SUPERINTENDENTS’ PERCEPTIONS OF
DISTRICT CULTURE

By

SHANNON K THOMPSON

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

WASHINGTON STATE UNIVERSITY
Department of Educational Leadership, Sport Studies, and Educational/Counseling Psychology

DECEMBER 2016

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To the Faculty of Washington State University:

The members of the Committee appointed to examine the dissertation of SHANNON K THOMPSON find it satisfactory and recommend that it be accepted.

Kristin Shawn Huggins, Ph.D., Chair

Kelly Ward, Ph.D.

Glenys Hill, Ph.D.

Gay Selby, Ed.D.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to acknowledge all members of my committee, Dr. Huggins, Dr. Acker-Hocevar, Dr. Kelly Ward, Dr. Glenys Hill, and Dr. Selby, for guiding and supporting my efforts. Dr. Huggins served as guide, mentor, and scholar throughout this process. She devoted countless hours to discussing possibilities, asking probing questions to both clarify and deepen my thinking, and offering feedback during the writing process. Dr. Huggins was the quiet, constant, relentless pressure that did not give up on me even when I wanted to give up on myself. Thank you. Dr. Acker-Hocevar, thank you for your leadership and thinking throughout this journey. Dr. Ward and Dr. Hill, thank you for providing leadership, guidance, and advice as this journey culminated. Dr. Selby, who inspired me to enter the doctoral program, on so many occasions offered her wisdom, advice, experience, knowledge, and truth just when I needed it the most.

To Rebecca, Jennifer, and David, thank you so much for your support and friendship during the ups and downs of life, work, and doctoral studies. They are truly appreciated and highly valued. The laughter, the long hours, and struggles were well worth it. I wish you the very best on each of your next adventures.

Completion of this goal would not have been possible without the support and encouragement of my family. To my husband, Rich, thank you for being patient, picking up the loose ends, and hanging in there as I labored to complete my doctoral studies. To my children, Paige, Cailin, and Garret, thank you for understanding when Mom had to study, being patient with my lugging a computer and books around to your events, and not mixing up the constant piles of papers and notes on the table. You are my world and I love you to the moon and back. I am well aware that this accomplishment is not mine alone. It never would have been possible without the support from friends, family, and faculty.
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Abstract

by Shannon K Thompson, Ed.D.
Washington State University
December 2016

Chair: Kristin Shawn Huggins

In response to the short employment tenure of superintendents in school districts, this study examined the transition of superintendents hired new to a school district. Data were collected in this qualitative study from superintendent interviews were analyzed to determine the processes and strategies used by superintendents who were new to a school district, to learn about the district culture and to reconcile any discrepancies between their core values and the school district’s culture. Eleven superintendents from eastern and western Washington State were interviewed during the school year. The superintendents ranged in experience from one year to 22 years of leading school districts as a superintendent. The districts the superintendents led were in both rural and urban settings.

The study found that many factors competed for superintendents’ time, attention, and effort as the superintendents worked to lead a school district. However, it was important for the superintendent new to a school district to simultaneously cultivate relationships with the school board, the internal school community, and the broader external community. This need required superintendents to develop strategies to learn about the expectations, history, traditions, and work of the school, the community, and its members. As strong, trusting relationships between
superintendent and stakeholders developed, discrepancies concerning superintendent core values and district culture could be managed and the goals of the superintendent moved forward.
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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Never before in the history of the superintendency have there been more complex and sophisticated demands placed on superintendents’ time and energy (Usdan, McCloud, Podmostko, & Cuban, 2001). The current structure of the public school system requires that superintendents fill both managerial and leadership roles, which necessitates having the skills of a scholar, an applied social scientist, a communicator, and a democratic leader (Hurley, 2009). The superintendent must conduct each role with its plethora of responsibilities in such a manner that the role preserves, promotes, and advances the primary purpose of the system—learning and achievement for all students. Most importantly, the superintendent is the key factor in determining how a district will respond to the increased demands for academic achievement placed upon the educational system (Fuhrman, 2003; Kowalski, McCord, Petersen, Young, & Ellerson, 2011).

