullan, 2019, p. 2). They go on to detail eight positive and eight negative drivers that can either increase or decrease the effectiveness of the system. Carver (2000) writes that “many today would argue that the most destructive stress for superintendents is their relationship with their board of education” (p. 1). Ultimately, for governance, it is what the board and the superintendent do together that matters (Campbell & Fullan, 2019). Campbell and Fullan (2019)

argue for what they refer to as the Governance Core, which essentially is an intentional set of components that, when focused upon and used with strategic intentionality, will allow measurable outcomes to be created for the board and superintendent. Their Governance Core components are governance mindset, coherence, culture, jobs, and tools (Campbell & Fullan, 2019).

Heifetz once made the comparison of the dance floor and the balcony to the work being done by superintendents and school boards. The idea is that school boards need to have the systems thinking mentality and spend most of their time on the balcony to get a sense of the bigger picture and “distancing yourself from the fray” (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002). When individual trustees or the board as a governing body gets too close to “the fray” they often lose the necessary perspective needed to govern correctly, and often this is where problems arise between the board and superintendent; it is when the board gets involved in administrative, day-to-day operational issues that they begin to lose sight of the bigger picture and conversations that allow the board to keep the district moving in the right direction (Campbell & Fullan, 2019). Alsbury and Gore (2015) advocate for a system of balanced governance that “discourages micromanaging on one end” but also discourages rubber-stamp board governance. As a superintendent, finding that balance between disengaged trustees and micromanaging trustees is an important task (Alsbury & Gore, 2015). The concept of “informed oversight” is this idea that each board member and the board as a governing body can be a constructive member of the school district strategic vision and focus, that they can set big picture goals for student achievement and have a strong understanding of the way the district is going to help students to get there (Alsbury & Gore, 2015).

Ultimately, the typical mindset of placing district administration, specifically the superintendent, in a separate silo from the school board is not what is best for students and student achievement (Alsbury, 2008; Campbell et al., 2019). The superintendent and school board can and should operate as a governance team (Alsbury, 2008; Campbell, et al., 2019) working together toward an aligned strategic vision for the school district. In a 2018 article from a school board leadership journal (Elsbernd, 2018), a vice-chair of a school district in Iowa outlines the idea around the “big picture” and the criticality of the board keeping the big picture view in focus, and that sometimes when this gets confused, it creates issues for school boards and superintendents. It is important that the board can maintain the view of the overall, big picture so that they are able to do their work around the vision for the school district. Policy governance articulates specific principles for boards and superintendents to follow toward success, specifically the idea of determining organizational goals, the process of governance that will be used by the board, and the delegation of the operations to management. The author also explains that it is critical for the board, once they have identified their expectations and processes, to “stay in their lane” and allow the expert they have hired (superintendent) to do the job they have been hired to do, which includes the hiring of other experts within the organization to do their parts of the job. However, there is also a need for purposeful monitoring throughout the process by the board. This monitoring is how the board knows what is going on and that the school district and their superintendent are working toward the ends that have been identified by the school board. Ultimately, this entire process and framework are built upon trust. The board must trust their superintendent to do the right work in the right way. It also requires for the board to do work on the policy level to ensure that what the board values and expects are clearly communicated to the superintendent and all other stakeholders (Elsbernd, 2018). Policy

governance can be messy, however the strength of this type of governance is that it clarifies who has what authority. Without having this clarity, success is up to some level of chance and the individual personalities of those that are involved. Creating a clear concept of whose job something is versus whose job it is not can not only create boundaries for success, but it can also create levels of accountability. A *Board Leadership* journal article (Charney, 2003) regarding the policy governance framework specifically details some of the myths around this framework. The first myth is that a policy governance model only gives the board authority to hire the superintendent and set broad policy goals. In general, both of those items are accurate and a clear part of the board's role, but to say that this is all that the board has authority to do is inaccurate. Policy governance requires boards to set clear standards regarding the expected ends, or goals, as well as to provide the means for the management of the district to achieve these. A board using a policy governance model also has a clear delegation of authority, including what it expects from the superintendent and how it will evaluate the superintendent in achieving those expectations. Another myth includes the idea that a policy governance approach only works if the district has a strong superintendent. The board and the district should demand that the chief executive officer is a strong leader and that this leader is able to execute and move the district in the right direction. The idea that having a weak or ineffective superintendent is a reason for a school board to not use a policy governance model is incorrect. Instead, the focus should be on creating a strong board policy governance model that will clearly identify the strengths and weaknesses of the superintendent and require that either the superintendent grow in desired areas to meet the expectations of the district and the board or allow the board to move a different direction and find a chief executive officer that will be able to meet those expectations (Charney, 2003). Policy governance can be messy and can be viewed by some detractors as a "hands-off" approach for

school boards, however, it actually provides the appropriate level of “hands-on” while creating clear lines of authority and expectations for accountability. However, regardless of how experienced or inexperienced members of the board are as individuals or how effectively or ineffectively they operate as a governing body, ultimately, they are the “owners” of the school district, and the superintendent must understand that the board’s votes often will make or break their goals and initiatives. Because of this, the ability for the superintendent to garner the support of the board is critical to success (Polka & Litchka, 2008). As discussed regarding challenges for superintendents, divisive politics can take center stage in the board room. Chaotic board meetings became much more common over the past three years as national political issues and partisan politics became a larger focus in these meetings (Peetz, 2023).

### **Dissatisfaction Theory**

Dissatisfaction theory has been studied concerning school board and superintendent turnover (Alsbury, 2008; Iannaccone & Lutz, 1970; Lutz & Iannaccone, 1986; Sebert, 2006). In 2006, Sebert utilized this theory in studying the longevity of superintendents in the state of Wisconsin. His study found that, as stress and dissatisfaction increase in the community, the result may be the defeat of school board members, which may result in a political shift in the board which oftentimes results in the involuntary superintendent turnover. Sebert (2006) used the dissatisfaction theory as a predictor of superintendent tenure and turnover. The dissatisfaction theory is, in brief, the theory that essentially links the concept of public dissatisfaction, board of trustee incumbent defeat, and superintendent turnover (Alsbury, 2008; Iannaccone & Lutz, 1970; Lutz & Iannaccone, 1986;). Dissatisfaction theory has its roots in the superintendent vulnerability thesis from Callahan in 1966, which argued that superintendent behavior was connected to the politics of their local school boards, which were directly connected to, at the

time, what Callahan viewed as the economic values of the businessmen in the community (Callahan, 1966; Lutz & Iannaccone, 1986).

Iannaccone and Lutz (1970) refer to public dissatisfaction as the disease that often leads to professional death for the superintendent; and that has clear symptoms and treatment often starting with significant changes within the community or perhaps a significant issue which generates greater attention or interest on the board and district decisions (Lutz & Iannaccone, 1986). Special interest groups begin to increase in number and become louder and more demanding for “their way” and for specific policy changes. If untreated, these symptoms move into more aggressive tactics focused on board recall efforts in the middle of trustee terms and/or aggressive campaigning at the end of the term for a new replacement (Iannaccone & Lutz, 1970; Lutz & Iannaccone, 1986). Ultimately, for the superintendent, the research on the dissatisfaction theory has shown that, when there is, specifically, a politically motivated trustee incumbent defeat and/or politically motivated board member resignation due to public dissatisfaction, the next step is often removal of the district superintendent (Alsbury, 2008). Lutz (1982) discussed that superintendents should use community dissatisfaction as an early warning sign that they should create more open communication, work to revise policies to decrease dissatisfaction, and hopefully lengthen the board members' tenure. Alsbury (2008) found that school board and superintendent turnover did have a negative correlation with academic achievement and that, while not arguing it was causal, student achievement did decline during these periods of public dissatisfaction leading to board and superintendent turnover. Additionally, a 2006 study showed that increasing community levels of stress and dissatisfaction over specific issues often lead to the defeat, recall, or resignation of board members. This, in turn, creates a political shift within the composition of the school board. Often, as a school board turns over, the new board may



want to bring in a new superintendent. The theory then is that board turnover is often predictive of superintendent turnover (Sebert, 2006).

### **Trait Leadership Theory**

Trait leadership theory starts from the idea that leaders have very specific traits that non-leaders do not often possess. Trait leadership has been studied by several researchers with those studies specifically looking to identify the trait characteristics of leaders (Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1991; Lord et al., 1986; Mann, 1959; Stogdill, 1948, 1974). Stogdill's research in 1948 showed that it was more than just the presence of specific traits, but that also those traits matched the leadership situation that the person was working in. The 1974 Stogdill study took a more balanced approach, suggesting that both characteristics and situation were ingredients for strong leadership. Northouse (2004) reviewed the various studies on trait leadership and their identified leadership characteristics and pulled out those major leadership traits that were central to the findings from past research. Those major leadership traits were intelligence, self-confidence, determination, integrity, and sociability (Northouse, 2004). Northouse and his trait leadership approach would indicate that trait leadership is all about the leader and their inherent qualities and not about those whom they lead or the specifics of the situation. "It is the leader and his or her personality that is central to the leadership process" (Northouse, 2004, p. 21).

Zaccaro et al. (2004), provided a model of leader attributes and performance that was based on previous research but combined uniquely to create different levels of influence on leadership (Zaccaro et al., 2004). They proposed that "Leader traits contribute significantly to the prediction of leader effectiveness, leader emergence, and leader advancement" (Zaccaro et al., 2004, p. 121). Additionally, their premise is that the attributes of leaders include specific traits that allow the leader to "respond effectively and appropriately across situations" (Zaccaro et al., 2004, p.

121). Their model, identifies distal abilities (cognitive abilities, personality traits, motives, and values) which are important in all general leadership situations. While more “proximal attributes” (specific expertise and knowledge, social and problem-solving skills) become more situationally important. Zaccaro et al. (2004) also argue that the operating environment and the leader processes are combined with the leadership traits to establish true criteria for leadership and ultimately the emergence of leadership, leadership success, and advancement and promotion.

## **Conclusion**

The role of the superintendent has evolved since the inception of the position and has endured through the political changes that surround the American system of public education. Today, the role of the superintendent is not a position with a singular focus but rather a role in which the person leading the school district must wear all five of the hats of teacher-scholar, manager, democratic leader, applied social scientist, and communicator. Finding the appropriate balance of these roles is even more critical when you examine the criticality of the board-superintendent relationship. Board governance, another enduring component of both American public education, but also of American democracy, is a critical component for the success of the system as well as an important component for this research as an element that, if not given proper attention by the leader, can be disastrous for the superintendent during times of chaos as dissatisfaction increases. As Fullan stated, it is easy to see “why coherence is so difficult to accomplish under conditions of overload, fragmentation, and policy churn” (Fullan & Quinn, 2016, p. 2). For superintendents to meet the demands of all five roles and work in coherence with the board of trustees takes strong leadership skills and intentional efforts on the part of both the board and superintendent (Campbell & Fullan, 2019)

## **Chapter III**

### **Design and Methodology**

#### **Introduction**

Chapter 3 discusses the foundation of the research design and methodology used to gather and analyze the collected data related to offender mindset, self-efficacy, and resilience. This chapter includes an explanation of the researcher's role as well as specific information about the location, sites, population, and phenomenon relating to the study. Additionally, a discussion on the reliability of the data and ethical concerns is provided.

Because of the researcher's background and experience in educational leadership, as well as their own lived experience of navigating the chaos of COVID-19 from a district leadership role, a hermeneutical phenomenological approach was identified and utilized. This approach requires the researcher themselves to be immersed in the phenomenon and the context they are studying. It is also critical, because of the researchers' own experiences as an educational leader, to do everything possible can to remove researcher biases and pre-conceptions from the study, and instead immerse themselves into the world and experiences of the participants. The primary requirement to participate in the study was to be a public school superintendent who had served in the role of superintendent during all three "phases" of the COVID-19 pandemic. For the study, the researcher identified three phases. Phase One was the portion of the 2019-2020 school year from March through June. This was the phase when the COVID-19 pandemic first impacted public schools in the United States. The second phase was the following school year, from July 2020 through June 2021. The third phase was the 2021-2022 school year, from July 2021 through June 2022.

## Research Questions

For this study, research questions were identified to help to examine the lived experience of school district superintendents as they led their districts in the face of chaos and to identify the superintendent roles that superintendents leveraged or relied upon in these moments of chaos. The research questions for this study were:

1. What are school district superintendents' perceptions and lived experiences regarding the phenomenon of leading a school district through the chaos of the COVID-19 pandemic?
  - a. Of the identified five key roles of a superintendent (Callahan, 1966; Kowalski, 2005); which of these roles was perceived as the most significant for superintendents leading through the chaos of the COVID-19 pandemic?
  - b. Of the identified five key roles of a superintendent (Callahan, 1966; Kowalski, 2005); which of these roles presented the greatest challenge for superintendents leading through the chaos of the COVID-19 pandemic?

## Research Design

For this study, which focused on the lived experiences of six school district superintendents as they led their organizations through the chaos of the COVID-19 pandemic, a hermeneutical phenomenological approach was chosen. Husserlian phenomenology, also known as descriptive phenomenology, seeks only to describe the situation or phenomenon from the perspective of the person being studied (Ellis, 2016; Husserl, 1968, 2004; Van der Mescht, 2004). Husserl focused on the philosophical underpinnings of phenomenology and the concept that humans experience the world as they move through it, that they sense, imagine, focus on and relate to the world, by being in the world. *Cogito* which is the idea of being aware and awake to

the world, the individual's place within the world, and their own experiences within it is another key idea within phenomenological philosophy. Specifically, within phenomenology, the natural world around us is always there, and we are always part of it (Husserl, 2004).

Martin Heidegger expanded upon Husserl's work to develop a form of phenomenology that focuses on the analysis and interpretation of the individual's lived experiences. Hermeneutic phenomenology, as described by Heidegger, approaches this research design with the idea that the researcher must be immersed within the situation or phenomenon that is being studied as it allows for the researcher to better understand the perspectives and lived experiences of the participants. Phenomenology, the science of phenomenon, as outlined by Heidegger (1927) in the writings *Being and Time*, is foundational to the concept of phenomenological research and the attempt to study the lived experience of individuals in a phenomenon. This work studies the idea of the meaning of being, and that "being" is the most universal concept, while also being challenging, if not impossible, to define in quantifiable terms. The work of Heidegger specifically builds upon the work of Husserl, expanding toward the idea of descriptive phenomenological research (Heidegger, 1927, 1993).

Hermeneutic phenomenology attempts to capture the lived experiences of the participants, to bring forward the participants' perceptions regarding the phenomenon, and to provide new insights and ways of viewing the phenomenon (Crowther et al., 2017; Yuksel & Yildirim, 2015). In his book *Researching lived experience: Human science for an action sensitive pedagogy*, van Manen (1997) outlines the concept that phenomenological research is about questioning the way people experience the world and the desire to know and understand the world through a phenomenon. The concept of intentionally being directly within the world being studied as a researcher is called "the principle of intentionality," a principle used when it

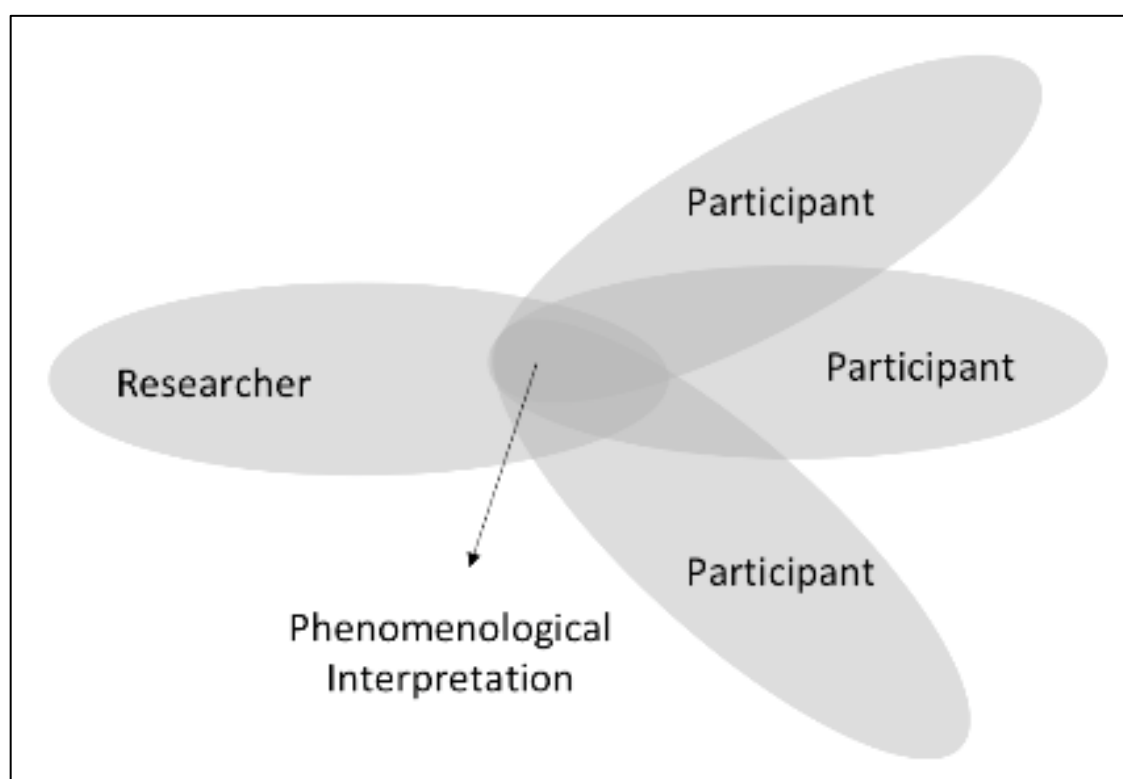
is impossible to separate oneself as a researcher from the world being studied (van Manen, 1997). Looking at phenomenology from a philosophical perspective, van Manen (2002) argues that the center of phenomenological study is wonder. The idea of creating a sense of wonder regarding the phenomenon and the lived experiences of those being studied is part of why researchers endeavor to conduct phenomenological studies. The research and the narrative around these lived experiences should create questions and cause the reader to want to know more (van Manen, 2002).