The educational goal of the 20th century was to increase high school graduation rates; the 21st century requires the educational goal to be focused on student preparation for success in a rapidly changing technological environment in a global community (Synder, Acker-Hocevar, & Synder, 2000). The public school system is not structured to allow all students to be taught the skills required to work, learn, and be productive global citizens in the Knowledge Era (Wagner, Kegan, Lahey, Lemons, Garnier, Helsing, Howell, & Rasmussem, 2006). Not only is the educational goal of public school systems shifting to address more global, technical demands, but the clientele being served by the public school system is changing as well. Superintendents leading today’s public education system face the changes of meeting accountability demands for increasing student learning in a society growing in ethnic diversity, number of students from low
socioeconomic backgrounds, number of English language learners, and number of as well as severity of special needs students (Glover & Vaugh, 2009; Kowalski, 2006; Kowalski et al., 2011; Ravitch, 2010; Usdan, McCloud, Podmostko, & Cuban, 2001; Wagner, Kegan et al., 2006). In 1988, 22% of school age children were of color; in 2006 that number increased to 42%. In 2010 the number increased to 48% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). Thomas Mesenbourg, acting director of the Census Bureau, added an understanding to these numbers by explaining, “The proportion of young children that is the minority has been increasing since the 2010 Census and if this proportional growth continues, we expect that crossover to majority-minority for this group will occur within the next couple of years” (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013). In addition to a growing diverse student population, the number of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds has also increased. Between 1990 and 2011, the percentage of school aged children in families living in poverty increased from 17% to 21%, translating to 10.9 million children (NCES, 2013). In the United States, diversity and poverty are associated with lower academic achievement. As diversity reaches 50% and the number of students living in poverty continues to climb, school systems will need to make significant improvement in the learning of students of color and of poor students (Marzano & Waters, 2009).

In addition to issues concerning students of color and students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, English language learners present changes to districts. In 1979, the percentage of English language learners was 9%. That percentage grew to 19% by 2003 (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2005). The National Center for Educational Statistics (2013) reports an increase of English Language learners by 1% or 0.6 million students between 2003 and 2011. Even prior to appearing in increased numbers, English language learners systematically
underperformed in U.S. public schools (Acker-Hocevar, Cruz-Janzen, & Wilson, 2012). For example, in New York, 23% of English language learners perform at a proficient level by their scheduled high school graduation; however, only 27% of those students graduate in 4 years (New York State Education Department, 2007). Additionally, the number of special needs students being served by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act increased between the years of 1981 to 2011, from 4.1 million students to 6.4 million students or 13% of all public school students (NCES, 2013). The National Center for Special Education Research reports that a considerable achievement gap in reading, mathematics, science, and social studies exists between students with disabilities and their general education peers (Wagner, Newman, Cameto, & Levine, 2006). An increase in student needs, coupled with the reauthorization of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, has added complexity to the role of superintendent and intensified pressure for superintendents to increase achievement levels for all students by improving teaching and learning (Colburn, Toure, & Yamashita, 2009; Daly & Finnigan, 2011; Firestone, 2009).

Adding to this challenge is the historical practice of schools and classrooms “having highly autonomous work habits that can result only in random acts of excellence” (Wagner, Kegan et al., 2006, p. 16), a situation in which isolation reinforces and creates system barriers to change. Superintendents face the challenge of developing communities of practice in which new learning, innovation, and problem solving arise collectively rather than through random acts of excellence (DuFour & Fullan, 2013). Pardini and Lewis (2003) point out that real learning seldom takes place without sensitive yet forceful guidance from educational leaders. Hence, the complex and unanticipated problems facing public education today require school district leaders to be flexible and collaborative (Pardini & Lewis, 2003). Superintendent leadership is
dependent upon superintendents’ ability to adapt their practices to the given circumstances, to be able to understand the underlying causes of the problems and learn how to respond to the problems (Wahlstrom, Lovis, Leithwood, & Anderson, 2004). Doing so requires the superintendent to understand the social system where he or she works well enough to predict how stressful the change will be and how capably the system and individuals can absorb the stress (Heifetz, 1994). Leaders who attempt to create significant changes through a simple, linear, analytical process almost always fail (Kotter, 2012). A shared process of change is relevant for today’s school district superintendents because the complexity of the changes that are presented throughout their leadership has never been greater; nor have the stakes for success been higher than they are now, given that education is an economic issue and the quality of life across the globe is influenced by the nations’ quality of schooling (Snyder et al., 2000; Uhl-Bein, Marion, & McKelvey, 2007; Wagner, Kegan et al., 2006). Public school superintendents will be challenged to transform the systems’ service and delivery methods to create school districts that successfully prepare all students with the skills and orientations required to be productive global citizens in a changing marketplace (Heifetz, 1994; Snyder et al., 2000; Wagner, Kegan et al., 2006).

The political nature of the job also presents change as the superintendent attempts to choreograph forward movement of student achievement goals and objectives with boards, other administrators, teachers, special interest groups, unions, and state/federal mandates (Bird, Wang, & Murray, 2009; McFarlane, 2010). As Williams (2004, p. 36) noted, “The environment in which most superintendents are asked to perform is unpredictable, highly politicized, and immersed in complex social and economic dynamics.” Current superintendents are expected to lead school improvement efforts with their professional knowledge while at the same time
acquiescing to the will of the people both inside and outside the school system (Wirt & Kirst, 2009). Subsequently, superintendents are caught in internal and external forces they have little control over (Grogan, 2008). The 2010 Decennial Study of Superintendents found that 91% of all superintendents reported that district-level and school-level administrators working in their system had moderate to considerable influence to influence district policy and operations (Kowalski et al., 2011). The study further reported that 84.4% of superintendents responding indicated that teachers had a moderate to considerable level of influence on them (Kowalski et al., 2011). In every decision, the superintendent plays a pivotal role in the operation of the district, as she or he is the only individual with positional authority to have entrée to the power spheres of the school board, central office administrators, principals, teachers, parent groups, community groups, and local and state government personnel (Bird et al., 2009).

Given those political realities, district cultures are multifaceted and complex. District culture shapes not only perspectives on student learning but also decision-making norms, as well as attitudes toward problem solving and relationships (Joyce & Murphy, 1990). One of the greatest institutional challenges facing superintendents is culture change (Kowalski et al., 2011). However, changing organizational culture is an arduous task due to the difficulty of identifying basic assumptions (Schein, 1988) and is a time-consuming process because it can take years to accomplish (Fullan, 2001; Kotter, 2012; Schein, 1988). Unfortunately, studies indicate that the national average for public school superintendent tenure ranges from 3.64 years to 7.25 years (Knox, 2013), while in large urban areas public school superintendent tenure rarely lasts longer than 3 years (Williams, 2004). Superintendents must socialize to their new environment and culture before they attempt to make change (Ehrhart, Schneider, Macey, 2014; Schein, 1988).
Problem Statement

In order to bring about meaningful and sustainable change within a school district, superintendents need to understand the district’s culture and reconcile discrepancies between their core values and the school district’s culture. Nationally, superintendents face the additional challenge of implementing the English Language Arts and Mathematics Common Core State Standards, Next Generation Science Standards, Smarter Balanced assessments, new teacher and principal evaluation systems, and changing requirements; they also have to face the instability of state and federal funding (Linn, 2005; Gober 2012). Further, the reauthorization of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 has raised the demand for school district superintendents to be accountable for the educational effectiveness of student learning by systemically improving teaching and learning (Daly & Finnigan, 2011; Colburn & Talbert, 2006; Colburn, Toure, & Yamashita, 2009; Johnson & Chrispeels, 2010; Madaa, Halverson, & Gomez, 2007; Mangin, 2009; Muhammad, 2009). Learning is viewed as an indispensable investment required for success in the Knowledge Era (Uhl-Bien & Marion, 2008). However, the social conditions over the past few decades have had noticeable effects on public school superintendents and their school districts as superintendents work to ensure that all students have access to quality teaching and learning (Kowalski et al., 2011). Anthony Muhammad (2009) notes, “Traditional legislative mandates that focus solely on student outcomes, even when coupled with threats of embarrassment and loss of job security, may be person’s powerless to effect change in the face of personal belief systems that perpetuate the achievement gap” (p. 14).

Numerous studies have concluded that in school systems in which the culture did not support and encourage reform efforts, improvement did not take place (Bryk, Lee, & Holland, 1993; McLaughlin, 1995; Newman & Associates, 1996; Fullan, 1999). Culture was identified as
a key factor in determining whether improvement was possible (Deal & Peterson, 1999). Further, Connors and Smith (2011) noted that an organizational culture determines results and that the results desired largely determine the kind of culture needed. Therefore, the school board’s most important function is selecting the superintendent, because the alignment of the executive and where the organization wants to be in the future must be a focus of the hiring process (Ethhart, Schneider, & Macey, 2014). The hiring of the superintendent links the school board’s educational vision with the leader who will be tasked with accomplishing the vision (Lumby & Foskett, 2011). Members of the organization need to be mindful that if everyone in the organization continues to think and act in the same way today and tomorrow as they did yesterday, the organization will not accomplish different results (Connors & Smith, 2011). This study qualitatively examined second-year superintendents’ perceptions of their school district culture and their district cultural socialization. Further, it examined how superintendents in the second year of their superintendency reconciled any discrepancies between their core values and the school district’s culture.

**Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to contribute to the empirical research that examines the impact of culture on district-level leadership, specifically the superintendent, by investigating the experiences and perceptions of second-year superintendents regarding their school district culture, their school district cultural socialization, and the means by which they reconciled discrepancies between their core values and the school district’s culture.
Research Questions

The following research questions were used:

1. How do second-year superintendents develop an understanding of the school district’s culture?
2. How do second-year superintendents reconcile discrepancies between their core values and the school district’s culture?

Overview of Methodology

A qualitative research design was selected to conduct this study because of its emphasis on “people’s lived experiences to locate the meanings people place on the events, processes, and structures of their lives and for connecting these meanings to the social world around them” (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014, p. 11). Additionally, the methodological tradition of dealing with the understanding of the subjectivity of social phenomena requires the use of a qualitative approach (Noor, 2008). A qualitative approach provided the methods to develop an understanding of the complex issue of superintendent leadership in the context of organizational culture. Qualitative methods were well suited for a study of how individuals’ points of view toward the same experienced phenomena may differ.