A hermeneutic phenomenological approach was chosen partly because of the researchers' own experiences working in district-level administration during the COVID-19 pandemic. Heidegger's focus was on the concept of *Dasein*, which can be translated from German to English to mean "Being." Heidegger believed that humans can be aware of who they are by examining their actions and that through the experience of that examination we learn what it means to be a being living in the phenomenon (Heidegger, 1927). In a phenomenological study, the phenomenon itself is being studied, rather than the individual participants (Englander, 2012). The participants are important as they are the ones who have experienced and will describe their lived experience within the phenomenon, however, the primary focus of the study is the phenomenon itself. In this case, the phenomenon is leadership during the chaos of the COVID-19 pandemic. Leadership has been identified as a phenomenon in and of itself, with Burns stating that it is one of the most observed but least understood phenomena (Burns, 1978). Leadership is a phenomenon worth studying because leadership, as Souba (2014) states, is "not theoretical" but rather very practical, in a lived moment, and so very much a phenomenon worth studying (Souba, 2014). Phenomenology isn't a system so much as it is a practice, and the point is to describe the phenomenon as it is experienced from the point of view of the person in the

situation (Webb & Welsh, 2019). The lived experience is the focus, embedded within the individual's conception of their experience. This intersection point between the researcher and the participants for phenomenological interpretation is shown in Figure 2 below. The researcher's role is to use their own expertise to guide the "inquiry and make it meaningful" (Webb & Welsh, 2019, p. 171).

**Figure 2**

*Phenomenological Interpretation*



*Note.* From “Phenomenology as a Methodology for Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Research,” by A. S. Webb and A. J. Welsh, 2019, *Teaching and Learning Inquiry*, 7(1), p. 170. CC BY 4.0.

## Participants

Participants in a phenomenological research study are chosen with some intentionality to identify individuals with a lived experience in a phenomenon and with a willingness to discuss said experience (Alase, 2017; Englander, 2012; Giorgi, 2006; Kleiman, 2004; Lavery, 2003; Shinebourne, 2011; Willis et al., 2016). Phenomenological research typically has a smaller sample size, allowing the researcher to go more in-depth with each participant, and therefore the phenomenon being studied (Connelly, 2010; Englander, 2012). The researcher initially identified ten potential candidates who met the criteria, and each were called personally (see Appendix B) and then sent a follow-up electronic letter (see Appendix C) that explained the study purpose and some basic elements of the methods that would be used. Additionally, the researcher asked those ten candidates to consider reaching out to any colleagues who would meet the criteria who might also have an interest in participating. This snowball sampling method led to the identification of two additional potential candidates for the study. The researcher followed up with phone conversations with each of the potential participants to identify their level of interest in participation. It was critical that the participants fully understood the nature of the study, understood the types of information that were going to be gathered, and felt comfortable and willing to have open conversations. In the initial screening conversations with potential participants, the researcher tried to identify those who would be willing to have detailed and articulate conversations. There have been some studies that have posited that often individuals at high levels of educational leadership are more likely to speak in generalities and abstraction rather than to speak in the detailed, descriptive language (Brooks & Normore, 2015). Based upon the follow-up phone conversations, from the initial list of twelve participants, the researcher identified six individuals who were willing to move forward. Of the



six participants, all were current superintendents who had served in the role of district superintendent for all three identified phases of the COVID-19 pandemic. These superintendents represented districts of varying sizes, demographics, and locations, including five different states. Additionally, the pandemic response efforts in the districts that these individuals led were different in several ways. The response in terms of masking, in-person learning, and quarantine protocols differed in both small and more significant ways between each of these six districts. Likewise, the stability of the school boards from the perspective of board turnover differed in these districts as well.

### **Data Collection**

Data collection in this phenomenological approach was primarily conducted through structured and semi-structured interviews with each participant. In a semi-structured interview, the main questions set the overall structure for the interview, which may include both open and closed questions. The interviewee has freedom within the interview regarding how to answer and how much to answer, while the interviewer can lead and prompt the interviewee for further explanation (Drever, 1997). For this study, each participant was interviewed on three separate occasions. The first round of interviews (see Appendix D) was conducted with a focus on building trust and rapport between the researcher and participants; the questions during the first round of interviews were relatively demographic in nature. The researcher spent some time during the first interview outlining the purpose of the study, the research questions, and addressing any questions or concerns on the part of the participant. During this interview, additional verbal informed consent was gathered before the first questions were asked. Demographic questions were used to identify information such as district size, type of community (urban, rural, suburban, etc.), length of tenure within the district, as well as previous

roles in educational leadership both within the district in question and in other districts. Six initial interview questions were developed before the interviews, and the nature of the interviews allowed for some conversation and additional questions based upon the responses of the participants. At the end of the first round of interviews, the participants were given a journal with prompt questions. The participants were asked to participate in reflective journaling regarding their lived experiences and perceptions of leading a school district during the COVID-19 pandemic. These questions and reflective journaling were used as a primer to allow the participants to reflect on information from the past and prepare themselves for the second round of interviews.

During the second round of interviews (see Appendix E), the participants were asked a series of semi-structured questions intended to focus on the challenges, issues, decisions, successes, and setbacks that occurred during the pandemic. These were semi-structured in that participants' responses often led to additional questions that weren't necessarily part of the scripted interview protocol. These questions were also used to gain better clarity regarding the perceptions and thoughts of the participants and to better ensure that the researcher adequately understood their experiences. Like the first round, there were six initial questions developed, which were then expanded upon during the interviews to allow for better clarity and discourse.

The third round of interviews (see Appendix F) was conducted after the initial two interviews were transcribed and summarized. The researcher provided the summary of the interview to the participant and then met with the participant again to discuss the analytical summary, allowing the participant to identify whether they agree with the substantive information provided in the summary and to correct any issues. Additionally, it allowed the participant to provide additional information if warranted. In the case of this third round of

interviews, there was much less of a focused protocol and more open dialogue around the participants' review of their interview summary.

All three rounds of the interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams. These interviews were captured with audio and video recording. The use of both audio and video recording allowed the researcher the ability to focus on the verbal and non-verbal communication that occurred during the interviews. Though the use of e-mail interviews has been identified as an option for conducting interviews when it isn't possible to be face-to-face (Bowden & Galindo-Gonzalez, 2015), there are some inherent limitations to that method that led the researcher to use Microsoft Teams and video/audio recording. Primarily, this method was chosen to see the participants and their non-verbal communication while also helping to better create rapport between researcher and participants (see Appendices D-F). The interviews were transcribed for exact verbal communication, and the researcher also took notes on any specific non-verbal communication that accompanied the explicit verbal message. These transcripts were then coded to organize the interview data into themes.

### **Analytical Methods**

Phenomenological research cannot be and should not be dictated by a prescribed set of analytical methods. Rather, the nature of phenomenological research is that of a focused and concentrated effort to be responsive and open to the phenomenon being studied (Connelly, 2010; Giorgi, 2009, 2012; Hycner, 1985). Even the steps of transcribing and coding the interview questions involve listening for a sense of the whole from the participants. Interviews are transcribed with a focus on both the literal words being spoken by the interview participants and on non-verbal communication. This is partially why all interviews were done either in person with video and audio recording or via remote video meetings with audio and video recording.

The ability to go back into the video recordings and make note of what was said, as well as how it was said, was an important component of getting a sense of the whole from the participants. Though phenomenology doesn't follow a prescriptive analytical approach, some very key steps should be undertaken to best meet the goals of the research. This involves taking the raw data from the interviews and other collected sources and reducing it into more digestible and manageable details. The researcher takes the data and attempts to filter out the important ideas from those that are less important, and then uses that information to identify themes with which to create a narrative of the themes and analysis (Ellis, 2016).

The methods of analysis should be emergent and reflective with a focus on allowing the words of the participants to speak for themselves (Wilding & Whiteford, 2005). The researcher must allow themselves to listen to the recordings and read the transcriptions with a level of "openness" that allows them to identify the emergent meanings (Connelly, 2010; Hycner, 1985). The concept of phenomenological reduction is the term used to describe this openness. Bracketing is often used as a term to describe this idea of removing, or reducing the researchers' own internal beliefs, and views of the phenomenon and allowing themselves to allow for the participants' views, and experiences to emerge (Giorgi, 2009, 2012).

For this research, the analytical steps that were taken were based on Hycner's (1985) work regarding phenomenological analysis, identified as transcription, bracketing/phenomenological reduction, listening to the interview for the sense of the whole, identifying units of general meaning, identifying units of meaning that are relevant to the research questions, identifying clusters of relevant meaning, determining themes, narrative summaries, conducting a second interview, modifying themes, and identifying themes for all interviews. Additionally, the work of van Manen (1997) which details the six steps of

phenomenological research was utilized. These steps are outlined in Table 1 below and begin with identifying a phenomenon of interest and investigating it as a lived experience (van Manen, 1997). The researcher must maintain their focus on the phenomenon as observed and lived by the participants, rather than through the researchers own lens or conceptualization.

As stated earlier, a third interview was conducted with each participant as part of the analysis process. The researcher provided the summary of the interview #1 and #2 data to the participant and then met with the participant to discuss that analytical summary. This provided the participant the opportunity to identify whether they agreed with the information provided in the summary, and/or to correct any issues. Additionally, it allowed the participant to provide any additional information. In the case of this third round of interviews, there was much less of a focused protocol and more open dialogue around the participants' review of their interview summary. Once these interviews were completed, the researcher reviewed them for any changes or modifications to the themes and summary for that participant. Once all interview summaries and themes for all participants were finalized, the researcher worked to identify what shared themes emerged from each of the participant interviews. These themes were then used to complete a final narrative of the lived experiences of the superintendents as they related to the initial research questions. These steps are further articulated in the table below of the stages of phenomenological research.

**Table 1***The Stages of Phenomenological Research*

Steps	Definition
1. Turning to the nature of lived experience	Formulating a research question.
2. Investigating experience as we live it	The phenomenon is captured through methods of investigation (e.g., interviews, focus groups).
3. Reflecting on the essential themes which characterize the phenomenon	The overall meaning of an informant's experience is sought when reflecting on the themes.
4. Describing the phenomenon in the art of writing and rewriting	Through the process of writing, the intention is to make visible the feelings, thoughts, and attitudes of the informants.
5. Maintaining a strong and orientated relation to the phenomenon	The researcher must strive to remain focused on the research question.
6. Balancing the research context by considering the parts and the whole	The researcher is asked to "constantly measure the overall design of the study.

*Note.* From "Patient Experience in Health Professions Curriculum Development," by S. Molley et al., 2018, *Journal of Patient Experience*, 5(4), 303-309. CC BY-NC 4.0.

**Validity and Reliability**

In phenomenological studies, the researcher needs to determine the validity of the interview questions and consider the validity of the data collected through semi-structured interviews (Creswell, 2014). Experts in research, as well as experts in educational leadership, reviewed the interview and provided recommendations on wording, the relevance of interview questions, and the reliability of the interview questions to answer the research questions. The initial validation process took place utilizing a content validity index tool in an excel spreadsheet format.

Ten experts reviewed the interview questions for content validity, with a content validity index of 100%. The content experts had a universal agreement of 100%.

To ensure the relevancy of the survey questions to the research questions, the researcher asked the ten content experts to identify their level of agreement or disagreement with the alignment of each of the survey questions to the research questions. Based on input from the content experts, each survey question was strongly aligned with a research question.

After content validity, pilot interviews were conducted with two educational leaders. In addition to weighing all possible options, the researcher used content validity and confirmed that the findings measured the “content [the questions] were intended to measure” (Creswell, 2014, p. 160).

To ensure the credibility of the interviews, the researcher also piloted the interview questions with two current superintendents to make sure the questions would lead to relevant data (Brenner, 2006). Based on the results from the pilot, the interview questions were modified, and the final protocol was written (Appendix D-F). Throughout the qualitative data collection phase, the researcher kept an audit trail in the form of a research log. The research log aided in the credibility of the findings (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Marshall & Rossman, 2015).

To validate the findings of the interviews, the researcher used member checking (Creswell, 2014, 2015; Marshall & Rossman, 2015). Participants reviewed initial research conclusions from the interviews. Due to the possibility of increased discomfort to the participants, the researcher did not ask the participants to review their interview transcripts (Mero-Jaffe, 2011). Instead, initial study results were shared with the study participants via e-mail. Participants were asked to review the initial results from their interview and confirm that their voices were accurately represented (Marshall & Rossman, 2015). To determine the reliability of the semi-structured interviews, the researcher checked transcripts for errors (Creswell, 2014).

## **Role of Researcher**

The researcher is a school district administrator who served in district administrative roles during all three identified phases of the COVID-19 pandemic. As such, the researcher has worked in a leadership capacity during the chaos of the pandemic, and though not working directly as the superintendent during this period, was actively involved, and/or directly responsible for much of the COVID-19 response within their district. With this background and experience comes some level of expertise with the phenomenon being studied. During the first phase of the COVID-19 pandemic, the researcher served as the director of curriculum & instruction for the West Ada School District, which is the largest school district in the state of Idaho. During phase two of the pandemic, the researcher served in the role of Assistant Superintendent, chaired the district's COVID-19 Task Force, and was the primary point person for the district COVID-19 mitigation plan. During phase three, the researcher worked as Deputy Superintendent and again worked directly with the Superintendent and all other district administration on the COVID-19 response plans.

Despite the level of experience and background that the researcher had with the subject matter, it was important to make every effort to utilize the phenomenological reduction concept to view the phenomenon through the eyes of the study participants and not bring the researchers' ideas and potential preconceptions into the study. Looking at phenomenology from a philosophical perspective, van Manen argues that wonder is the "central methodological feature of phenomenological inquiry" and that not only is wonder part of the researcher's role, creating wonder on the part of the reader of the research is also part of the point of the research itself (van Manen, 2002, p. 5). Phenomenology isn't a system so much as it is a practice, and the point is to describe the phenomenon as it is experienced from the point of view of the person doing the



experiencing (Van der Mescht, 2004; Webb & Welsh, 2019). Because of this lived experience focus, the researcher's role is to use their own expertise to guide the "inquiry and make it meaningful" (Webb & Welsh, 2019, p. 171).

### **Limitations**

One of the largest limitations of any form of qualitative research is that of the time and amount of data that is needed to truly inform the study. The sheer amount of time to conduct quality interviews and to ensure that the data is of high quality can be immense. Additionally, because of the time constraints, a limited number of participants were used, and thus the ability to generalize the findings of this study beyond that of the participants is challenging (Brooks & Normore, 2015; Creswell, & Poth, 2018; Marshall & Rossman, 2015; Taylor et al., 2015; Yuksel & Yildirim, 2015).

Phenomenology is not empirical analytical science and cannot be used to prove that one thing is better than another or that one approach or experience is more valid or more important than another. Phenomenology doesn't focus on solving problems, but rather it focuses on meaning and the significance of certain phenomena as experienced by the individuals in focus (van Manen, 1997).

## **Chapter IV**

### **Results**

#### **Introduction**

The complexity of the superintendency and the continued evolution of the role is reflected in the 2010 study of the American school superintendent by Kowalski et al. (2011). While the superintendent role in 1837 was primarily as teacher-scholar, the role continued to evolve and expand over time with different aspects becoming the primary focus of the position. These different roles of teacher-scholar, manager, democratic leader, applied social scientist, and communicator were each the primary area of focus at different periods in the evolution of the superintendent role (Callahan, 1966; Kowalski et al., 2011). Today, however, the modern superintendent must have the knowledge and skills of all individual and specific roles as well as the ability to discern which to employ at the right time (Kowalski et al., 2011). The superintendent's role is to bring together the school board, the community at large, parents, teachers, and support staff around a shared vision for the school district (Stanford, 1999; Fusarelli, 2006; Adams, 2013; Hickerson, 2021; Minimo & Bueno, 2022). This requires the ability to understand the culture and climate of the district and the community at large, which requires the interpersonal communication skills to clearly articulate shared beliefs and values. Moreover, the superintendent must also have the leadership skills necessary to navigate the intricacies of the system (Abrams, 1987; Kowalski, 2005; Glenn et al., 2009).

The COVID-19 pandemic added an additional layer of focus and attention on all aspects of the superintendency as the “navigators and captains in this tumult,” (Hemmer, & Elliff, p. 981) resulting in the need for the superintendent to make constant adjustments to navigate the school district through the storm (Hemmer & Elliff, 2020; Shoup & Studer, 2010). The

American public education system was dramatically impacted by the pandemic, as districts needed to provide a quality level of education to all students while also trying to manage the growing public health crisis (Hartney & Finger, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic presented a unique set of circumstances where science, politics, fear, misinformation, and confusion were combined to put every school district in the country in the eye of the community storm. Districts around the country were asked to make decisions that placed health and safety on one side of the scale and teaching and learning on the other (National Superintendents Roundtable, 2021; Schwartz & Diliberti, 2022; Peetz, 2023). District decisions were often met with vitriol and anger from one side of the argument or the other. Many districts chose complete remote learning as their path, while others chose to keep schools open for in-person learning. Both decisions created arguments from the other side of the discussion. Narratives were created that district A, for example, did not care about the health and safety of students, staff, or the community at large based on their decisions to continue in-person instruction, while district B was cast as ignoring the academic, social, and mental-emotional needs of students in favor of focusing on virus mitigation. Meanwhile, other districts chose to try to thread the needle between these competing forces and find the middle ground between valuing in-person learning as much as possible while also focusing on doing so safely and with mitigating measures. These districts were on the receiving end of anger from both sides as they were not offering enough in-person options or were not taking health and safety as seriously as they should. Superintendents and school boards were directly in the middle of these decisions and the resulting dissatisfaction and divisiveness (Peetz, 2023; National Superintendents Roundtable, 2021; Schwartz & Diliberti, 2022).

All of this occurred in an increasingly polarized political environment. Former President Donald Trump “directly politicized the issue, publicly threatening to withhold funding to schools

that fail[ed] to hold in-person classes and arguing that Democrats want[ed] schools remote for their electoral benefit” (Baker et al., 2020, p. 2). The politics of the pandemic entered the school district board rooms, where board meetings became hostile events with fights over mask requirements, in-person learning, and other COVID-19 related protocols (Hartney & Finger, 2020; Hernandez, 2022; Lisi, 2021; Marr, 2021; Starr, 2020; Steimle, 2021). These challenges were compounded by the emergence of an expanding level of scientific disbelief and denial, where even healthcare experts’ advice was questioned for validity (Brown, 2021). Additionally, school boards and school board meetings, which have historically been non-partisan, became much more partisan during this pandemic (Hartney & Finger, 2020; Hernandez, 2022; Lisi, 2021; Marr, 2021; Starr, 2020; Steimle, 2021).