The research focused on Washington State superintendents in their second year of employment with the school district in which they were serving as superintendent. Participants were chosen through purposeful sample selection (Merriam, 2009; Seidman, 2006). The researcher compiled the superintendent hiring for the upcoming school year to provide the initial list of potential participants. Characteristics of ideal participants included being superintendents who were hired from outside of the district, had previous district leadership experience, and were in their second year of their superintendent contract.
A semi structured interview process was used by the researcher. By conducting in-depth interviews with the superintendents, I was able to better document their lived experience and how they were making meaning of those experiences (Seidman, 2006). I, as the researcher was the primary instrument for data collection and analysis (Merriam, 2009). Interview questions centered on superintendents’ perceptions of district culture, their socialization to district culture, their own beliefs and values, and any gaps between their core values and the district’s culture.

Upon completion of the interview transcriptions, each participant’s interview transcript underwent several cycles of coding to reveal categories, and from the categories themes emerged. A critical component of qualitative research is founded on how individuals construct reality (Merriam, 2009). In this study, the interview responses of superintendents presented their reflections on their first year of superintendent leadership in a new district and their perceptions of their second year in the position.

**Significance of the Study**

This study may be useful to superintendents, especially new superintendents, who are entering their first superintendency, or to experienced superintendents transitioning to a new school district. The results may provide new and experienced superintendents insight into how to navigate the socialization process of the school district and serve as a tool for practicing superintendents to use in attempts to reconcile discrepancies between their core values and their school district’s culture. The insight and findings compiled from this study have the potential to further the investigation of this topic in scope and breadth and to add to the literature on superintendents and school district culture.
Limitations of the Study

The limitations of this study include my limited experience as a qualitative researcher and interviewer, the limited size and scope of the research, and the amount and depth of information the participants were willing to share (Seidman, 1998). Participants may have been constrained in offering information about themselves and their leadership skills, and their ability to convey and communicate their experiences may not have been expansive. In particular, superintendents serving in the role of superintendent for the first time were not as open to discussing their experiences as those interviewed superintendents who had held the superintendent position previously in other district(s). First-time superintendents were closed and direct in their responses to interview questions. Even with follow-up probing questions, first-time superintendents were guarded and did not lessen their political lens in their responses.

Mitigation for these limitations included acknowledging that the reader rather than the researcher determines what can apply to his or her context, including the use of member checking, engaging in peer review (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2011), and writing reflexivity journals (Pillow, 2003). Additionally, the use of multiple data sources and multiple means of data collection to triangulate the data increased the internal validity of the study (Fraenkel & Wallen, 1996; Merriam, 2009). Continuing to read, self-train, and emulate other researchers in terms of listening; asking good questions; knowing my topic of study; caring about the data; conducting parallel tracks; and persevering were additional means of mitigating my inexperience as a researcher (Yin, 2011).

Assumptions

Three primary assumptions were made by the researcher in the context of this study. The first assumption was that participants would provide their perceptions of how they had developed
an understanding of their school district’s culture and how they reconciled any discrepancies between their core values and the school district’s culture. The second assumption was that the selection of superintendents from districts of different geographic locations with varied demographics, variance in number of schools, and different enrollment sizes would provide a broad spectrum of perspectives. The third was that data collected and transcribed would be accurately recorded.

**Definitions of Key Terms**

*Beliefs* – how a person comprehends and deals with the world around “him or her; consciously held, cognitive views about truth and reality” (Ott, 1989, p. 39).

*No Child Left Behind, 2001* – Public Law 107-110: 197th Congress legislation to strengthen accountability for schools to close the achievement gap through the use of highly qualified teachers, research-based instructional practices, sanctions, and parental choice (NCLB, 2002).

*Organizational Culture* – Schein (2010) defines this as a pattern of shared basic assumptions learned by [an organization] as it solves its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid, and therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think and feel in relation to those problems. (p. 18)

*Socialization* – according to Van Maanen, “the process by which members learn the cultural values, norms, beliefs, assumptions, and required behaviors that permit them to participate as effective members of an organization” (as cited in Erhart, Schneider, & Macy, 2013, n.p.).

*Superintendency* – the office, post or jurisdiction of a superintendent.
Superintendent – an administrator who is responsible for the coordination and direction of the operations of an institution, organization or department. In education, the term involves the administrator at the district, city, county, or state level who directs and coordinates the activities of the school system in accordance with local school board standards and state and federal laws.

Values – the conscious expressions of what an organization stands for, defined as “a standard of goodness, quality, or excellence that undergirds behavior and decision making and what people care about” (Deal & Peterson, 1999, as cited in Volante, 2012, p. 133).

Organization of the Study

This dissertation is divided into five chapters. The first chapter is an introduction to the problem and a background for the study, including the current challenges to superintendent leadership and the significance of this particular study. Additionally, Chapter One includes an overview of the methodology, research questions, limitations, and assumptions associated with the study. Finally, Chapter One provides definitions of key terms for the reader.

Chapter Two begins by discussing the historical roles of the superintendency. Further, this chapter examines the current roles, responsibilities, and leadership of the school district superintendent. In addition, Chapter Two discusses organizational culture and socialization before elaborating on the role of leadership in organizational culture.

Chapter Three outlines the methodology used in the study, along with a description of the data content, selection, and analysis. Chapter Four includes the results of the study. The fifth and final chapter discusses the findings and makes recommendations for new and experienced superintendents, practice, and future research directions.
CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The twenty-first century superintendent has a challenging and multifaceted position. In the current context of educational reform, superintendents must be adept at navigating complex systems in order to improve student learning. While navigating these complex systems, superintendents must use their knowledge and skills to shape the organizational culture in their districts and to meet changing federal and state policy expectations.

Roles of the Superintendency

Although the current realities of the superintendent role are seemingly multifaceted, the history of the superintendency reveals five significant roles the position has held since its inception. The role in its infancy was focused on the scholar. Throughout the 1860s to the early 1900s, the superintendent position was instructionally focused and the work tightly controlled by the school committee (McFarlane, 2010; Pardini & Lewis, 2003). The superintendent was selected for his or her knowledge of teaching and work with curriculum. During the early 1900s, the educational system shifted and the centralized school board was structured and operated more like a business board of directors. Board members were responsible for setting policy, and the superintendent was responsible for overseeing the day-to-day operations of the district (Kowalski, 2006). The superintendency began to shift from educational scholar to manager as a result of the educational system’s being aligned with the corporate business model (Fuchs, 2006).

By 1925 the shift was complete, and the superintendent’s role transitioned into its second phase, in which it more closely resembled a managerial job in business than a leader of an
educational system (Callahan, 1966; Snyder et al., 2000). The superintendent strived to run the educational system in a streamlined, efficient, and standardized way using leadership styles that incorporated scientific management practices (Thomas, 2001). The first half of the 20th century defined the superintendent’s work as comprising the 4 B’s—bonds, budgets, buses, and buildings (Pardini & Lewis, 2003; Usdan et al., 2001).

After the managerial role, the third historical role of superintendents held, the democratic leader emerged. This role began shifting the superintendent’s duties in the 1930s to have the district leader focus on democratic schooling. Throughout the 1930s and into the 1950s, the superintendent held the role of negotiator and statesman. Key elements of the role were to cultivate community relations in an effort to gain moral and financial support from the community for the public schools (Fuchs, 2006) and to be an astute political strategist (Björk & Gurley, 2003).

The fourth historical role of the superintendent was that of the applied social scientist (Kowalski et al., 2011). The change was driven by the public’s dissatisfaction with the public school system in the 1950s and the expectation that the superintendent would have the expertise to apply scientific inquiry, research deficiencies, and be able to recommend policy in order to fix what was wrong (Kowalski, 2005). The study of theory and infusion of the social and behavioral sciences became core to the preparation of the superintendent (Kowalski et al., 2011). The 1970s saw the work of the superintendent evolve to the 4 R’s—race, resource, relationships, and rules (Pardini & Lewis, 2003; Usdan et al., 2001). The role expanded to encompass not only managing the school but also the political considerations and factors of the time (McFarlane, 2010). During this period, Chapman (1997) asserted, special interest considerations became a
major function of school board members’ participation, and members’ agendas affected the superintendent’s role (McFarlane, 2010).

Research identifies the fifth major role of the superintendent as that of communicator. This role was influenced by the further politicization of public education through the publication of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983 (Ravitch, 2010). Due to this shift, the superintendent needed to be a key advocate for, and translator and interpreter of, the broader federal policies (McFarlane, 2010). Those policies exerted tremendous influence on their schools’ curriculum, culture, and climate (McFarlane, 2010). While the 1980s saw the work of communicator as the 4 A’s—academic standards, accountability, autonomy, and ambiguity, the 1990s saw the introduction of the 5 C’s—collaboration, connection, communication, child advocacy, and community building—added to the priorities of superintendency (Pardini & Lewis, 2003; Usdan et al., 2001). As a consequence of numerous iterations of the superintendent’s primary role throughout the position’s history, the work shifted to meet the demands of the role expectations.

**Current Roles, Responsibilities, and Leadership**

The superintendent’s role in the 21st century focuses on the superintendent’s being the distributor of resources according to standards of equity and fairness without alienating stakeholders both within and outside of the school district; being a data analyzer to make informed decisions; being a scholar, knowing what is good practice in order to continue it and what is not in order to eliminate it; and being a booster of instruction to allow all students to meet the expectations outlined in the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act (Colburn & Talbert, 2006; Daly & Finnigan, 2011; McFarlane, 2010; Pardini & Lewis, 2003).