Districts across the country experienced an increasingly high rate of superintendent turnover, and the information from the School Superintendents Association (2022) demonstrate that this was increasingly true at the end of phase two of the COVID pandemic, July 2020 through June 2021 (Morton & Valley, 2022; National Superintendents Roundtable, 2021; Peetz, 2023; Sawchuk, 2022; Schwartz & Diliberti, 2022).

While the turnover cannot be entirely attributed to COVID-19 and the challenges of leading through the chaos of the challenging political and operational landscape, there is an interesting correlation between the increased challenges and the number of changes that occurred throughout the country (National Superintendents Roundtable, 2021; Peetz, 2023; Schwartz & Diliberti, 2022).

There is limited existing research that examines how leaders, specifically school district superintendents, lead organizations amid and through chaos, whether that chaos is a pandemic, a challenge within the school board, a school tragedy, or something else. This study aimed to

identify leadership principles that come to the forefront during these times of crisis and specific principles that lead to greater success. Additionally, with the attrition rate of school district superintendents, there is a gap in the literature in helping to identify the practices that can better equip district leaders to successfully navigate the chaos and maintain their role within the district.

Throughout this study, the researcher intended to examine the participants' lived experiences as they navigated leading their school districts through the chaos of the COVID-19 pandemic. More specifically, the study aimed to identify which of the five roles of a superintendent, as identified by Callahan (1966) and then Kowalski (2005), of teacher-scholar, manager, democratic leader, applied social scientist, and communicator, was most significant and challenging for the superintendents. This study intended to identify the roles that public school superintendents leverage or rely upon in moments of chaos. Through this process, several significant themes emerged.

This chapter presents the research findings that resulted from semi-structured interviews that were conducted with six public school superintendents from across the United States. The researcher chose and utilized a phenomenological approach to examine the lived experiences of leading a school district through chaos, specifically through the lens of the chaos of the COVID-19 pandemic. This hermeneutic, phenomenological design was chosen as the best method to allow the researcher to answer the research questions, understand the lived experience of these individual participants, and examine those experiences within this phenomenon of leading through the chaos (Ellis, 2016; Husserl, 1968, 2004).

## **Review of the Research Design**

The researcher chose to use a qualitative research design for this study. Qualitative research “is a broad approach to the study of social phenomena” (Marshall & Rossman, 2015, p. 3). The researcher focused on the lived experiences of six school district superintendents as they led their school districts through the chaos of the COVID-19 pandemic. Semi-structured interviews with the six participants were used to collect the data and best examine their lived experience. This interest and focus on the lived experience of the participants lent itself to a phenomenological approach which “describes the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 75).

The researcher identified three distinct phases of the COVID-19 pandemic relating to school district superintendents. Phase One was the portion of the 2019-2020 school year from March 2020 through June 2020. This was the phase when the COVID-19 pandemic first impacted public schools in the United States. The second phase was the following school year, from July 2020 through June 2021. The third phase was the 2021-2022 school year, from July 2021 through June 2022. All six school superintendents who participated in this study served as the superintendent during all three “phases” of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Because of the researcher’s background and experience in educational leadership and their own lived experience of navigating the chaos of COVID-19 from a district leadership role, a hermeneutical phenomenological approach was identified and utilized. This approach requires the researcher themselves to be immersed in the phenomenon and the context with which they are studying (Alase, 2017; Brooks & Normore, 2015; Connelly, 2010; Creswell, et al., 2018; Drever, 1997; Englander, 2012). It was also critical, because of the researchers’ own experiences as an educational leader, to do everything possible to remove their own biases and

preconceptions from the study, and instead to immerse themselves into the world and experiences of the participants.

In a phenomenological study, the phenomenon itself is being studied rather than the individual participants (Englander, 2012). The participants are important as they are the ones who have and will describe their lived experience within the phenomenon; however, the primary focus of the study is the phenomenon itself (Crowther et al., 2017; Englander, 2012; Heidegger, 1927; Souba, 2014; van Manen, 1997; Webb & Welsh, 2019; Yuksel & Yildirim, 2015). In this case, the phenomenon is leadership during the chaos of the COVID-19 pandemic. Leadership has been identified as a phenomenon in and of itself, with Burns (1978) stating that it is one of the least understood phenomena while being one of the most observed. Leadership is a phenomenon worth studying because leadership is not theoretical but, rather, is very practical in a lived moment, and so very much a phenomenon worth studying (Souba, 2014).

In a semi-structured interview the main questions set the overall structure for the interview, which may include both open and closed questions (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019; Creswell & Poth, 2018). The interviewee has freedom within the interview regarding how to answer and how much to answer, while the interviewer can lead and prompt the interviewee for further explanation (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Drever, 1997). For this study, each participant was interviewed on three separate occasions. The first round of interviews (Appendix D) was conducted with a focus on building trust and rapport between the researcher and participants. The questions during the first round of interviews were relatively demographic and gave the participants a chance to briefly discuss their experiences while leading their district during the pandemic. The researcher spent some time during the first interview outlining the purpose of the study, the research questions, and addressing any questions or concerns on the part of the

participant. Demographic questions were used to identify information such as district size, type of community (urban, rural, suburban, etc.), length of tenure within the district, and previous roles in educational leadership.

Six initial interview questions were developed and the nature of the interviews allowed for conversation and additional questions based upon the responses of the participants. At the end of the first round of interviews, the participants were provided with reflective journal prompts (Appendix G). The participants were encouraged to participate in reflective journaling regarding their lived experiences and perceptions of leading a school district during the COVID-19 pandemic. These questions and reflective journaling were used as a primer to allow the participants to reflect on information from the past and prepare themselves for the second round of interviews.

During the second round of interviews (Appendix E), the participants were asked a series of semi-structured questions intended to focus on the challenges, issues, decisions, successes, and setbacks that occurred during the pandemic. These were semi-structured in that participants' responses often led to additional questions that weren't necessarily part of the interview protocol. These questions were also used to gain better clarity regarding the perceptions and thoughts of the participants and to better ensure that the researcher could adequately understand their experiences. As in the first round, six initial questions were developed which were then expanded upon during the interviews to allow for better clarity and discourse.

A final third round of interviews (Appendix F) was utilized after the initial two interviews were transcribed and summarized. The researcher utilized member checking to ensure that the summaries accurately captured the participants' lived experiences (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Lincoln and Guba (1985) define member checking as: "the



process of continuous, informal testing of information by solidifying reactions of respondents to the investigator's reconstruction of what he or she has been told or otherwise found out and to the constructions offered by other respondents or sources, and a terminal, formal testing of the final care report with a representative sample of stakeholders" (p. 77). The researcher provided the summary of the interview to each participant and provided the participant an opportunity to identify whether summaries accurately captured their experiences. All three rounds of the interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams. Interviews were captured with audio and video recording.

Phenomenological research is that of a focused and concentrated effort to be responsive and open to the phenomenon being studied (Connelly, 2010; Giorgi, 2009, 2012; Hycner, 1985). Even the steps of transcribing and coding the interview questions involve listening for a sense of the whole from the participants. Interviews are transcribed both with a focus on the literal words being spoken by the interview participants and on non-verbal communication. The methods of analysis were emergent and reflective with a focus on allowing the words of the participants to speak for themselves (Wilding & Whiteford, 2005). The researcher listened to the recordings and read the transcriptions with a level of "openness" that allowed them to identify the emergent meanings (Connelly, 2010; Hycner, 1985). The concept of phenomenological reduction is the term used to describe this openness (Crowther & Thomson, 2020; Husserl, 1968; Hycner, 1985). Bracketing is often used as a term to describe the idea of removing or reducing the researchers' own internal beliefs and views of the phenomenon and allowing themselves to permit the participants' views and experiences to emerge (Giorgi, 2009, 2012).

For this research, the analytical steps that were taken were based upon Hycner's (1985) work on phenomenological analysis. These steps begin with transcription,

bracketing/phenomenological reduction, and listening to the interview for the sense of the whole. Once the interviews have been listened to, often multiple times, the researcher works to identify units of general meaning, and then to identify units of meaning that are specifically relevant to the research questions. From there, the researcher identifies clusters of relevant meaning, determines themes based upon those clusters, and then writes the narrative summaries. The researcher then conducts a follow up interview with each participant, modifies themes, and identifies themes for all interviews (Hycner, 1985).

### **Emergent Themes**

For this study, research questions were created to examine the lived experience of school district superintendents as they led their districts in the face of chaos and to identify the superintendent roles that public school superintendents leverage or rely upon in these moments of chaos. The research questions served as the blueprint for the semi-structured interview protocol (Appendix D, E, F). Participants were questioned about their lived experiences, which of the five roles were most significant, and which were most challenging. They were also asked to identify to what they attribute their success to in leading their district through the chaos of the pandemic. The discoveries are aligned with the following research questions:

1. What are school district superintendents' perceptions and lived experiences regarding the phenomenon of leading a school district through the chaos of the COVID-19 pandemic?
  - a. Of the identified five key roles of a superintendent (Callahan, 1966; Kowalski, 2005), which of these roles was perceived as the most significant for superintendents leading through the chaos of the COVID-19 pandemic?

- b. Of the identified five key roles of a superintendent (Callahan, 1966; Kowalski, 2005), which of these roles presented the greatest challenge for superintendents leading through the chaos of the COVID-19 pandemic?

Table 2 illustrates the themes that emerged from the interview process.

**Table 2**

*List of Themes by Research Questions*

Research Question	Themes
1. What are school district superintendents' perceptions and lived experiences regarding the phenomenon of leading a school district through the chaos of the COVID-19 pandemic?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• District Culture/Identity</li> <li>• Rapid Pace of Change</li> <li>• Team /Collaborative Decision Making</li> <li>• Erosion of Trust</li> </ul>
a. Of the identified five key roles of a superintendent (Callahan, 1966; Kowalski, 2005), which of these roles was perceived as the most significant for superintendents leading through the chaos of the COVID-19 pandemic?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Communicator (Primary)</li> <li>• Applied Social Scientist</li> </ul>
b. Of the identified five key roles of a superintendent (Callahan, 1966; Kowalski, 2005), which of these roles presented the greatest challenge for superintendents leading through the chaos of the COVID-19 pandemic?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Democratic Leader (Primary)</li> <li>• Applied Social Scientist</li> </ul>

The semi-structured nature of these interviews allowed for an open dialogue and for each participant to share and discuss their experience in a manner that best reflected that experience.

### **Research Participants Profile**

Six public school district superintendents were chosen as participants in this study. The participants came from five states (California, Idaho, Indiana, Illinois, and Michigan) and from districts of varying size and demographic profiles. All six of the participants served as

superintendent in their current school district for all three phases of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 3 provides a profile of each participant.

**Table 3**

*Research Participants and District Profile*

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Region</b>	<b>Education Tenure</b>	<b>Tenure in Current Role</b>	<b>Student Enrollment</b>	<b>District Type</b>
Marie	West	39 Years	5 Years	13,000 students	Mixed-Mostly Rural
Mike	Midwest	21 Years	4 Years	3,700 students	Suburban/Urban
Phillip	West	32 Years	5 Years	24,000 students	Suburban/Urban
Larry	Midwest	32 Years	12 Years	16,000 students	Urban
John	Midwest	25 Years	12 Years	5,000 students	Suburban/Rural
Jacob	Midwest	25 Years	5 Years	11,000 students	Urban

Once the researcher had concluded interview #2 and those interviews were transcribed, the researcher spent time listening to the recordings of the interviews and reading the transcripts to get a strong sense of the narrative being provided by the participants. The researcher completed narrative summaries of each interview participant in an attempt to capture their words, and thoughts regarding their lived experiences. Participants were given a draft of their summary and an opportunity to provide additional feedback regarding how well those summaries reflected their lived experience.

While the COVID-19 pandemic impacted all school districts across the country, there were differences in terms of how involved and prescriptive each state and local government was regarding the pandemic, school closures, and mitigating measures. Some states focused more on local control and putting the decisions in the hands of local school boards while others demonstrated a top-down approach where the governor or State Department of Education was more in control of the decisions being made.

### *Marie*

Marie is a current superintendent in the Western Region of the United States who served as superintendent through all three phases of the COVID-19 pandemic. The state where Marie's district is located took a largely top-down approach for much of the pandemic. The governor mandated the school shutdowns, mandated face coverings when schools did return, and was very prescriptive in terms of the steps schools and districts had to take to return students to school safely.

In conversations with Marie, several themes regarding the lived experience of leading through the chaos of the pandemic emerged. The first theme was around the importance of the established culture and leaning heavily into the district's established values when making decisions during the pandemic. Marie mentioned that the district adopted messaging that came from Margaret Wheatley about above and below the green line. Marie stated:

below the green line, there's three areas. There are relationships, of course, information/communication, making sure everyone is aware of information; and then identity, who we are as an organization and what our belief and value systems are. And then above the green line would be your systems, the actual running of the district. We've always believed that you need both to be a successful district...we relied on that to get through the pandemic.

This idea of established identity and values as a school district allowed for the leader to lean on the culture that valued communication and relied on focusing their decisions on what they value and believe in.

The second theme was the critical importance of the team around the superintendent. Because this district had, before the pandemic, spent so much time developing a collaborative

decision-making culture, the emergence and critical nature of the team was very successful. Throughout the interviews, Marie mentioned the strength of the team around the superintendent and the existing relationships and trust that had been built before the pandemic. This idea of team and collaboration extended to the superintendents in the same region who were now collaborating at a higher level and trying to stay aligned in their practices. According to Marie, the pandemic pushed these individual leaders to be much closer and work more in alignment than before the pandemic.

In terms of the five roles of a superintendent and which of those were most significant, Marie identified the role of communicator as being most significant. This was again attributed back to the existing above/below the green line idea and the value that existed on communication and providing stakeholders with information. From the very beginning of the pandemic, Marie held regular Zoom meetings to communicate up-to-date information, changes, and other important information. Because the superintendents in the region met weekly with the department of public health, Marie would regularly hold Zoom calls with stakeholder groups to provide the most recent updates.

In terms of which of the five roles presented the greatest challenge, the democratic leader role was identified. Marie clearly felt that this was the area of least comfort, and not what they had spent their career working on as an educator. Marie mentioned the divisiveness around the pandemic and the role of the superintendent in lobbying politicians to make teachers a priority in the vaccination process. Specifically, one of the biggest areas of needing to be a democratic leader was in working with the teacher's union and trying to find common ground between those that wanted all students in school with no masks and those that felt it was unsafe to be in school at all.

Marie credits the team with helping to survive the chaos of the COVID-19 pandemic and successfully leading the district. “That’s what really got me through is people, my team.” Additionally, Marie mentioned several times that early on they decided they would follow the county public health guidelines. Whatever they required is what they were going to do, “no more, no less.” If it was a suggestion, then their team would decide what was best for their community.

To summarize, this superintendent credits their success in the pandemic largely to some of the conditions that had been established prior to the pandemic. The established culture and values of the district helped to create clarity in the decision-making process and to make communication a priority. Additionally, the collaborative nature of decision-making was already in place within the administrative team, allowing the team to work through their problem-solving collaboration more cohesively. It stands to reason that in a different form of “chaos” these same levels of focus on shared values and collaboration would be similarly critical.

### ***Mike***

Mike is a current superintendent in the Midwest region of the United States. He served as superintendent through all three phases of the COVID-19 pandemic. The state where Mike’s district is located took a primarily top-down approach for much of the pandemic. The governor mandated the school shutdowns, mandated face coverings when schools did return, and was very prescriptive in terms of the steps schools and districts had to take to return students to school safely.

Mike articulated that one of the largest challenges was the level of uncertainty and the speed with which changes were happening. Guidance from their public health agency, the state department, and the governor’s office was constantly changing. As a result, schools were in the

position to have to adjust to those constant changes. As Mike stated, “we’re trying to get to a place, yet the map keeps changing as to how we’re going to get there. Yet we are asked to get there in the most efficient route, yet we’re not allowed to go the way we think we should go.”

Mike discussed that though the pandemic created several major challenges, it allowed the superintendent to build strong relationships and connections through all necessary meetings and collaboration. It also helped Mike build a strong network of superintendents with whom to collaborate. Mike discussed that the role of superintendent can be a lonely one, and that, while having an internal team to work with is great, it is also important to have colleagues who are in the same role to collaborate with.

In terms of the five roles of a superintendent, Mike said that all five roles impacted their district’s leadership. The role of communicator was the most important and required the most time and focus. According to Mike, the nature of the chaos required a large amount of communication with a wide variety of stakeholders. This was needed to gather information from all the groups and individuals like legislators, the health department, the department of education, and the governor’s office, and to disseminate information to staff, parents, and the community. As Mike stated, part of this communication was getting all the information out without “putting my own personal bias in it and trying to ensure the health and safety of everyone.” Mike believes, based on conversations with the parents, staff, and the community, that their focus on communication was why they were so successful.

However, Mike also acknowledged that their constant efforts to communicate and provide open communication had drawbacks. During this pandemic, every communication about a decision came with groups of stakeholders who disagreed with the decision and believed the decision was wrong. While communication was a critical tool, it came with it the challenges of



understanding things from the applied social science standpoint. Understanding and predicting how people would react to these really challenging decisions was difficult. Mike discussed that, in retrospect, the easiest part was the first two and a half months when the governor shut everyone down. The combination of understanding the sociology behind people's beliefs, the political issues that swirled in the chaos, and trying to make good decisions to keep people safe was a significant challenge.

When asked, "to what do you attribute your success, and how did you survive the chaos," Mike, once again, leaned into open dialogue, collaboration, being willing to get in the room with people and listen, and also being willing to help educate others on the challenges being faced. Mike discussed that people often had ideas that really made sense to them as a solution. Still, when confronted with the complexity of a school district, they understood better that these aren't always easy decisions.

Mike also gave much credit for surviving the chaos to his superintendent colleagues, whom all leaned on each other and became much more aligned through this pandemic. Finally, Mike also reiterated that having a strong team around you as a superintendent is invaluable to success in this or any chaotic situation.

### ***Phillip***

Phillip is a current superintendent in the Western Region of the United States. Phillip served as superintendent through all three phases of the COVID-19 pandemic. The state where Phillip's district is located took a primarily local control approach for much of the pandemic. There were very few mandates from the State Department of Education, the governor's office, etc. Each locally elected school board and its superintendent were given much of the authority to make decisions for the schools in their community. Some issues arose around the authority of

local health districts and what role they could and should play in school decisions. Still, ultimately decisions were primarily left to the local school district level.

In speaking with Phillip about their experience leading a school district through the chaos of the COVID-19 pandemic, some interesting observations were made. First, Phillip made the analogy that leading during this time was much like being a first-year teacher. As a first-year teacher, you know what you want to say on the first day, but after that you are just trying to stay a day ahead of your students. This analogy connects to the rate of change that needed to occur during this pandemic. As Phillip stated, things that would have typically taken a year or longer to do had to be done in a much shorter timeframe. For example, because kids were sitting at home, there was a need to get an online learning environment ready for them. This was not something the district had in place, but they were able to get that going in a matter of months. Phillip stated, “And so the idea that we had to speed up our response and come up with out-of-the-box ideas was so foreign to the organization that it became very difficult to operate within that kind of environment. But you didn’t have a choice.”

In discussing which of the five superintendent roles were most critical to leading the district, Phillip identified the role of communicator. Specifically, however, Phillip discussed the concept of identifying and articulating their beliefs as a school district. Phillip was meeting with the district executive team, and they were struggling with all the challenges and decisions. They identified that part of the struggle was they hadn’t taken the time to clearly identify and state the values and beliefs that would drive their decision-making process. Phillip led the team through a full day on a Saturday to identify those values and beliefs. They came up with five beliefs that they then articulated to the staff and community. These beliefs “became our bible on how and what, what we made decisions on, and how we made those decisions.”

When asked which of the five roles was most challenging or difficult, Phillip identified that of the democratic leader, stating “I had to accept that there were going to be consequences for the decisions in the political realm.” However, because they had taken the time to identify the five core beliefs that guided their decision, they were able to “look each other in the eye” and commit to making decisions based on those values and not in terms of the potential political consequences.

Phillip attributes their success in leading the district through the chaos to several things. First, the incredible team of leaders that worked on the team. The group of leaders on the district executive team were each able to be given portions of the organizational structure and then allowed to run with those things and take care of them. Phillip didn’t need to micromanage the leaders and was able to trust them to do their job and to do it at a high level with those five values/beliefs at the center of the decision-making. Additionally, Phillip articulated that the support of their family at home was critical in surviving the chaos. Having that support system and something else to focus on at the end of the day was very important. Additionally, areas that led to successfully navigating the chaos were a strong organizational structure, identifying people in the medical community that they could trust and rely upon for information, and the relationships with each other that kept them going.

Phillip repeatedly discussed the rapid nature of the change required during the school district's pandemic. He mentioned many times in the interview that they surprised themselves by how quickly they got things done. He credited the professionalism of the teachers and leaders for being committed to their ideals and beliefs, at the forefront of those being student learning. When asked what he would do differently if he had to go through it again, Phillip discussed

giving themselves more credit for being able to make large changes in a short amount of time rather than relying on the long-held belief that “you can’t turn a battleship on a dime.”

### *Larry*

Larry is a current superintendent in the Midwest region of the United States. Larry served as superintendent through all three phases of the COVID-19 pandemic. The state where Larry’s district is located took a primarily local control approach for much of the pandemic. However, in the case of the district led by Larry, there was a prescriptive health department that largely dictated what school districts were able to do.

Larry describes the experience of leading his district through the chaos of the COVID-19 pandemic as both “the greatest opportunity to lead our community, our staff, our students” and “the greatest challenge that any of us have faced.” From the perspective of the greatest opportunity, Larry found that it truly highlighted those who could lead well and those who could not. It also pushed districts and leaders to do things outside the traditional comfort zone. However, it was the greatest challenge for leaders, in the view of Larry, because of the constantly changing guidance and the “carnage in school leadership along the way at various levels.”

Larry discussed the role of the superintendent, specifically the evolution of that role over time, stating, “I’m sometimes envious of my predecessors and the role that they were able to assume. And I believe that some of it is the changing perception of public schools and the erosion of trust that many in the public have in the public school system and public-school leaders.” Larry attributes much of this change and this erosion of trust to the high-speed nature of communication with social media. Larry believes that, in his experience, his role ultimately is that of “convener” with the public, “helping people to understand the importance of our school

district in our community.... that we're representing well the values of our community, that we're advocating well at the statehouse and with our elected officials."

In discussing the five roles of a superintendent and which were most significant, Larry points to two different but closely aligned roles of applied social scientist and communicator. First, the role of an applied social scientist is to understand the different perspectives and needs of different people within the community. This involves understanding students and their experiences learning from home, the parents who now must figure out how to manage students and home and ensure they are cared for, the employee/staff perspective, board members' perspectives, etc. This role combined with that of the communicator were critical because Larry needed to be a "very clear communicator with where we were, what we were doing, and things were changing every day – sometimes every hour." In terms of communication, Larry and the district made it very clear from the beginning that they were going to follow the science and follow the recommendations of the health department experts. Additionally, they made it clear that their priority was doing what was best for the students. Articulating these priorities and how they would make decisions was important for the community to understand. Larry believes that staying consistent with those priorities allowed for better success.

Larry didn't find that one of the five roles was more challenging or difficult than the others during the pandemic, but he did identify the one that probably required the most time and attention. The role of democratic leader was a "daily occurrence" and "probably took up the bulk of my time." This is attributed to all the varying groups, interests, beliefs, and opinions that must be listened to, communicated with, and considered.

Larry attributes the successful navigation of the chaos to several things. First, Larry had established credibility and trust within the community and with the staff before the pandemic.

Because he had been superintendent for many years before the pandemic, people already understood “how I operate, who I am.” Additionally, the other factors that led to success were being open, being honest, having transparent communication, and staying consistent with what they had communicated regarding how they would make decisions and what would take priority.

Larry said, “I’ve been challenged by the level of carnage this has left in many school districts.” He discussed that this wasn’t only a pandemic issue that leaders faced during this time, talking specifically about some of the “politics” and what some have referred to as the “moral panic” that arose during this time. Issues arose with school districts being criticized about indoctrination, critical race theory, social-emotional learning, and attacks on school library books. “I know that some of the issues that began during the pandemic, and let’s not forget because it’s not just the pandemic, but also, we went through a significant social justice period of crisis.... those two things collided at the same time and so while everybody was kept up in their homes and we had this kind of fear of being around other people, we isolated ourselves, and then we have all these other things.” Finally, Larry brought this idea to a close with the fact that leaders need to be very “cognizant of what has happened in the last two-and-a-half years.”

### ***John***

John is the superintendent of a public school district in the Midwest region of the United States and served as superintendent through all three phases of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the state where John’s district is located, there was a balance of local control and state/health department-directed control. The local health departments were a primary area of focus in terms of rolling out the expectations for mitigating measures.

In describing his experience leading a school district through the chaos of COVID-19, John discussed it in relation to one of the previous most significant challenges of his career,

merging two high schools. At the time, that decision and the challenges that came from that decision were what he believed would be the most difficult portion of his career. However, compared to leading through COVID-19, that previous issue didn't compare in terms of turbulence. John talked significantly about this idea of "cumulative fatigue," and the impact on students' stamina for learning, studying, and being in school, and the fatigue that has impacted everyone from students, staff, parents, and himself as a leader. At one point during interview #2, John mentioned that leading during COVID-19 should be measured differently than others years within educational tenure. "It was two years, but it's got to be measured in dog years. It was two years of my superintendency, but it might as well have been ten."

Another aspect of this leadership period and its impact on education was discussed by John. Not only was there the impact of cumulative fatigue, but there was also, from the perspective of this superintendent, an erosion of trust from stakeholders around public education. John attributed this erosion of trust to several factors. First, during the remote period of instruction, there was decreased accountability for both staff and students. People were teaching and learning from their living rooms and could easily take time off, turn off the camera, get a snack, etc. Additionally, John believed that, in general, parents assumed a level of instructional integrity and rigor, and all of the sudden during the remote period of instruction the "veil was lifted." What they saw happening on their student's computer screens was not always up to the standards they were expecting to see. Connected to all this were many stakeholders lumping public schools into the "federal government leviathan." Distrust of the CDC, federal, state, and local elected officials bled into distrust for local school boards and their decisions.

When asked about which of the five superintendent roles was most significant or challenging, John talked about the role of communicator. Specifically, communication was

significant and challenging because of the rapid pace of information that was coming to our schools and community. John used the example of a parent hearing about a new change at the federal level being reported on the 6 o'clock news and expecting that change would be implemented the next day, while, at the same time, the local authorities were telling schools to wait until they had time to review the changes and get them implemented. Communication to stakeholders often resulted in trying to educate them on the process, how decisions were made, and how quickly those federal changes would be implemented at the local level. Additionally, John discussed the manager's role because of all the significant logistical challenges that were required. Difficulties related to managing people included asking them to take on roles outside their job description and taking on things outside their area of expertise. Most of the people were educators who didn't have a background in epidemiology but who were now spending time focusing on contact tracing, case reporting, mitigation measures, etc. All of this contributed to the idea of cumulative fatigue which came up multiple times during interviews with John. Finally, John discussed the applied social scientist and democratic leader as being significant because of how challenging and divisive the political landscape and diversity of opinions were during this time. John discussed the idea of "two camps in constant warfare with each other." These two camps were those who were demanding mask requirements, vaccine requirements, and remote learning versus those that believed their liberty was being stolen by being asked to wear a mask. Schools and school boards were caught in the middle of this fight. John stated, "it didn't seem like there was anybody in the middle saying, it really isn't fair to put our schools in this position."

John believed that hiring the right people ultimately allowed him and his school district to survive and to successfully navigate the pandemic. Because they had the right people on the



team, they were able to develop a “model of efficiency” which became a model for school districts around the county. Their model allowed the staff in the building to focus more of their time on their actual jobs in teaching and learning rather than only the protocols and mitigation. That being said, when asked what he would do differently, he stated that he would have made the move to that model earlier. It took some time for the district-level leadership to fully appreciate the challenge at the building level. The first six to eight months were very hard on the staff at the building level. Making the changes they made gave the building leaders more support and freed them up to lead their schools. Additionally, he mentioned that, with hindsight being 20/20, they would have hired a “health and safety” operations employee to oversee the contact tracing investigations, communications, coordinating with the health department, etc.

### ***Jacob***

Jacob is the superintendent of an urban public school district in the Midwest region of the United States, and he served as superintendent through all three phases of the COVID-19 pandemic. The state where Jacob’s district is located took a primarily local control approach for much of the pandemic.

In describing his experience leading a school district through the chaos of COVID-19, Jacob led off by talking about how much there was to be proud of. According to Jacob and his experience, staff demonstrated more significant levels of flexibility and could move quickly to online learning when the governor shut everyone down in the first phase. He gives much of that credit to the staff. There were also significant challenges, however, with the largest being on the student side. “We, in pretty much every single area, from social-emotional to standardized tests to just behavior, regressed with the vast majority of our students.” Jacob also discussed the importance of understanding your local community during the pandemic. His district and

community feared COVID-19 and expected a cautious approach to school and mitigation. Other districts around the state in more rural or suburban locations received more pushback on mask requirements and remote learning, and they dealt with more discussions about COVID being a hoax or not something to be concerned about. Jacob and his district didn't experience that issue. No single parent or community member demanded masks to be removed from students. Parents and the community were supportive of being cautious, and, as a result, they spent a more significant amount of time in remote learning and in masks than other more rural and suburban districts.

Jacob stated that all the five superintendent roles were significant to his leadership during the pandemic at different times and for different reasons. There were times when the superintendent needed to be the democratic leader, whether lobbying the board of health or local elected officials or navigating his own local school board and understanding where to push and where to back off. Additionally, during the pandemic, there was much political divisiveness around school issues that were unrelated specifically to the pandemic. These issues, like Critical Race Theory, library book banning, and social-emotional learning challenges, became hot-button partisan political issues. Jacob needed to take on the role of the democratic leader during this period as legislation started to emerge at the state legislature.

Because there was so much fear in the community around his district, the role of communicator was significant to allay people's fears. They needed to understand the steps that were being taken to keep kids and staff safe. Communication was critical in keeping staff, students, parents, and the community updated on the rapidly changing country, state, and local guidelines.

The role of social scientist was equally important because they needed to understand their community and lead their district in a way that provided care for their community. Within his district, Jacob and their staff ran safe zones at elementary schools to help the working parents during remote learning. They kept their bus drivers employed to deliver meals to students/families in Section 8 housing and provided internet hot spots and Chromebooks to students and families who were without connectivity.

Ultimately, Jacob believes that all five roles were significant, stating:

In a crisis, all those things become magnified, and people look to leadership during crisis situations to provide a level of stability that if the leader is frantic and chaotic, then I think the organization takes on those characteristics. But if the leader can be calm, even if they don't have all the answers, I think the organization will respond similarly.

Finally, when asked which role was most challenging, Jacob stated that the role of scholar-leader was most challenging from the aspect of conducting e-learning in an urban district and maintaining high levels of student success. He mentions that from an outside perspective the idea of a democratic leader was probably the most challenging because all of that was happening in the public eye, but "behind the scenes, to me, way more important than that stuff was the academic, or lack of academics is what it turned out to be, for our kids."

Many school districts and superintendents around the country didn't successfully navigate the pandemic, and many superintendents didn't survive professionally. When asked what he attributes his success to, Jacob mentions several key things; first, he leans on the fact that he is on the younger side of superintendents, so leaving the profession or retiring was not on the table. This meant he had to keep a "growth mindset," identify the next challenge, and face it. Second, due to his age and background, the transition to e-learning was something that he could

lead and feel comfortable with. Jacob also gives significant credit to the team of individuals around him that “rose to the occasion” and “rallied around this challenge and our kids and families.” Last but certainly not least, Jacob attributes his own survival of leading through chaos to his family and his faith. Having a support system at home and his faith was critical in overcoming the despair and difficulties encountered during this difficult leadership period.

Using themes helps the author explain all six participants' lived experiences. Still, it is equally essential to provide specific responses from individual participants to allow this study to examine their lived experiences.

### **Results from Question 1: Perceptions and Lived Experiences of Superintendents Regarding the Phenomenon of Leading a School District through the Chaos of the COVID-19 Pandemic**

For the purposes of this study, a hermeneutical descriptive phenomenological approach was identified and utilized. This approach requires the researcher to be immersed in the phenomenon and the studied context. Descriptive phenomenology is so named in that it seeks only to describe the situation or phenomenon from the perspective of the person being studied (Ellis, 2016; Husserl, 1968, 2004). Husserl focused on the philosophical underpinnings of phenomenology and the concept that humans experience the world as they move through it, that they sense, imagine, focus on and relate to the world by being in the world. Martin Heidegger expanded upon Husserl's work to develop a form of phenomenology that focuses on analyzing and interpreting individual lived experiences. Hermeneutic phenomenology, as described by Heidegger, approaches this research design with the idea that the researcher must be immersed within the situation or phenomenon that is being studied as it allows the researcher to better understand the perspectives and lived experiences of the participants. Several themes emerged

as participants spoke about their individual experiences leading their school district through the chaos of COVID-19. These themes were: established culture/identity, the rapid pace of change, team/collaborative decision-making, and erosion of trust. Table 4 shows the four themes and the frequency of response from participants regarding those themes.

**Table 4**

*Participant Responses by Theme*

<b>Participant Responses</b>	<b>Frequency of Response</b>
District Culture/Identify	4 out of 6 Participants
Rapid Pace of Change	4 out of 6 Participants
Team/Collaborative Decision Making	6 out of 6 Participants
Erosion of Trust	4 out of 6 Participants

***Theme 1: District Culture/Identity***

The theme of district culture and identity came out across all participants in various ways. Four out of the six participants (67%) identified that having an established culture, set of beliefs, and ideals was critical in helping as an essential part of their decision-making process. Marie mentioned that the district had previously adopted messaging regarding what they refer to as “above and below the green line.” They used these ideas as part of their defined ideals and beliefs as an organization. Marie stated:

Below the green line, there are three areas. There are relationships, of course, information/communication, making sure everyone is aware of information; and then identity, who we are as an organization and what our belief and value systems are. And then above the green line would be your systems, the actual running of the district. We’ve always believed that you need both to be a successful district...we relied on that to get through the pandemic.

Similarly, Phillip discussed identifying and articulating their beliefs as a school district. Phillip articulated the importance of this, stating:

I'll give you an example that early on in the pandemic, during that first phase, we were absolutely, as an executive counsel, struggling with all of the different things we had to get done. And I think one of the reasons was because we didn't take time to really articulate what we believed. And we spent, we took one full day, it was on a Saturday, we came down here and we spent a day talking about our beliefs. This is what we believe. And we put together a document that had about five different, what we called interests, and that became our bible on how and what; what we made decisions on and how we made those decisions. We communicated that early with our staff and our community. And so, when we made decisions. Then we pointed back to one of those beliefs, and that, I think, is what kept people together during that timeframe. And they were very general statements, but we could then say the reason we are going to require masks was because we believe in a safe and secure learning environment. And so, you may not agree with it, but you knew what we were going to do.

Phillip, also discussed this topic further stating:

When you talk about leadership, it reinforces to me just how important it is that the organization believes in what they're doing. The leaders will change, but the organization has to have something to hold on to. And to me, that was what really came out during the pandemic, was their belief in their skills, their belief in their abilities, their belief in learning. That's what they rallied around. And so, you know, get them the tools, get them the masks, whatever those things are, the infrastructure, and then let those guys do the magic.

Larry attributed the successful navigation of the chaos to several things:

I had already established some credibility in our community. So, prior to the pandemic, I'd been superintendent here for nine years and so had already developed that level of trust with our community, with our board, with our staff. They already knew how I operate, who I am, kind of where I fall with my credibility. And so, that was, I think, a significant factor. I think the other factor was just being open, honest, and transparent with people as we navigated through that. But most importantly, we stayed focused on our children. We stayed focused on what our children needed.