In addition to drawing upon many roles and a variety of work needs that come with those roles, the superintendent must develop and apply his or her own leadership skills. There is an
intersection between the work responsibilities of the superintendent and the leadership needs of
the role. In fact,

the convergence of a superintendent’s leadership role demands within schools and
districts coupled with the increased demands for accountability suggest the contemporary
superintendent is likely to remain a dynamic and malleable leadership role shaped by
both internal and external environments. (Bredeson & Kose, 2007, p. 16)

Balancing the demands of the two environments requires that superintendents act in their
adaptive capacity not to make things happen, but rather to stimulate the conditions whereby
change can happen naturally (Hurst & Zimmerman, 1994). In order to be effective,
superintendents need to realize that what worked in the past is no guarantee of success in the
future (Vroom, 2000). Today’s superintendent must focus on systemic reform to address the
expanse of student needs to ensure that every student learns while balancing the policy tension
created by a more socially and politically diverse community rather than on managing and
maintaining the status quo (Kowalski, 2006).

**Superintendent Challenges in Increasing Student Learning**

The challenges superintendents face as they try to address increased student learning are
numerous and varied. One such challenge is how the superintendent is going to balance his or
her need to manage and develop the internal operations of the district focused on increasing
student learning while monitoring the internal and external environment in addition to trying to
anticipate and respond to the external demands (Lunenburg & Ornstein, 2008). A second
challenge is task and time management. Examination of the work of the superintendent indicates
that superintendents are interested in curriculum, instruction, and student learning; however, the
day-to-day realities and responsibilities of leading a complex organization, particularly legal and
political issues, divert time and attention from instructional leadership (Bredeson & Kose, 2007). A third challenge for today’s superintendents is the development of communities of practice to create the conditions that improve curricular, instructional, and assessment practices intended to increase student learning and outcomes collectively rather than through random acts of excellence (Bredeson & Kose, 2007; DuFour & Fullan, 2013; Wagner et al., 2006).

**Trust**

Tierney (2006) identified trust as “a dynamic process in which two or more parties are involved in a series of interactions that may require a degree of risk or faith on the part of one or both parties” (p.51). Ensari and Karabay (2016) pointed out that trust develops at both an individual level and an organizational level. Trust is deeply tied to the context in which it arises (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995) and is a critical resource for leaders (Heifetz, 1994).

An employee’s trust in his or her leader is shown to be a key factor that affects an organizations structure and working relationships (Dirks & Ferrin, 2002; Ensari & Karabay, 2016). Mishera and Morrissey (1990) defined organizational trust as the employee’s perception of organizational support and belief in the leaders to be truthful and keep their promises. Numerous researchers have concluded that if leaders are to be productive and accomplish organizational goals, they must have cohesive and collaborative relationships with stakeholders (Baier, 1994; Goldring & Rallis, 1993; Louis, Kruse, & Marks, 1996). Tschannen-Moran stated that it is the leaders’ responsibility to set the tone of trust in the organization and that trust can either diminish or grow as a result of the leader’s behavior (2004).

Mishra (1996) identified five behaviors leaders can display that are shown to improve employee perceptions of trust in their leaders: consistency, respectful behavior, sharing and distribution of control, effective communication, and the ability to show care. Mishra and
Morrissey (1990) further contended that organizational trust can be cultivated through four foundational elements: (a) open communication throughout the organization, (b) employees assuming active roles during decision making, (c) distribution of knowledge and information, and (d) respectful sharing of feelings and expectations. Granted the delicate state of trust in an organization, it is imperative that the leader elevate the importance of civil relationships among organizational stakeholders (Syphert & Gill, 2009). Tschannen-Moran’s work on trust summarized the key facets of trust as being benevolence, honesty, openness, reliability, and competence (2004). Flores and Solomon (2001) noted that trust is “cultivated through speech, conversation, commitments, and actions. Trust is never ‘something at hand’, it is always a matter of human effort. It can and often must be conscientiously created, not simply taken for granted” (p. 87). Tschannen-Moran (2004) further commented that “trust is a choice and a judgment based on evidence” (p. 16). Leaders need to remember that organizations exist to accomplish tasks that would otherwise be too complex, expensive, large, or beyond a single individual’s ability to accomplish. Tschannen-Moran stated:

When a newcomer joins an organization a level of interdependence is initiated immediately by virtue of the shared purpose embodied by the organization. A new employee’s success and continued employment depends on the ability to forge workable relationships with the existing organizational players and to serve organizational purposes. (p. 42)

Organizational Culture

Culture embodies the shared values, beliefs, assumptions, expectations, behaviors, customs, rights, and accumulated shared learnings (Schein, 1988) manifested in overt behavior (Schein, 1984). Culture includes that invisible yet powerful set of meanings and mindset held
individually and collectively throughout a system (Kotter, 2012; Wagner, Kegan et al., 2006). The unconscious exchange of beliefs and assumptions that provides meaning to people’s words and actions also contributes to culture (Deal & Peterson, 1990). Organizational culture as Schein (1984) defined:

Patterns of basic assumptions that any given group has invented, discovered, or developed in learning to cope with its problems of external adaptations and internal integration, and that have worked well enough to be considered valid, and therefore to be taught to new members (p. 3).