### ***Theme 2: Rapid Pace of Change***

Another theme that came out across all six participants was the rapid pace of change demanded from school districts during this time. Four out of the six participants mentioned that during the COVID-19 pandemic information was coming in quickly and guidance was changing rapidly. Mike elaborated that one of the most significant challenges was the level of uncertainty and the speed with which changes were happening. Guidance from their public health agency, the state department, and from the governor's office was constantly changing, and schools were in the position to have to adjust to those constant changes. Mike stated:

We're trying to get to a place, yet the map keeps changing as to how we're going to get there. Yet we are asked to get there in the most efficient route, yet we're not allowed to go the way we think we should go.

Phillip shared the challenges and his concerns regarding the rapid pace of change stating:

I remember at one point, right at the beginning, coming home one night and saying to my wife that I just didn't, there were so many things that we had to get done in such a short amount of time, I didn't think we could do it. And I thought, I just, I don't know how

we're ever going to do this. So, in reflecting on that, the fact that we did all of those things and did them effectively is a testament to the staff that we have here, but more importantly, probably even more impactfully, to the level of professionalism that our teachers and our principals had during that time. Because you know as well as I do, we can sit up here in the ivory tower and make our grand pronouncements. We don't have to do the work. So, getting it organized was one thing, but the level of professionalism that our principals and our teachers showed during that timeframe is what I think saved us.

Phillip made the analogy that leading during this time was much like being a first-year teacher stating:

I think the short answer is everybody was a first-year teacher. And that's the best way I can describe it. There was nothing you could draw on that helped you make decisions. Everything was new. And that's why I compare it to being a first-year teacher. You know, when you walk into that first classroom that first year, you know what you want to say that first day and then after that, it's just can I stay a day ahead of my kids? Well, I think that analogy is similar to how we had to deal with the pandemic. That Spring Break, that Sunday of Spring Break, or just before Spring Break, that weekend, we knew it was coming. But we were trying to hold on to what we knew we were going to end up having to do. And I say this to people all the time, you know, I was so naïve back then that I literally thought that if we could get that week before Spring Break and Spring Break, then everything would be okay, that two weeks coming back. I literally believed that with my heart. And then when we called school, that night, I remember going home and telling my wife, "This is going to be my entire Superintendency." It just, because of the public



reaction, I knew this was going to be an unbelievable odyssey that we were going to go through.

Mike discussed this rapid pace of change and the level of uncertainty that it created for schools and school leadership:

And I think the hardest part, for me anyway, was the uncertainty. Things were changing all the time. Guidance from our Department of Public Health. Guidance from CDC. What this parent read somewhere here. Not being able to get the Ashlake Department of Public Health and the Starland County, which is our county, those two health entities on the same page as to what we should be doing. So, it felt like we were navigating all these things.

Larry reflected on the rate of change, as well as how quickly information was being provided, and then changing again:

I don't think anything can compare to the amount of information that we were receiving that was different, I mean vastly different, almost a hundred and eighty degrees different than what we'd received an hour before that. And Health Commissioner, you know, health professionals coming in and telling us, "You can't do this," and "you can't do that," "you have to operate this way," "people are going to die," you know, these were life and death decisions that we were making based off of the possibility of someone, you know, not faring well with the virus, especially early on.

Phillip added:

I think the thing that I learned, well, I wish I knew at the beginning our ability to be, our district's ability to be as flexible as it was. Moving that battleship in that harbor, it was as difficult as anything you could possibly do. And what I learned through the pandemic

was we were much more nimble than I thought we were. Because we were forced to. So, I wish I would have known that at the beginning, because I think that would have helped me make decisions quicker. Because I was still in the mindset of if we do this, then that's going to happen. Because we've tried that before. But that's what I learned through the pandemic was we're a lot more nimble than I thought we were. So, as a perfect example, we had tried for years to get our teachers to get on the same platform for an online presence. But it was, we just never could get them to do it. And we, and I think what we didn't have was the wherewithal to say no, you're going to do it. And during those first six weeks, every teacher went to Google Classroom. Every teacher. And it was, that's exactly what I'm talking about. Because we did the same thing, it was like oh, this is going to be a catastrophe. And then we made the announcement and every teacher went okay, done. We need some help getting some training. And like, okay. We're a little bit, to your point, we're putting up roadblocks just because of past experience, but we didn't necessarily need to do it.

John reflected on the rate of change, and the expectation from stakeholders regarding implementation based upon those changes:

And it seems like, you know, you're listening to the CDC, you know, so something comes out on the six o'clock news that was a change at the federal level, parents' expectation that tomorrow morning at eight o'clock, you have a plan in place to address those changes. When in reality, it didn't filter down to the state health departments, and then the local health departments for sometimes weeks at a time. So you're, you know, your legal counsel is saying don't change anything until you get the local health department on board.

Larry described the experience stating:

I think it was our greatest opportunity to lead our community, our staff, our students. And I believe through this last two-and-a-half years, we saw those who were able to lead well and we saw those who are not. And unfortunately, there was a lot of carnage in school leadership along the way at various levels. But, so I thought it was a great opportunity for us to lead, but it was, obviously, the greatest challenge that any of us have faced because of the uncertainty of the pandemic, because of the changing guidance and regulations that came upon us, because we were forced to do things that we weren't used to doing traditionally.

In describing his experience leading a school district through the chaos of COVID-19, Jacob stated:

Well, let me first say that there was a lot to be proud of. I think that people in general were way more flexible than they ever were in the past. I had bus drivers delivering meals, you know, teachers, in my district, at least, we were ordered shut by the governor for that first phase that you were talking about – March through July – so we had to switch to online learning in very short order.

Marie discussed the rapid pace of change stating:

So, when I reflect back on that, I remember thinking, like, well there goes all these ideas that I had planned because things just seemed to, at the very beginning in March, it just seemed like it was happening so quickly. I didn't have any time to stop anything

### ***Theme 3: Team/Collaborative Decision Making***

The critical nature of the team and collaboration consistently emerged in interviews with participants. Two levels of team and collaboration came out in interviews. The first was around

the team at the district administrative level, typically referred to as the superintendent's cabinet or executive team. The second was around the collaboration that emerged between superintendents as they all worked together to navigate the chaos of the pandemic.

Regarding the district administrative team, Marie stated:

Well, first of all, it made me realize what a strong team I have. You know, I mean, that was very, very critical. Not feeling like I had to, you know, we had collective decision making. I'm really big around that distributive leadership and tapping into people's strengths. So it made me realize, and a lot of the team members were already in place. It wasn't like I came in as Superintendent and put all these people in place, but. So they were already there, those relationships of trust were critical to come out.

Marie went on to state:

So, with that experience, I remember thinking that I had a very strong team around me, jumped right in, what do you need us to do Marie, they all came in on that Saturday. We spent all day trying to think what are we going to do? I was very fortunate that I'd been in the district for so long that I had a lot of relationships, a lot of trust built up...that's what really got me through is people, my team.

Phillip also credited the importance of surrounding himself with an outstanding team of leaders stating:

But the other thing was when the focus that the directors and assistant superintendent had while they were here, and their ability to do different aspects of the organization, independently, is what saved us. That's how we got through it. So, I divvied up different parts of the organization to each one of the directors and said this is yours, go and do it. So, you know, one person had facility issues, and another had technology, and so they

just took it, took that staff and ran with it. And had I not had capable people in those positions, even though they didn't know shit about any of that stuff, they learned it and they learned it quickly. And that's what saved us.

John shared the importance of shared leadership and having a strong team around the superintendent:

You're really looking at your own people, knowing their capacity, understanding the current job function that they're paid to do, right? They got this list of tasks to complete every day, and, you know, they're getting an email from me every other day saying okay, here's the new contact tracing rights, here's how we're going to communicate to parents, here's how we're going to investigate exposure cases and close contact cases. And looking at the volume the, sheer volume of it, you know. I had my HR Director, who didn't do a lot of personnel management during that time, didn't do a lot of, you know, preparing for contract negotiations or just being a part of the cabinet because she was consumed with, you know, you got different roles for staff, different roles for kids, you got extracurricular activities, trying to manage athletics and all those things.

John added:

You know, we actually, I'm very, very fortunate here. I always say I hired well. We actually were a leader in the county in what I say is developing a model of efficiency for processing this information. The county health department actually used our investigation protocol in documentation as kind of the model for the county. So that helped us a lot, right? So I would go to our people and say listen, the entire county is leaning on us; we're the largest school district in the county. Half the students in the entire county come to our

school district. The health department's looking at us for leadership. Our parents are looking to us for leadership. And we're delivering.

Jacob discussed the importance of team stating:

And I will say that there was, my team is the other one I want to give credit to. It did seem like, for Redmont at least, there was some of this we're going to come together to get through this. And so I do feel like a lot of my team rose to the occasion. A few of my team left too, though. Like they realized this was too much. But the majority of my team rallied around this challenge and around our kids and families. And that, I think, was really important.

Phillip further articulated the importance of his leadership team commenting, "Well, I'll tell you, from a personal side, the way I survived it was because I am surrounded by unbelievably amazing leaders."

Larry agreed with the importance of team and collaboration:

I rely heavily upon the people that I've hired into the Superintendent's Cabinet. They all have responsibilities. My job is to see the big picture and to make sure that we're all, you know, kind of following the same pathway, that we're all in line and with each other. But getting out of the way and letting them do their jobs, and just knowing enough information that I can speak to it but I'm not in the weeds.

This idea of team and collaboration extended to superintendents collaborating with their colleagues from other districts. Marie expressed the importance of collaborating with colleagues from surrounding districts stating:

...because our county superintendent would call us together every week, I think all of the county superintendents really developed a strong bond with each other. We, to this day,

we still have a big group text. We still to do this day, hey, what are you guys doing for this? Or when you have to do, you know, so that just, we were all in it together and so we were all making decisions together. And some weren't always the same, because you know, you have to fit the context of our communities.

Mike also discussed the importance of having superintendent colleagues with whom to work:

I would have not gotten through this without my superintendent colleagues or my family at home understanding what was going on. My wife, thankfully, is a high school teacher, so she understands the education world. But, specifically the forty-two other superintendents that I could call at any moment in time and say, "What are you doing here? What are your thoughts here?" was invaluable to me. You know, as a new superintendent, I knew some of the people during my transition. But, you know, your predecessor's only going to show you so much, right? They want to keep their own little group together. So that forced me to have to meet all these people and work together on a lot of things. And I would have never gotten through this without them.

#### ***Theme 4: Erosion of Trust***

Another theme that emerged from the interviews with participants was the erosion of public trust in public education. Larry expressed his thoughts on the erosion of public trust stating:

The role has evolved a great deal. I'm sometimes envious of my predecessors and the role that they were able to assume. And I believe that some of it is the changing perception of public schools and the erosion of trust that many of the publics have in the public school system and public-school leaders. I would attribute a great deal of that probably to our ability to get information quickly through social media and other

mediums, similar to politicians and other elected officials that people once thought were very noble and humble and servant-minded people. And they found out that some of our elected officials are not that way. I would say the same thing holds true about superintendents. And my only experience, because I've not been in a district that's smaller than mine – and ours is large by state standards, certainly not large by US standards at 17,000 pre-pandemic. But my experiences, of course, were very different than some of my colleagues that are in suburban districts, that are in rural districts, smaller districts, those types of things.

John also identified this erosion of trust from stakeholders around public education stating:

Watching some of those remote lessons was really eye opening. Not for me as a superintendent because I had been in classrooms, you know, hundreds and hundreds of classrooms. But for a lot of our parents who saw what was, and in some cases, what wasn't happening. So, you're starting to see a really negative view of public education and just full disclosure, I think some of it warranted with the lack of instructional integrity and rigor that parents had assumed was happening. So the veil's been lifted a bit.

Similarly, Jacob reflected on the increased criticism of public schools that occurred during the pandemic:

I will say that people were very critical during that time. Very critical of everything you did. So, there was no gaining consensus. It was every single decision was criticized by someone. And you say that's part of the name of the game, I suppose, being in a leadership position like this. But it was magnified during Covid. And there also was this, and some of this remains, but this lack of assumption that everybody has the kids' best



interest in mind. Like, it wasn't like that. It was like people saw you as the enemy, you know, like, you're the enemy of my kid for not bringing them back sooner. Or you're the enemy of my kid for bringing them back sooner. And that was probably the most difficult thing, when the overwhelming majority of educators I know are in it for the right reasons, they got into it to help kids. But the, some of that stuff on social media was just brutal. I mean, it was just brutal during that time. And I had to swear off of it for a while and just let my wife look at it and she would bring certain things I had to address to my attention because the stuff people were saying about myself and the school system was really awful. It was really awful. And so, I mean, I guess you get a thick skin through that kind of stuff, but it didn't need to be that way.

### **The Five Roles of a Superintendent**

As part of this study involving leadership through chaos, the five roles of a superintendent, identified by Callahan (1966) and then Kowalski (2005), of teacher-scholar, manager, democratic leader, applied social scientist, and communicator, were examined. The literature supports the notion that the role of the superintendent is complex (Lowery & Harris, 2002) and that the superintendency impacts all aspects of the school district system (Norton et al., 1996). Today these roles are combined as part of the complexity required of the superintendent (Bjork et al., 2014b). The complexity of the superintendency and the continued evolution of the role is reflected in the 2010 study of the American school superintendent by Kowalski et al. (2011), where those five distinct roles are clarified as no longer being distinct; “the contemporary superintendent is expected to wear five different hats, and she or he is expected to know when to transition among the roles” (Kowalski et al., 2011, p. 5). Ultimately, the role of the superintendent is that of the chief executive officer. They are responsible for

ensuring that the school district meets all levels of regulation, mandate, and policy from the federal, state legislature, state board, State Department of Education, and local school board (Bjork et al., 2014a).

Participants were provided with a document outlining information about the five roles of a superintendent (Appendix H). As part of the second interview, participants were asked to identify which of the five roles were most significant in their ability to lead their district during the Covid 19 pandemic. Additionally, participants were asked to identify which role presented the greatest challenge. Table 5 identifies the responses by participant:

**Table 5**

*Participant Responses by Superintendent Role*

<b>Role</b>	<b>Frequency of Response</b>
Communicator Role as Most Significant	6 out of 6 Participants
Democratic Leader Role as Most Challenging	5 out of 6 Participants
Teacher/Scholar Role as Most Challenging	1 out of 6 Participants

**Results for Research Question 1a: Most Significant of the Five Identified Roles of a Superintendent**

Though all six participants identified communicator as the most significant, there was also a sentiment that all the roles were significant at different times and in different ways. Jacob specifically articulated that each of the roles of the superintendent are important, and each had moments where the specific role needed to be utilized:

I think they all had different times where each skill set was most important. For example, there absolutely was a part, when you're looking at a democratic leader, of having to lobby with the Board of Health and with politicians, because they had a lot of

influence over what was happening in our schools during the Covid time. But the social scientist aspect too, you know we ran, I didn't mention this last time, but we ran safe zones in four of our elementary schools where working parents could still drop off their kids and doing learning at our schools. So, we absolutely were, we were, re-employed our bus drivers to go out into the community where we had some of our Section 8 housing and we delivered meals to those areas because we know those parents struggled with transportation. We provided hot spots and within two weeks, we put out 6,000 Chromebooks to our community. You know, so we absolutely did that, but I can't de-emphasize teacher/scholar either because there was a lot of pressure there to make e-learning successful. Now ultimately, it wasn't. At least not for our district, it was not largely successful. But, to answer questions about how are we going to do this and make sure that kids are progressing, you know, people would just keep looking at the person behind them until it got to me. And to be able to do that. And just the manager piece was also, you know, the board – I think I did mention last time – the board voted to give me executive powers that I didn't even need to run things by the board. So to make sure all the pieces of the organization were still, you know, a lot of cases, it meant, for example, like, alright, now our payroll employee can't come in because of quarantine. Originally quarantine was ten days, so you're talking two full weeks of work. So how are you going to get payroll processed? So coming up with processes for people to be able to work from home if they weren't, you know, critically sick, and doing all that. So, I don't know if, not to go around your question, but I think all five were key. Like, that's the thing about it, in crisis, all those things become magnified and people look to the leaders during crisis situation to provide a level of stability that if the leader is frantic and

chaotic, then I think the organization takes on those characteristics. But if the leader can be calm and, even if they don't have all the answers, if they can provide that hey, this is going to be okay, I think the organization in large will respond similarly.

### ***Role of Communicator***

While Jacob advocated for the importance of all roles at varying times, he also articulated the critical nature of the communicator role:

Certainly, communicator was absolutely critical because of, as I mentioned, there was a lot of fear in my district over Covid. So, one way to combat fear is to communicate, right? And that part, I think, can't be understated.

Marie identified the role of a communicator as being most significant:

From the very beginning, I was holding Zoom meetings. I would open up varied Zoom meetings for staff. So again, we have about 1,500 staff members, both classified and certificated and I would, you know, vary the time so it was convenient for people because they just wanted to know what was going on, what were we doing specifically to, during the closure and then during the summer, whenever I would get an update – because we had weekly meetings with our County Department of Public Health and the county superintendent of schools and all that. So, I was either putting out written information or opening up Zoom so that they could do a Q&A, and my staff would monitor the questions and so that, so they could hear directly from me. Did a lot of videos and then did that thing for parents. And then even as we opened up the year, just, you know, keeping them informed. If it wasn't about what our next steps were going to be, it's like, look what we're doing. We're feeding kids. And I would take pictures and, just to keep our community, our staff, my school board obviously, informed as frequently as we

could. So that was probably my number one thing that I had to do. Because if you don't tell the people, well then, they make up the information. Kind of like what I said earlier, too, I mean, people would call me and want to talk to me and, you know, like, "Marie, this isn't safe, you can't open the schools yet." And I'd have to reassure them of all the things we've put into place and communicate in a way that they felt reassured, you know, but they understood where I was coming from too. That I wasn't going to be swayed in the direction that we were going to head.

Mike shared his thoughts on the significance of the communicator role:

I personally look at the most important one that I had to focus on the most was the role of communicator. Being able to communicate with not only our legislative bodies and our health departments, but our families, our staff, to get all this information out to them and try to do it in a way that was not, I guess, putting my own personal bias in it and trying to ensure the health and safety of everyone I think was the most key thing was communication. Which is why I believe, and what I even heard from families and the board of education, is that why we as a district were successful because we were really at the forefront of communication. When things came out, we sent it out. If it needed some additional information from me, they got that. I had numerous meetings with our unions, with parent groups, with other folks, health department (Mike, Interview).

Mike went on to say:

I think for the most part, the most important part in my role was being able to communicate to all the different stakeholders that needed to know what was going. And our parents needed to make sure that their kids were safe when they came back. Our staff needed to know they were safe. So, I think communicator was the biggest one of –

they're all important – but the communicator one for me was the most important part of our success...A lot of meetings, a lot of open dialogue, a lot of collaboration. Sitting down with my board and saying, “Here’s what they’re telling us, what do you think we should be doing? This is my recommendation; however, I need to hear from you.” We had many phone calls, many meetings. I met with many parent groups and asked them the exact same question. What do you think we should be doing here? The state says this, this, and this. And I think what happened is, people, although they didn’t always necessarily like what I had to tell them, they felt as though they had a chance to talk and be heard. And they would bring something to that and say okay, that sounds good but how do I then handle this, and this, and this? And I think many of our families – and they’re all great people, and our board too – I think sometimes they lose perspective of how large our organization is and how many moving parts there are. And when one thing happens, what happens over here, here, and here? And it gave people an opportunity to say, “Yea, okay, I understand. I’m not sure I like it, but I understand how that could be influential.” And I think many superintendents that I’ve spoken to that really, really struggled, didn’t do a lot of that. I mean, don’t get me wrong, I don’t think my wife enjoyed I was out four nights a week every week dealing with meetings and different gatherings and meeting with the PTA or meeting with the local village officials to try to talk through some of this. But I think, in retrospect, all that time built a lot of goodwill and trust in our community.

Phillip reflected on the role of communicator, and its significance within his leadership:

But without really, really good communication during that time, I don’t know that you could have held the system together. So, you know, how are we going to get laptops to

people? And so the infrastructure of actually doing it is one thing. But then making sure that the families knew how to do that was much more important than actually getting the laptops to each site.

Larry articulated his thoughts on the most significant role stating:

I think, well, for me it would have been, I think it's really, it would probably be really closely aligned between the applied social scientist and the communicator. Because I really had to be able to understand where people were in all facets, whether you're talking about students and their learning experience at home, parents who have now had to figure out what to do with their children or how to make sure their children are cared for and safe and all of those things while they may or may not be going to work, where our employees were, where our school board was, where our community was, you know, all of those kinds of things. But also, I had to be a very clear communicator with where we were, what we were doing, and things were changing every day – sometimes every hour. And so, we had to be very good about having those systems in place in which we could get messaging out, that we could pivot and shift and all those common terms that we all came to love during the pandemic. And just make sure that people understood, to the best of our ability, what the circumstances were.

John shared the challenges of communication as it pertained to the rapid rate of information that districts were receiving, articulating:

I think it had a lot more to do with kind of the changing rules and regulations around Covid, reporting, contact tracing, masking. And it seems like, you know, you're listening to the CDC, you know, so something comes out on the six o'clock news that was a change at the federal level, parents' expectation that tomorrow morning at eight o'clock,

you have a plan in place to address those changes... So trying to communicate that what you see on the news can't be reflected in policy change until, you know, the local folks get their hands around it was very challenging. And so, you know, it really taxed our public relations department.

### **Results for Research Question 1b: Most Challenging of the Five Identified Roles of a Superintendent**

During the second interview, participants were asked to identify which of those five superintendent roles were most challenging while leading their school district through the chaos of the COVID-19 pandemic. Five out of the six participants (83%) identified the democratic leader as the most challenging role during the chaos of COVID-19. Two of the five participants also indicated that the role of the applied social scientist was challenging. Additionally, Jacob identified the role of teacher-scholar as the most challenging.

#### ***Role of Democratic Leader***

The democratic leader role was identified as being the role that presented the most significant challenge. Marie stated:

Very much so. And that's probably, of those five roles, that's probably my least comfortable role because I started off as a teacher. I'm never a, you know, I was never a political, per se, person anyway. And so, you know, we reached out to our assembly people, our local, not our local, but county and statewide legislation to try to get teachers on a priority list for vaccinations.

Marie went on to add:

It was very much for the first time, too, I saw real strong division. There were those that were, like, I mean, two exact opposite beliefs. And navigating that, I remember, because



I'm a very much, I don't want to say a people pleaser, but I want to make sure that people feel heard, feel listened to. And so I had a lot of my longtime friends, you know, that I worked, either I was a teacher alongside with or a principal of, and they would reach out and call me and say, you know, "Marie, I'm too afraid to come back and I really think we should teach from home." And then I'd have those that are like, "We got to get back in classroom, our kids need us. There's such disparity out there." And so trying to navigate where I wanted them to feel like I was listening to them and then trying to then bring their qualms down. And at one board meeting, I mean, this is when we still, we were being televised, but we would let one person in at a time to speak in person. Oh my god, we probably had a hundred people, 50/50, you know, besides the ones on the thing, that would want to come and speak their piece. It was like a 50/50 thing and managing my board to, like, not get caught up in that. Don't get caught up and you're not going to please everybody, you know, you make a decision. I go, keep the kids first, what are we going to do for kids?

Mike shared the struggle of the democratic leader role specifically during this particularly divisive period stating:

And the other part of it was, you're fighting people who just did not believe in the government. In hindsight, you know, the easiest part for me as the superintendent were those first two-and-a-half months when the governor shut us all down. Because I couldn't do anything. You got a problem with it, go out in the spring field and yell at him. He told me I can't be open. But then the following year, all of a sudden, when we started bringing kids back and there were mask rules, all of a sudden I was fighting

people who didn't believe in masks, didn't believe in vaccines. And you're fighting that, what do you expect me to do?

Larry identified that democratic leader was the role that probably required the most time and attention, stating:

It was a daily occurrence. And took up probably the bulk of my time, especially early on. Because there was so many different people, so many different groups to navigate and to provide time to and to coordinate and communicate with. So yeah, and I think the challenge there was making sure that we were addressing all of those groups and that we were able to, so for instance, you know, I met every Friday with our health department and with our health commissioner for our health department. So we met every Friday and typically there was an epidemiologist on that call, there was all of the superintendents were on that call, but we religiously met every Friday and sometimes in between depending on what was going on. I think about the, I think it was Tuesday press conferences with the governor and state doctors. So, we were always listening to those for a while. So we'd all tune in daily, keeping up with our principals, and I had setup committees early on, so right when the pandemic hit, I had five or six, maybe, committees that we set up and I had people in charge of each one of those committees and so I was constantly checking in with them as we were developing plans to return, we were developing plans to operate in the pandemic, and you know, addressing every possible variation of what may or may not happen just in case we had to very quickly mobilize and implement that portion of the plan.

Larry addressed other issues surround the role of democratic leader, and the challenges it created, stating:

Districts in conservative communities have certainly fared worse than districts that are in more liberal communities, of course. And I have some really good friends that are no longer the superintendent as a result of what that has created. It's not over. I know that some of the issues that began during the pandemic, and let's not forget, because it's not just the pandemic, but also, we went through a fairly significant social justice period of crisis with Ahmaud Arbery and Breonna Taylor and just a number of situations that continue to happen. And continue to happen today, so we can't discount George Floyd, of course. So those two things collided at the same time and so while everybody was kept up in their homes and we had this kind of fear of being around other people, we isolated ourselves, and then we have all of these other things.

John discussed the divisive political environment and how it impacted the role of democratic leader, sharing:

You're trying to balance the inane political debate around this. From the mask, you know, triple mask, quadruple-vax folks to the anti-government, our freedom is being ripped away from us because we're being asked to vaccinate; those two camps just in constant warfare with each other. And it just didn't seem like there was anybody in the middle saying gosh, it really isn't fair to put our schools in this position, they're doing the best they can, right? So there was never any, I would say, moderate voices at the table to kind of help us manage the PR side of this, right? You're kind of on your own.

Jacob shared some of what he saw during the pandemic, in terms of the challenging political landscape and divisive environment for schools, stating:

I will say that people were very critical during that time. Very critical of everything you did. So there was no gaining consensus. It was every single decision was criticized by someone. And you say that's part of the name of the game, I suppose, being in a leadership position like this. But it was magnified during Covid. And there also was this, and some of this remains, but this lack of assumption that everybody has the kids' best interest in mind. Like, it wasn't like that. It was like people saw you as the enemy, you know, like, you're the enemy of my kid for not bringing them back sooner. Or you're the enemy of my kid for bringing them back sooner. And that was probably the most difficult thing, when the overwhelming majority of educators I know are in it for the right reasons, they got into it to help kids.

Jacob, however, did not identify the role of democratic leader as being the most challenging role. For Jacob, the role of teacher-scholar was the most challenging role. This role was identified by Jacob primarily because of the significant challenges that his district faced with virtual learning. Jacob elaborated on this stating:

I'm not sure I recognized it at the time, but I definitely think the scholar leader, as far as how e-learning went for an urban district like us, I think that absolutely was the biggest challenge. Because we were just going with a lot of our best guesses on how to do things and looking what other people were doing. But nobody really had it figured out. Even though probably from the outside observer, it would have been probably something more along the democratic leader because they say the board meetings. Because a lot of this

got hashed out in the public, but behind the scenes, to me, way more important than that stuff was the academic, or lack of academics is what it turned out to be for our kids. Additionally, Jacob served a community that was primarily aligned in their concern and fear about the health and safety aspect of the pandemic. Jacob indicated that they didn't face the same level of divisiveness as other districts regarding mask protocols, health and safety measures, and making decisions with safety at the forefront. This combined with the concerns from a teacher-scholar perspective, moved the democratic leader role down to the second biggest challenge area for him as he navigated leading his school district.

As discussed, the role of a superintendent is complex. The five roles of a superintendent, identified by Callahan (1966) and then Kowalski (2005), of teacher-scholar, manager, democratic leader, applied social scientist, and communicator are each important, and the superintendent must have the ability to discern when to utilize each role to navigate the challenges being faced. However, this study has identified that in moments of chaos, the leader must have strong understanding of the importance of communication and democratic leadership.

### **Limitations**

It should be noted amid the challenges of navigating the COVID-19 pandemic; significant issues of social justice and moral panic emerged as an added element of chaos for schools, and school districts. In the aftermath of the death of George Floyd on May 25, 2020, protests emerged across the country regarding racial equality and police brutality. Allegations of student indoctrination emerged across the country with discussions around critical race theory and how the issue of race is handled in public education. Additionally, there were social justice issues around liberty, the role of schools in making health and safety decisions, transgender

rights in schools, concerns over books in classroom, and school libraries. All of these issues had the potential to aggravate an already challenging, chaotic situation for school district leaders.

### **Summary of Results**

Six public school district superintendents who led their respective school districts through all three phases of the COVID-19 pandemic were interviewed regarding their lived experiences. The researcher utilized a hermeneutical, phenomenological approach and semi-structured interviews. The analysis of these interviews identified four emergent themes. These themes were; established culture/identity, the rapid pace of change, team/collaborative decision-making, and erosion of trust. Additionally, participants were asked to examine the five identified roles of a superintendent identified by Callahan (1966) and then Kowalski (2005) of teacher-scholar, manager, democratic leader, applied social scientist, and communicator and to determine which of these roles were most significant and most challenging during their leadership of their school district. The participants identified the communicator as the most significant role they each played as they led their respective school districts through the chaos of COVID-19. The democratic leader was identified as the role that created the biggest challenge and consumed the most time for the participants during the pandemic. While these roles emerged as the most often discussed in terms of significance and challenge, the other roles cannot be dismissed, as each participant identified the importance of those roles at various times throughout this leadership period.

## **Chapter V**

### **Discussion**

#### **Introduction**

The role of the superintendent is complex, carrying the role of chief executive officer for the school district. The superintendent is often caught between competing interests and competing opinions regarding how to navigate crisis situations (Bjork et al., 2014b; Glenn et al., 2009; Hoyle et al., 2005; Kowalski et al., 2011; Lowery & Harris, 2002; Norton et al., 1996). Such chaos may include a natural disaster that impacts the community, but it may also be a student death, an incident that raises community concerns, or, in the case of this study, a global pandemic. This study focused specifically on the chaos surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic within school districts and their communities. This study aimed to examine the lived experience of school district superintendents as they lead their districts in the face of chaos.

The COVID-19 pandemic presented a unique set of circumstances where science, politics, and policy put district leadership, as well as school board governance, in the crosshairs of public scrutiny and partisan politics (Ansell et al., 2020; Harris, 2020; Harris & Jones, 2020; Malkus et al., 2020). Over the course of the past 180 years, the position of the superintendent has changed many times from distinct, discrete roles identified by Callahan (1966) and then Kowalski (2005) of teacher-scholar, manager, democratic leader, applied social scientist, and communicator to the version of the superintendent that we see today that encompasses each of those discrete roles into a single, complex position.

For this study, the researcher identified three distinct phases of the COVID-19 pandemic relating to school district superintendents. Phase One was the portion of the 2019-2020 school year from March 2020 through June 2020. This was the phase when the COVID-19 pandemic

first impacted public schools in the United States. The second phase was the following school year, from July 2020 through June 2021. The third phase is the 2021-2022 school year, from July 2021 through June 2022.

The study's participants consisted of six public school district superintendents, all of whom served in their current roles in their current school district for all three phases of the COVID-19 pandemic. The participants' experiences and perceptions were provided through semi-structured interviews. These interviews allowed each participant to share their personal experiences and discuss their challenges, their successes, and to what they attribute their success. Chapter five explores the significant findings of this study and some conclusions and implications based on the participants' lived experiences.

### **Summary of Results**

This qualitative study aimed to examine the lived experiences of six superintendents as they navigated the phenomenon of leading their school district through chaos. Specifically, the chaos of the COVID-19 pandemic was the lens through which their leadership was examined.

The following research questions drove the study:

1. What are school district superintendents' perceptions and lived experiences regarding the phenomenon of leading a school district through the chaos of the COVID-19 pandemic?
  - a. Of the identified five key roles of a superintendent (Callahan, 1966; Kowalski, 2005), which of these roles was perceived as the most significant for superintendents leading through the chaos of the COVID-19 pandemic?



- b. Of the identified five key roles of a superintendent (Callahan, 1966; Kowalski, 2005), which of these roles presented the greatest challenge for superintendents leading through the chaos of the COVID-19 pandemic?

The study's participants were identified through both convenience sampling and snowball sampling. Snowball sampling is an alternative approach to convenience sampling, where participants are asked to recommend others for the study (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with each of the six participants. Interviews were transcribed, and then narrative summaries were completed and shared with each respective participant. The participants were asked to review the narrative summaries and provide feedback on whether the summaries accurately captured their lived experiences (Creswell, 2014, 2015; Marshall & Rossman, 2015). Narrative summaries and interview transcripts were coded to find themes across participants. The coding process allowed the researcher to identify themes aligned with the research questions. The themes that emerged were 1) district culture/identity, 2) rapid pace of change, 3) team/collaborative decision making, and 4) erosion of trust.

### **District Culture/Identity**

Interviews with the six participants highlighted the importance of an established district culture and identity. Specifically, four out of the six participants attributed their success largely to their district's clear, distinct identity and culture with specific ideals, values, and beliefs commonly held and understood. Having an established, clearly articulated identity, set of values, and priorities allowed the district leadership to leverage those ideals in their decision-making process. While the decisions weren't easy, stakeholders understood that the established ideals would drive decisions. Leaning into the idea of culture, values, and beliefs has long been part of

the role of a superintendent. Such established culture and identity were critical to the participating superintendents as they navigated the pandemic. As evidenced through the conducted interviews, it stands to reason that knowing “who you are” and “what you are all about” is helpful when making decisions—articulating those belief systems and making them an embedded part of the district operations allowed for some of the decisions that needed to be made to be much cleaner and more manageable. In moments of chaos and turbulence, when the environment is so different from what is typical, it is more important than ever to bring those values and ideals of the organization to the forefront, to ensure there is no mission drift, and to confirm that decisions are still being made with those values in mind.

### **Rapid Pace of Change**

The rapid pace of change emerged as a significant theme regarding the participants' lived experiences. Four of the six participants discussed the challenges they faced related to the rapid nature of changing information regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the need to make large-scale, operational changes in a short period of time. Repeatedly, participants discussed that there was no playbook to help navigate the chaos that was occurring in their district, around the country, and around the globe. Information from health experts was changing very quickly as they worked to understand the nature of the virus. Mitigation recommendations changed rapidly and at a challenging pace for school districts to keep up with. As noted by one participant, school districts, and traditional education in general, has not been known for nimble, rapid response. The pandemic forced district and school leaders to approach change differently than they had previously been comfortable doing. During his interview, Larry mentions the adage many districts have long used, which compared a school district to a battleship that isn't nimble. He states that the “we can't turn this battleship on a dime” concept had to be challenged

during the pandemic. All of the participants mentioned a level of pride in how well their districts responded during the pandemic, and how quickly they were able to pivot quickly to adapt to the changing nature of the pandemic.

### **Team/Collaborative Decision Making**

All six participants discussed the importance of their team and the collaborative decision-making processes that allowed them to be successful. This collaboration was important within their internal district team and with superintendents in neighboring districts. Regarding the internal team, this connected back to the existing culture established before the pandemic. The participants in this study mentioned that they had an established culture of shared leadership and collaborative decision making which allowed them to deploy those same strategies as they endeavored to make unprecedented decisions during the pandemic. The trust and established culture of collaboration were critical to their successful navigation. However, four of the six superintendents mentioned that the collaborative work during the pandemic created a much more closely aligned relationship between superintendent colleagues than had existed pre-pandemic. The concept of the collaborative leader isn't necessarily reflected in one of the five identified roles of a superintendent. However, it was quite clear from this study that the importance of collaborative, shared leadership was critical to these superintendents surviving the chaos of this pandemic.