The strength of a culture stems as Schein (1984) describes it is from two key components the “homogeneity and stability of the group membership, and to the length and intensity of shared experiences among the group members (p. 7). Researchers Chatman and Cha (2003) evaluate the strength of culture on “high levels of agreement among employees about what’s valued and high levels of intensity about these values” (p.23).

However, the strength of a culture does not correlate with the culture’s effectiveness. As Schein (1984) points out “the actual content of the culture and the degree to which its solutions fit the problems posed by the environment seem like the critical variables” (p. 7). In addition to the culture of the organization, subcultures can emerge as they are developed around common bases for identification and through activities of the group (Rodrigues, 2006). Multiple differing cultures can exist among and within organizations. In fact, “the essence of an organization’s culture exists at the macrocosmic level through organizational structures and microcosmically in the way the organizational structure is manifested in individual exchanges and interpretations of those” (Venzant & Huggins, 2013, p. 7). This concept is exemplified within a school district
where there is one overarching organizational culture yet each site has its own culture and each of these cultures interacts with the others.

Organizational culture is the property of the group; it represents the accumulated learning acquired over the group’s history (Schein, 1988). The importance of organizational culture cannot be overemphasized. Organizational culture functions as a means by which its members understand their environment and determine how to respond (Schein, 1988; Yukl, 2013). It is through these shared beliefs and established traditions that stability and continuity in the organization can be ensured (Yukl, 2013).

**Socialization to the Organizational Culture**

Van Maanen (1976) defined socialization as “the process by which members learn the cultural values, norms, beliefs, assumptions and required behaviors that permit them to participate as effective members of an organization” (p. 89). Ethart, Scheinder, and Macey (2014) noted, “As newcomers go through the socialization process they learn information they need from a variety of sources, which helps them to develop mental models for how to function in their job, roles, group, and organization” (p. 154). Parsons (1951) commented on the importance of the newcomer’s learning the necessary knowledge to perform well in his or her new role. Bauer, Bodner, Erdogan, Truxillo, and Tucker (2007) took it a step further by pointing out that newcomers must make a resolute effort to attain information and support that is useful for navigating the new environment. Additionally, new employees must strive to understand the sources of power in their new work environments in order to take action and to function effectively (Etzioni, 1961). Socialization is core to understanding the *why* of a culture’s stability over time and its powerful effect on organizational members (Ethart, Schneider, & Macey, 2014).
The concept of newcomers progressing through stages of socialization is based on the anthropological work of rites of passage. Van Gennep (1960) characterized the rites of passage as having three distinct phases: the rites of separation, the rites of transition, and the rites of incorporation. Separation is noted as when a clean disruption from the previous occurs and entry into the new happens. Transition is the phase in which the newcomer comes to understand about the organization and the profession’s responsibilities. Incorporation refers to the final phase of the rites of passage, during which the new employee begins the work. As Ehthart et al. (2014) commented, this is when the employee learns the way things really are in comparison to how the organization was previously described.

In more recent research, Ashforth, Sluss, and Harrison outlined four general stages of socialization: anticipation, encounter, adjustment, and stabilization (2007). The first stage, anticipation, takes place prior to the new employee’s beginning work with the organization and is described as the information shared by the organization with the new employee and the employee’s expectations of the organization. Stage two, encounter, is present when the employee begins work within the organization and appraises his or her actual experiences in terms of what he or she had anticipated. Stage three, adjustment, is highlighted by the employee’s prevailing over the shock of the initial encounter and beginning to make sense of what he or she is experiencing in the new workplace. This stage is also distinguished by the efforts undertaken by both the person and the organization to aid in the socialization process. The fourth and final stage, stabilization, occurs when the employee is acknowledged as a full member of the organization or is seen as an insider.

Further, Jones (1986) offered that socialization methods could be grouped into two main categories: individualized and institutionalized. Individualized socialization is defined as more
casual, individual, and unplanned, whereas institutionalized is seen as more official, successive, and group methods of socialization. In addition to the methods of socialization, researchers have investigated four components in which organizational learning occurs as part of the induction of the new employee: task (how to accomplish the position), role (accountability, power), group (exchanges and rules), and organization (principles, beliefs, morals, governance) (Feldman, 1981; Fischer, 1986; Ostroff & Kozlowski, 1992). Cooper-Thomas and Anderson (2006) proposed that who provides information to the new employee during the socialization process is important. The who can be clustered into two key sources: the first source is organizational colleagues, such as colleagues, administrators, and advisors. The second key source is organizationally sanctioned information sources, such official socialization courses, which includes professional development and organizational writings. Ostruff and Kozlowski’s 1992 research contends that newcomers who proactively seek information from others about their new organization, their peers, and their roles and responsibilities are inclined to reach a higher level of successful entrance goals.