### **Erosion of Trust**

Four of the six participants explicitly discussed the theme of an erosion of public trust in public education. Some of this was attributed to public schools being caught within a general distrust of all government entities, while others attributed it to levels of disappointment with online learning that became prevalent during the COVID-19 pandemic. There is a need for

additional research to identify whether this erosion of trust varied across the country or whether there were differences in this erosion of trust in rural vs. urban vs. suburban communities. As mentioned by Larry, some of his colleagues in districts with different demographics had harder times than others. Erosion of trust also contributed to the challenging nature of the role of the democratic leader, which participants identified during interviews. Because of the increasingly divisive nature of partisan politics, the role of the democratic leader became even more challenging for superintendents as they led their district during the pandemic.

### **The Five Roles of a Superintendent**

As part of this study, the researcher examined the five roles of a superintendent identified by Callahan (1966) and then Kowalski (2005) of teacher-scholar, manager, democratic leader, applied social scientist, and communicator. The literature supports the idea that the superintendent role is complex (Lowery & Harris, 2002) and that the superintendency impacts all aspects of the school district system (Norton et al., 1996). The complexity of the superintendency and the continued evolution of the role is reflected in the 2010 study of the American school superintendent by Kowalski et al. (2011). In this study, the five distinct roles of superintendent are clarified as no longer being distinct; “the contemporary superintendent is expected to wear five different hats, and she or he is expected to know when to transition among the roles” (Kowalski et al., 2011, p.5).

Each participant was asked to identify which of the five superintendent roles were most significant in their leadership during this specific period of the COVID-19 phases. They were also asked to identify which of those five roles was most challenging to their leadership during the studied period. The most significant role identified was that of the communicator, while the most challenging role was that of the democratic leader.

### ***Significance of the Communicator Role***

Each participant was asked to identify which of the five identified roles of a superintendent were most significant in their leadership during this specific chaos. All six of the participants identified the role of the communicator as the most significant in their leadership. In terms of the superintendency, this role involves the skill in conveying information, news, and ideas. Communicator is also one of the five identified roles of a superintendent in which the work focuses primarily on shaping culture, increased community engagement, strategic planning, and relationship building (Callahan, 1966; Kowalski, 2005). While each participant had varying views on how the communication role played out and why it was so significant, there was no equivocating the criticality of communication in navigating chaos as a superintendent. Communication was critical in keeping staff, students, parents, and the community updated on the rapidly changing country, state, and local guidelines. Superintendents needed to communicate with various stakeholders to gather information from all the groups and individuals like legislators, the health department, the department of education, and the governor's office, and to disseminate information to staff, parents, and the community. The importance of communication was directly connected to the theme of the established culture of the school district. Articulating those ideals, values, beliefs, and priorities to all stakeholders is a significant role of the superintendent. During the chaos of the pandemic, the communication role was critical in reinforcing those identified values and beliefs as well as clarifying how those would be used as decisions would be made.

### ***Challenge of the Democratic Leader Role***

Each participant was asked to identify which of the five identified roles of a superintendent were most challenging for their leadership during this specific chaos. Four out of

the six identified the role of a democratic leader as the most challenging. Two of the six identified the role of the applied social scientist and teacher-scholar as the key challenge, but all six mentioned the role of a democratic leader and the challenges that arose during the pandemic regarding partisan and divisive politics. Those that discussed the idea of the applied social scientist role did so in connection with the democratic leader role. They discussed the importance of understanding your community and the political environment of your community as part of your leadership. This concept of place-based leadership and truly knowing the community in which you lead was important and had implications in varying ways for each participant.

Regarding the superintendency, the democratic leader role traditionally focuses on lobbying state and federal elected officials for funding and handling pressure from special interest groups and policy makers (Callahan, 1966; Kowalski, 2005). All of the participants, when discussing the challenge of the democratic leader role, talked about it in relation to this theme of erosion of trust, as well as the increased intrusion of partisan, divisive politics into the school district and board room.

## **Discussion**

This dissertation began with the phrase “chaos precedes change,” and the concept that the superintendent is the chief executive officer for the school district and is often standing directly in the eye of that storm, caught between competing interests and competing opinions regarding how to navigate the crisis, whatever form the crisis or chaos takes (Bjork et al., 2014b; Glenn et al., 2009; Hoyle et al., 2005; Kowalski et al., 2011; Lowery & Harris, 2002; Norton et al., 1996). The literature around superintendents supports the concept of the evolution of the superintendency to become a very complex position. Over the course of the past 180

years, the position of the superintendent has changed many times from discrete roles identified by Callahan (1966) and then Kowalski (2005) of teacher-scholar, manager, democratic leader, applied social scientist, and communicator to the version of the superintendent that we see today that encompasses each of those discrete roles into a single, complex position. However, this study aimed to examine the lived experiences of superintendents as they led their district through chaos, and to identify which of those discrete roles emerged as more significant or challenging when leading during the chaos.

***Discussion of Results for Research Question 1: Perceptions and Lived Experiences of Superintendents Regarding the Phenomenon of Leading a School District through the Chaos of the COVID-19 Pandemic***

Throughout the interviews, four themes emerged regarding their perceptions and lived experiences. These themes were: established culture/identity, the rapid pace of change, team/collaborative decision-making, and erosion of trust. Not surprisingly, the importance of culture emerged as a theme during this study; both the 1993 professional standards for the superintendents (Hoyle, 1993) and the standards developed in 1999 by ETS both identify this as a key area of a superintendent role. Examining the lived experiences of the six participants confirmed that having a developed, shared vision and culture is critical when leading through challenging times. These superintendents attributed at least part of their success to having the ability to lean on their district identity, culture, and beliefs in making decisions and articulating the why behind those decisions. Research regarding the role that superintendents play in establishing a culture and, specifically, a culture of trust shows that communication, honesty, and listening are fundamental and critical (Anderson, 2016). Superintendents impact district culture over time by understanding that they must invest in the people doing the work in the

classroom to create collaborative cultures and reciprocal accountability. The superintendent cannot do all of these things alone, but their leadership and vision for this work, and prioritizing it within their district, has an impact on student achievement, teacher efficacy, and district culture (Dufour & Fullan, 2013; Dufour & Marzano, 2011). Leaning into the idea of culture, values, and beliefs has long been part of the role of a superintendent. An established culture and identity were critical to the superintendents in this study as they navigated the pandemic. It stands to reason that knowing “who you are” and “what you are all about” is helpful when making decisions, and articulating those belief systems and embedding them into district operations allowed for some of the decisions that needed to be made to be much cleaner and more manageable. In moments of chaos and turbulence, it is important for all stakeholders to have the north star of those guiding ideals and beliefs that help avoid “mission drift.” As a superintendent, this concept of district culture is an embedded standard of success, but often it isn’t fully appreciated until it is really needed. Every district has a mission statement, and most have the requisition vision statements and value statements that live on their district website. However, from a professional practice standpoint, each district has the opportunity post-pandemic to ask themselves whether those statements, those identified values and beliefs, are truly providing guidance. As Philip stated during his interview:

When you talk about leadership, it reinforces to me just how important it is that the organization believes in what they’re doing. The leaders will change, but the organization has to have something to hold on to. And to me, that was what really came out during the pandemic, was their belief in their skills, their belief in their abilities, their belief in learning. That’s what they rallied around.



Recently an article in *School Administrator*, the publication produced by The School Superintendents Association (AASA), articulated the importance of an “affirming vision for public education” (Wiener, 2023, p. 28). The author posits that “no one is better positioned than local superintendents to articulate a rich vision for public education and rally their communities in support” (Wiener, 2023, p. 28). Districts around the country, in the face of extreme challenges during and post-pandemic realities, have doubled down on their district identity and compelling vision for their school district (Wiener, 2023).

The erosion of trust theme that emerged was often paired with the challenges of the democratic leader role. The level of partisan, divided politics entering the board room and impacting district operations was a theme that emerged across 67% of the participants; the significant challenges of the democratic leader role emerged across 83% of the participants. The theme ultimately is that schools and school boards are becoming a more hotly contested space than previously seen in our history. Cohn (2023) put it this way, “For almost three years now, the pandemic put an extraordinary spotlight on public education in local communities in ways that were unprecedented” (p. 18). Part of this challenge can be attributed to what John described as public schools being lumped into the “federal government leviathan,” and the general distrust of the federal government. Curriculum content has also been in the spotlight, as the pandemic lifted the veil for parents and allowed them to see not only the core content but also initiatives related to social emotional learning, diversity, equity, and inclusion work. In the midst of the public health crisis of COVID-19, schools were under fire for mask mandates, online learning, and mitigation measures, while also being accused of indoctrinating students, pushing gender conversations, and teaching critical race theory.

***Discussion of Results for Research Question 1a: Most Significant of the Five Identified Roles of a Superintendent***

The five previously identified roles of a superintendent are teacher-scholar, manager, communicator, applied social scientist, and democratic leader (Callahan, 1966; Kowalski, 2005). The participants in this study identified the significance of the role of the communicator, which confirmed previous research and literature that identified communications and community relations as key standards for a superintendent (Hoyle, 1993; Latham & Holloway, 1999). As Larry mentioned, this role of “convener” is more than just sending out communication. It is bringing people together, creating clarity around the vision and beliefs of the school district, and building a community of support for the school district, and that requires the interpersonal communication skills to navigate the intricacies of the system and to listen and learn and respond appropriately (Fusarelli, 2006).

***Discussion of Results for Research Question 1b: Most Challenging of the Five Identified Roles of a Superintendent***

The role of the democratic leader emerged as the most challenging of the five identified roles of a superintendent. The participants that discussed the challenges related to this democratic leader role did so with direct relation to the themes of the erosion of trust, divisive, partisan politics, and public dissatisfaction. Iannaccone and Lutz (1970), well before the COVID-19 pandemic, referred to public dissatisfaction as the disease that often leads to professional death for the superintendent. This disease has clear symptoms and treatment, often starting with significant changes within the community or perhaps a significant issue that generates greater attention or interest in the board and district decisions (Lutz & Iannaccone, 1986). Special interest groups begin to increase in number and become louder and more

demanding for “their way” and for specific policy changes. If untreated, these symptoms move into more aggressive tactics focused on board recall efforts in the middle of trustee terms and/or aggressive campaigning at the end of the term for a new replacement (Iannaccone & Lutz, 1970; Lutz & Iannaccone, 1986). Public schools and school districts have become “culture war battlegrounds” (Berman, 2023, p. 25). The politically motivated attacks on district initiatives around social-emotional learning, racial issues, gender issues, and book banning are at the center of the challenges for a superintendent as a democratic leader (Berman, 2023).

School board races have historically been non-partisan, with only a handful of states (Georgia, Louisiana, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, and Tennessee) requiring school board candidates to list their party affiliation on the ballot. However, Indiana, South Carolina, and West Virginia are currently considering legislation to require partisan elections for school board candidates (Cohn 2023).

Ultimately, for the superintendent, the research on the dissatisfaction theory has shown that when there is, specifically, a politically motivated trustee incumbent defeat and/or politically motivated board member resignation due to public dissatisfaction, the next step is often the removal of the district superintendent (Alsbury, 2008). Lutz (1982) discussed that superintendents should use community dissatisfaction as an early warning sign that they should create more open communications, work on revising policies to decrease dissatisfaction, and hopefully lengthen the board members' tenure. The importance of a superintendent understanding the critical nature of the political role cannot be overstated. This must be part of superintendent training programs in the future.

## **Researcher's Reflection**

The ideas that led to this study emerged early in the COVID-19 pandemic. In late April 2020, I was visiting with my then-doctoral advisor about the seed of this research idea. I used the phrase “the narrative has shifted” to talk about the lens through which people were viewing and talking about schools. At that time, my district had all but completely closed down. We were providing work for students, and teachers were sending things out, but it wasn’t the level of education we wanted to provide for students. We were, at that point, still under the impression that things would be “back to normal” by the following fall. This naivete was short-lived, as districts around the country quickly realized that a “new normal” was coming. There was no playbook for what we were experiencing and what we would experience over the next couple of years. It wasn’t always perfect, and mistakes were certainly made, but schools, district and building leaders, teachers, and staff members were doing the best possible work they could for their students and their communities.

As an educator and educational leader, I appreciated the unique opportunity to examine my six participants' lived experiences. The leaders that chose to participate in this study endured significant challenges as they led their districts through the chaos of COVID-19. They had to make hard decisions that often conflicted with their own personal opinions or forced them to make compromises that were not easy. They brought people together, they embraced their role as a communicator, and they also understood that they couldn’t do it all themselves. They demonstrated a commitment to shared, collaborative leadership. Through their willingness to be open, candid, and thoughtful in their participation in this study, some recommendations for future research as well as some implications for professional practice have been identified.

## **Implications for Professional Practice**

This study examined the lived experiences of superintendents while leading their districts through chaos. Additionally, this study sought to identify themes regarding both the significant roles of the superintendent and the roles that caused the most challenge.

### ***The Role of Convener***

During the pandemic, one of the largest talking points that emerged was around learning loss, due to students who missed significant amounts of instructional time, or who received inferior instruction based on the circumstances with virtual learning. However, the more lasting legacy around this period in the history of public education is the erosion of trust that emerged. Because of this what must be considered in terms of the superintendency is larger than the simplicity of any single defined role. While the communicator role was identified by the participants as being the most significant, and the democratic leader role was identified as most challenging, additional themes of erosion of trust, and the importance of culture, values, and team and collaborative decision making also emerged. The implications of these roles and themes are clear; the superintendency perhaps now more than ever is about bringing people together.

Considering the theme of erosion of trust, and the significant concerns regarding how to rebuild that trust and move forward, requires that current and future superintendents embrace a new role, or perhaps a role that lies at the intersection of the five roles (teacher-scholar, manager, democratic leader, applied social scientist, and communicator). Due to the level of scrutiny that now faces public education and the challenges that are arising from special interest groups looking to undermine education, each superintendent must elevate the profession of public education in every interaction. Preparing future superintendents for the confluence of

these is critical for the future of public education. This “new” role of the superintendent as convener will serve to be critical in the “new normal” of educational leadership. This is a role that is all about bringing people together, creating a shared culture with identified values, beliefs and a focus on collaboration, and shared decision making. The role of convener is that of an advocate for their school district, and public education at large. This advocacy is both in the community, and in the state-house. Finally, this role is about elevating the profession of education, and creating a culture where all stakeholders are empowered, and engaged in elevating the conversation around the importance of education.

The complexity of the superintendency requires that these leaders must have the political skills and knowledge to best represent the district’s needs. They also must have the willingness to bring people together and to gather the voices of the community around the aspirations and values of the district. Finally, the superintendent must have the communication and relationship skills to articulate and share the vision, values, goals, and ideals with the community. It is this confluence of communication, democratic leadership, and shared leadership where superintendents will be able to successfully lead their district through chaos, in whatever form it takes.

The role of the superintendent as the democratic leader was identified as the most challenging during the pandemic, according to the participants in this study. A recent study (Schwartz & Diliberti, 2022) on why superintendents are considering leaving their role showed that politics and political division were significant issues. To successfully navigate the leadership in a school district requires that superintendents understand this democratic leadership role and have some tools at their disposal to work in the political arena more successfully. Higher education institutions with programs for superintendent certification need

to examine their coursework to better prepare future superintendents for the democratic leader part of the profession. Superintendents are typically educators who have made their way through the education profession from classroom teacher to administrator, and eventually to the district administration level; their professional practice and training up to the point of the superintendency has not prepared them for the critical challenge of navigating political waters.

### **Recommendation for Future Research**

Throughout this study, the intentions were to examine the perspective and lived experiences of these superintendent participants and to understand the phenomenon of leading a school district during and through chaos. This study, however, is qualitative and did not address some of the issues that may be better approached through quantitative or mixed methods approaches.

There is a need to examine whether there was a significant difference in perceived success in leading during chaos for Superintendents based on the type of school district they led. Did urban school districts have the same challenges, issues, and success as those in more rural, suburban, or mixed districts? It was mentioned anecdotally during the interviews that the district's demographic profile changed the types of challenges that were faced and therefore changed the roles and skills the superintendents needed to employ to navigate the situation.

Further research is needed in the area of virtual/remote teaching and learning. During the pandemic, most districts had to transition to some form of virtual learning. While some districts succeeded academically with this model, others did not. From the perspective of leadership and making a large-scale structural change, there is interesting research to be done on those districts that successfully transitioned from traditional to virtual instruction in such a rapid time frame.

Are there some critical attributes, steps, and processes that more successful districts implemented that we can all learn from?

The pandemic and the impact on schools was not only felt by district leaders; additional research should be done to examine the lived experiences of parents, teachers, principals, and board members. Each of these groups were faced with unprecedented challenges and were asked to navigate the new normal of teaching, learning, parenting, and governance. Their perspectives, along with those of the leaders, could provide great insight into the overall impact of the pandemic. Additionally, examination of the parent and teacher perspective, specifically as they related to the leadership of the principals and superintendents through chaos, may help to better triangulate the leadership roles that had a positive impact and those that created greater challenge.

## **Conclusion**

The COVID-19 pandemic was a nearly unprecedented event in modern history. The impacts of the pandemic are still being felt as of this writing in February of 2023. Those impacts are far reaching, and the reverberations are likely to last for a long time to come. Nowhere are those ripples more evident than in public education. The roles of communicator, democratic leader, teacher scholar, applied social scientist, and manager all have significance for current and future superintendents, and the COVID-19 pandemic and resulting chaos has confirmed the complexity of the superintendent role. Public education has been in the crosshairs of special interest groups since the pandemic began, and those efforts have continued with no signs of relief. There has always been a level of politics involved in running a school district. As a superintendent it is critical to be able to work with individuals from all political spectrums, as those individuals represent at least a portion of the district and district stakeholders. However,



the pandemic and the resulting chaos that came with it have brought a much greater level of political discord into the conversation around the teaching and learning of students in the United States. Superintendents must be armed with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to navigate the political landscape as it continues to change. As the chief executive officer of the school district, their role as a communicator has never been more important. Working with stakeholders to ensure there is a shared vision for the future of the district and taking the time to articulate the values and ideals of the district will be critical to create a community supported district that can overcome the political divisiveness. Bringing the community together around the core values of the district and embedding the voice of stakeholders from all walks of life into those values can help to reverse the erosion of trust and create a coalition of support.

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## Appendix A

### Informed Consent

Participant's name (Please Print): \_\_\_\_\_

I authorize Bret Heller, a doctoral student in the Department of Education at Northwest Nazarene University, Nampa, Idaho, to gather information from me on the topic of superintendent leadership in the face of chaos.

I understand that the purpose of this study is to examine the lived experiences of school district superintendents as they lead their districts in the face of chaos. The chaos of navigating the COVID-19 pandemic is the lens which leadership through chaos is examined.

I understand that I will be asked to participate in answering questionnaires and participate in interviews and that the approximate total time of my involvement will be 2-3 hours.

I am aware that I may choose not to answer any questions that I find embarrassing or offensive.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I may refuse to participate or discontinue my participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which I am otherwise entitled.

I understand that if, after my participation, I experience any undue anxiety or stress or have questions about the research or my rights as a participant, that may have been provoked by the experience, Bret Heller will be available for consultation, and will also be available to provide direction regarding medical assistance in the unlikely event of an injury incurred during participation in the research.

Confidentiality of research results will be maintained by the researcher. My individual, specific results will not be released without my written consent.

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

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## Appendix B

### Participant Recruitment – Phone Call Script

Hello \_\_\_\_\_,  
Name of Potential Participant

My name is Bret Heller, I'm a doctoral student at Northwest Nazarene University, and I'm calling to ask to see if you would have an interest in participating in a qualitative research study for my doctoral dissertation.

The purpose of this study is to examine the lived experiences of school district superintendents as they lead their districts in the face of chaos. The chaos of navigating the COVID-19 pandemic is the lens which leadership through chaos is examined.

Your involvement would be to participate in interviews, conducted by me. These interviews can be conducted face to face (in-person), and/or via Microsoft Teams. The total time that you would be asked to devote to this would likely be a total of two to three hours. I plan to begin the interviews as soon as this month (July 2022) but will work with you to identify the best times and format that work with your schedule.

All data will be kept confidential, and your name, and that of your school district will not be disclosed in the study.

Do you have any questions for me?

Would you be interested in participating in my research?

- If yes: I will follow up on this conversation with an email that will include some information about the study, my contact information, as well as an informed consent form for you to complete.
- If no: I understand, is there anything specific about the study that you have questions, or concerns about?
- If they need more time: I completely understand, I will follow up on this conversation with an email that will include some information about the study, and my contact information. If you have any specific questions that I can answer, please don't hesitate to reach out.

## Appendix C

### Participant Recruitment – Follow-up E-mail Script

Hello \_\_\_\_\_,  
Name of Potential Participant

My name is Bret Heller, I'm a doctoral student at Northwest Nazarene University, and I'm following up on our phone conversation regarding your interest in participating in a qualitative research study for my doctoral dissertation. During our phone conversation, you indicated that you were interested in participating in this study.

Your involvement would include participation in interviews, conducted by me. These interviews can be conducted face to face (in-person), and/or via Microsoft Teams. The total time that you would be asked to devote to this would likely be a total of two to three hours. I plan to begin the interviews as soon as this month (July 2022) but will work with you to identify the best times and format that work with your schedule.

All data will be kept confidential, and your name, and that of your school district will not be disclosed in the study.

I've attached two documents for your review. The first is a single page summary of the research focus, and the second document is an informed consent document. Please review the two documents before making your final determination regarding your participation in this study.

Thank you for taking the time to consider participation in this research study.

Bret Heller  
Northwest Nazarene University – Doctoral Student

Attachments:

- Informed Consent Form
- One-Page Dissertation Summary

## **Appendix D**

### **Interview #1 Protocol**

#### **Scripted Introduction:**

For this study, I have identified three distinct phases of the COVID-19 pandemic. Phase One was the portion of the 2019-2020 school year from March 2020 through June 2020. The second phase was the following school year, from July 2020 through June 2021. The third phase is the 2021-2022 school year, from July 2021 through June 2022.

1. What is the enrollment size of your district?
2. How long have you worked in education?
3. Would you consider your district rural, urban, or suburban?
4. During which phase or phases of the pandemic were you the superintendent of this or other school districts?
5. How would you describe the experience of leading your school district through the COVID-19 pandemic?

## Appendix E

### Interview #2 Protocol

#### Scripted Introduction:

As you are aware, the role of the superintendent is a complex one. The purpose of this study is to examine the lived experience of school district superintendents as they lead their districts in the face of chaos. The specific chaos of navigating the COVID-19 pandemic is the lens through which we will work. Callahan (1966) and then Kowalski (2005), identified five roles of a superintendent of teacher-scholar, manager, democratic leader, applied social scientist, and communicator. This study aims to identify which of these roles were most significant to the superintendent's leadership during the pandemic, as well as which presented the most challenges during their leadership through the pandemic.

1. I want you to think about the act of leading your school district during the COVID-19 pandemic.
  - a) What is your perception of your individual experience as a superintendent during COVID-19?
  - b) Researchers have identified five key roles of a superintendent, these roles are teacher-scholar, manager, democratic leader, applied social scientist, and communicator.
    - i. Of these roles, which roles was most significant in your leadership of your school district during COVID-19?
    - ii. Which presented the greatest challenge for during the pandemic?
2. How did you survive this chaos? To what would you attribute your success?
3. If you could do it all over again, what would you do differently?
4. Any additional thoughts or reflections that you would like to share?

#### Description of the Next Step in the Process:

Thank you so much for being willing to sit down with me and share your experiences. I wanted to provide you with the next and final step in this process.

I will be transcribing this interview, spending some time coding the interview, and looking to identify any themes that emerge. I will then write a narrative summary of the information you shared over the past two interviews.

I will provide that narrative summary so you can review it. I would then like to set up one more short session with you to discuss the narrative summary and for you to provide me with feedback on whether it accurately captures your lived experience and an opportunity for you to clarify or add anything.

## **Appendix F**

### **Interview #3 Protocol**

#### **Scripted Introduction:**

After I concluded my interviews with you, I transcribed those interviews and created a narrative summary including the themes that emerged from those conversations. I provided you with your summary, as well as the list of themes that emerged from across all of my participant interviews. Today is an opportunity to ensure that my summary accurately reflects the themes and information from your perspective. Additionally, if you have any additional reflections that you would like to add, this is an opportunity for that dialogue to occur today.

1. After reading through the summary, do you feel it accurately reflects our conversations and more importantly, accurately reflects your lived experiences?
  - a. If no, what would you change, add, or remove?
2. As you read through the summary and the themes that emerged from across the participant interviews, do you have any additional reflections that you would like to provide?
3. Do you have any other thoughts, questions, or concerns that we need to discuss?



## Appendix G

### Reflective Journaling Prompts

Participants are strongly encouraged to take time to engage in reflective journaling prior to the next interview (Interview #2). Below are some prompts that may be helpful.

1. Think back to the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, and March of 2019. What do you remember about that specific time frame, the decisions you were being faced with, and challenges that you were trying to navigate?
  - a. What specifically do remember regarding your own level of stress during this time?
  - b. What specifically do you remember about the level of panic or turbulence that existed in your district/community?
2. Think back to that spring of the 2019-2020 school year, how turbulent was that time in comparison to other difficult times during your tenure?
3. As you reflect on the entirety of the COVID-19 pandemic, what do you wish you knew at the beginning that you know now?
4. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, reflect on your state department of education, and the level of influence that other state entities had on your practices, decisions, etc...
  - a. How much autonomy did you have as a local school district regarding your health and safety protocols?
  - b. How much autonomy did you have regarding in-person, remote learning?
  - c. How did that autonomy, or lack thereof, impact your ability to lead your school district?
5. How did the pandemic impact your relationship with your local school board?
6. When you reflect on your tenure, and the COVID-19 pandemic;
  - a. What was the most challenging aspect?
  - b. How did you navigate and survive those challenges?
7. At any point during the pandemic, did you have thoughts about changing professions, changing school districts, changing roles?
8. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many districts saw other issues come to light which created additional levels of turbulence, chaos, and moral panic; did your district encounter any of that?
  - a. If so, to what do you attribute these issues?
  - b. How did you navigate these issues?

## **Appendix H**

### **Interview #2 Primer**

Thank you for your willingness to participate in this dissertation study. The role of this document is to provide the interview participant with important background information between interview #1 and interview #2. Interview participants are encouraged to read through this document, and reflect on their experiences as they relate to this dissertation topic. In addition to a brief introduction to the dissertation topic, there are definitions of some key terms and the interview questions that you will be asked.

Participants are strongly encouraged to engage in reflective journaling regarding their experiences and specifically related to the interview questions. Reflective journaling prompts have been provided in a separate document.

#### **Role of a Superintendent**

The role of superintendent formally began in 1837 in Buffalo, New York (Callahan, 1966; Kowalski et al., 2011). The role and expectations around the superintendency have continued to evolve over the course of the years and decades since the initial superintendency (Callahan, 1966; Kowalski, 2005). Through the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the superintendent was viewed and viewed themselves as teacher-scholar. As Kowalski et al. noted (2011), the idea of the common school and teachers delivering a very prescriptive and uniform set of content and courses, required the superintendent to oversee and ensure compliance toward that end. The role of the superintendent continued to evolve into a more managerial role or what Callahan (1966) would call the superintendent as a business executive, which occurred in direct alignment with the transition of the United States into a more industrial-focused society. The focus became more on time, efficiency, and a model compared with that of the manager of a company (Callahan,

1966). Starting around 1930, the role of superintendent shifted towards the role as a democratic leader (Callahan, 1966; Kowalski et al., 2011). This change in focus towards democratic leadership for superintendents was relatively short-lived and was replaced by a focus on the superintendent as an applied social scientist and was led in part by the American Association of School Administrators, directly related to universities which began to offer school administration as a field of study (Callahan, 1966; Kowalski et al., 2011). Finally, the idea of the superintendent as communicator emerged as our society moved to a more informational age from the previous manufacturing period (Kowalski et al., 2011).

When looking at the five roles of a superintendent identified by Callahan (1966) and then Kowalski (2005) of teacher-scholar, manager, democratic leader, applied social scientist, and communicator; the literature supports the notion that the role of the superintendent is a complex one (Lowery & Harris, 2002) and that the superintendency impacts all aspects of the school district system (Norton et al., 1996). Today these roles are combined as part of the complexity that is required of the superintendent (Bjork, et al., 2014b). The complexity of the superintendency and the continued evolution of the role is reflected in the 2010 study of the American school superintendent by Kowalski et al. (2011) where those five distinct roles are clarified as no longer being distinct; “the contemporary superintendent is expected to wear five different hats, and she or he is expected to know when to transition among the roles” (Kowalski et al., 2011, p. 5). Ultimately, the role of the superintendent is that of chief executive officer and they are responsible for ensuring that the school district is meeting all levels of regulation, mandate, and policy from the Federal, State Legislature, State Board, State Department of Education, and Local School board policy (Bjork, et al., 2014a). This while focusing on student learning, instructional programs, oversight of the district administration, and support services.

The complexity of the superintendency and the continued evolution of the role is reflected in the 2010 study of the American school superintendent by Kowalski et al. where the five distinct roles of teacher-scholar, manager, democratic leader, applied social scientist, and communicator are clarified as no longer being distinct; “the contemporary superintendent is expected to wear five different hats, and she or he is expected to know when to transition among the roles” (Kowalski et al., 2011). The role of the superintendent as chief executive officer and comes with the responsibility of ensuring that the school district is meeting all levels of regulation, mandate, and policy from the Federal, State Legislature, State Board, State Department of Education, and Local School board policy (Bjork et al., 2014b). This while focusing on student learning, instructional programs, oversight of the district administration, and support services. Ultimately, it is the superintendent’s role to bring together the school board, the community at large, parents, teachers, and support staff around a shared vision for the school district (Fusarelli, 2006; Stanford, 1999). This takes the ability to understand the culture and climate of the district and the community at large, which requires the interpersonal communication skills to navigate the intricacies of the system. The COVID-19 pandemic added an additional layer of focus and attention on all aspects of the superintendency as the “navigators and captains in this tumult” and their need to make the constant adjustments to navigate the school district through the storm (Hemmer & Elliff, 2020, Shoup & Studer, 2010).

This study intends to identify the superintendent roles that public school superintendents leverage or rely upon in moments of chaos and/or turbulence. The purpose of this study is to examine the lived experience of school district superintendents as they lead their districts in the face of that chaos and turbulence. The chaos/turbulence of navigating the COVID-19 pandemic is the lens which leadership is examined. Through this examination of those lived experience, the

study aims to identify which of the five roles of a superintendent identified by Callahan (1966) and then Kowalski (2005) of teacher-scholar, manager, democratic leader, applied social scientist, and communicator were most significant to the superintendent's leadership during the pandemic, as well as which presented the most challenges during their leadership through the pandemic. Additionally, because of the importance of the relationship between the board and the superintendent, the study also aims to identify which of those five roles of a superintendent proved most significant, and most challenging in terms of their working relationship with the local school board (Alsbury, 2008; Alsbury & Gore, 2015; Byrd et al., 2006; Campbell & Fullan, 2019; Carver, 2000; Glass et al., 2000; Grissom & Andersen, 2012; Iannaccone & Lutz, 1970; Land, 2002; Lutz & Iannaccone, 1986; McAdams, 2005; Resnick, 1999).

For this study, the researcher identified three distinct phases of the COVID-19 pandemic as it relates to school district superintendents. Phase One was the portion of the 2019-2020 school year from March 2020 through June 2020. This was the phase when the COVID-19 pandemic first impacted public schools in the United States. The second phase was the following school year, from July 2020 through June 2021. The third phase is the 2021-2022 school year, from July 2021 through June 2022.

### **Description of Terms**

Specific terms and definitions are provided to allow for the reader to have a strong grasp of the terms, ideas, and concepts used within this study. It is critical to maintain an understanding of the concepts and terms that exist within the literature reviewed as part of this study.

**Applied Social Scientist:** An applied social scientist is those within professions that seek to use the social science research and theory to improve their organization. Applied Social Scientist is also one of the five identified roles of a superintendent in which the work focused on taking a

social scientific approach to problem solving, and in which superintendents focus increased in awareness of issues such as poverty, equity, racism, etc. (Callahan, 1966, and Kowalski, 2005).

**Chaos:** A state of utter confusion, the inherent unpredictability of a system (Merriam-Webster, 2022). For schools this chaos may occur in moments of crisis where standard operating procedures don't necessarily apply. Chaos may also be experienced in schools due to significant division, and diverse levels of dissatisfaction amongst stakeholders.

**Communicator:** A person who is skilled in conveying information, news, and ideas.

Communicator is also one of the five identified roles of a superintendent in which the work focuses primarily shaping culture, increased community engagement, strategic planning, and relationship building (Callahan, 1966, and Kowalski, 2005).

**Democratic Leader:** Democratic leader is one of the five identified roles of a superintendent in which their work focuses on lobbying state and federal elected officials for funding, and handling pressure from special interest groups, and policy makers (Callahan, 1966, and Kowalski, 2005).

**Local School Board Governance:** The primary role of a school district board is that of governance or oversight of control and direction of the district. School boards are elected by the citizens within the community of the school district to represent the communities, ideals, values, and beliefs about the district, and the education of the students within the community. The school board primarily focuses on the policies of the school district, sets the standards for what is expected to occur and be accomplished, and hires the superintendent to be their chief advisor, and chief executive officer for the school district.

**Manager:** a person responsible for controlling or administering all or part of a company or organization. Manager is also one of the five identified roles of a superintendent in which the

work focuses primarily on budget, management, and operations (Callahan, 1966, and Kowalski, 2005).

**Phenomenology:** A qualitative approach to research that seeks to “explore, describe, and analyze the meaning of individual lived experience (Marshall & Rossman, 2015, p. 17)

**Semi-structured interview:** In a semi-structured interview, the researcher sets up some general structure or framework prior to the interview which details what topics, concepts, and themes will be explored within the interview. The person being interviewed has some discretion or latitude in how they answer, and how much they provide in response to the questions. The researcher/interviewer then responds by using prompts and follow-up questions to clarify or expand upon their answers. The semi-structured interview is open to new ideas, topics, and concepts that may emerge through the responses of the person being interviewed.

**Teacher-Scholar:** The teacher-scholar is someone who is focused on the process by which knowledge and skills are taught and provided to students, and someone who is also part of the larger community of life-long learners in a specific discipline, or area of expertise. Teacher-Scholar is also one of the five identified roles of a superintendent in which they were primarily involved with the supervision, and training of teachers (Callahan, 1966, and Kowalski, 2005).

### **Interview Questions/Protocol**

Interview participants are encouraged to read through this document, and reflect on their experiences as they relate to this dissertation topic. Participants are strongly encouraged to engage in reflective journaling regarding their experiences and specifically related to the interview questions.

While the following are the questions that will be asked, these interviews are semi-structured in that the interview participants have discretion regarding how they answer, and how

much they provide in response to the questions. The researcher/interviewer will then respond by using prompts and follow-up questions to clarify or expand upon their answers. The semi-structured interview is open to new ideas, topics, and concepts that may emerge through the responses of the person being interviewed.

### **Interview #2:**

Scripted Introduction: As you are aware, the role of superintendent is a complex one. The purpose of this study is to examine the lived experience of school district superintendents as they lead their districts in the face of chaos. The specific chaos of navigating the COVID-19 pandemic is the lens through which we will be working. Callahan (1966) and then Kowalski (2005), identified five roles of a superintendent of teacher-scholar, manager, democratic leader, applied social scientist, and communicator. This study aims to identify which of these roles were most significant to the superintendent's leadership during the pandemic, as well as which presented the most challenges during their leadership through the pandemic.

1. I want you to think about the act of leading your school district during the COVID-19 pandemic.
  - a) What is your perception of your individual experience as a superintendent during COVID-19?
  - b) Researchers have identified five key roles of a superintendent, these roles are teacher-scholar, manager, democratic leader, applied social scientist, and communicator.
    - i. Of these roles, which roles was most significant in your leadership of your school district during COVID-19?
    - ii. Which presented the greatest challenge for during the pandemic?
2. How did you survive this chaos? To what would you attribute your success?
3. If you could do it all over again, what would you do differently?
4. Any additional thoughts or reflections that you would like to share?



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