Role of Leadership in Organizational Culture

Given the importance of organizational culture, the organizational leader must address the reality of the widely shared norms, values, and perspectives held among those they lead, even if it is to challenge those notions. An overall acknowledgement exists that context matters in relation to a leader’s behavior and its consequences (Bredeson, Klar, & Johansson, 2008). Leaders operate within a context, and that context cannot be ignored (Stephenson, 2009). Bredeson et al. (2008) asserted that despite similar tasks and functions commonly used to describe the work of school superintendents, it seems reasonable to assert that each district leader enacts his/her
administrative role uniquely given such factors as district size, community demographics, organizational culture, history, geography, and local political realities, not to mention personalization of the role. (p. 3)

In a culture of complexity, such as a school district, superintendents must use their role to mobilize the collective capacity of the group members to change difficult circumstances (Fullan, 2001) such as the achievement gap among students of color, students of poverty, and White middle-class students. Doing so requires that supporting adults learn to enhance student learning while creating conditions for high levels of student learning to naturally to occur. Yet, regardless of a culture’s complexity, leaders can and do influence culture. Superintendents can leverage their influence by aligning their time, attention, words, actions, and resource allocation to focus cultural development on high expectations and rigor for all students. The effects of culture are stronger when approaches are consistent with each other and when the decisions and actions align with the values (Yukl, 2013). During times of change, leaders need to be careful to never misjudge the enormity of the forces that fortify complacency and aid maintenance of the status quo (Kotter, 2012). Schein (1988) noted that leaders must be conscious of culture; otherwise, culture will manage them.

As superintendents attempt to increase student learning, they must recognize that in order to cultivate the culture they want, they need to regularly review their own behavior and be mindful of what they notice or ignore. What leaders notice or ignore and systemically pay attention to communicates their core beliefs and leads others to notice and ignore those same things (Chatman & Cha, 2003; Schein, 1988). Additionally, superintendents need to be mindful that culture will form in their organization regardless of the action or in action the superintendent takes. The question is whether the culture formed will be a help or a hindrance to their ability to
achieve the goals and mission of the organization. Culture is too essential to leave unplanned (Chatman & Cha, 2003). As the system’s leader, the superintendent must create his or her desired culture of increased student learning through “modeling, socialization, and actions” (Schein, 1988, pp. 19-20).

Crises are important in creating and changing culture; crises heighten anxiety, which, in appropriate amounts, motivates new learning (Bridge, 2009; Schein, 1988). In a crisis, the way in which the leader deals with the crisis will create new norms, values, and working procedures (Kotter, 2012; Schein, 1988). How the leader defines and frames the crisis also reveals the leader’s underlying assumptions and beliefs (Bridge, 2009; Schein, 1988). The superintendent’s leadership can be a source of constructing or fracturing a school system’s culture, climate, and values based on leadership approach and perceived leadership practices (McFarlane, 2010). Superintendents must understand that they are the dominant figures in a district and that their beliefs, values, and assumptions represent the visible, articulated models for how individuals should function (Schein, 1988). Application of this knowledge must be part of the superintendent’s efforts to shift cultural beliefs in an attempt to increase student learning. Superintendents influence the culture they seek to develop by their repeated articulation of the vision, manifested as ongoing communication of their priorities and concerns through their daily activities and choices (Yukl, 2013).

**Cultural Change**

Given the increased accountability resulting from NCLB, superintendents need to be aware of how culture forms and changes if they are going to influence their organizational culture and increase student learning. Cultural change takes place very gradually, and it is often “long-term, nonsequential, and seemingly unmanageable” (Kezar, 2001, p. 50). Additionally,
cultural change happens only after people’s actions have been altered. After those actions are altered, the new behavior produced has to have some sort of advantage for a time to allow members and other people to establish the correlation between the new behaviors and the advantage (Kotter, 2012). New practices need help to grow deep roots into the core culture and be anchored into the group’s norms and values (Kotter, 2012). But, for change to “truly transform an organization, demands that people give up things they hold dear, including daily habits, loyalties, and ways of thinking” (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002, p. 65).

Superintendents should also note that, rather than trying to change individual people, the most important thing they can do is to contribute to the shifting of the entire culture (Johnson, 2006). The process of cultural change is multifaceted and multilevel. It also has a political component (Rodrigues, 2006) that cannot be overlooked. As superintendents work to develop an organizational culture focused on increased learning for all students, they must be mindful of the reality that deep cultural change cannot be credited to a single individual, but rather must be the result of the mobilization of different groups within and across the organization (Rodrigues, 2006). If cultural change is to take place, the result of new practices must be anchored to elements of the core. The superintendent needs to model, through actions and words, the new cultural assumptions sought (Schein, 1998). Developing new symbols, artifacts, and rituals associated with the new cultural assumptions will help a superintendent to manage the cultural change (Bolman & Deal, 2003; Schein, 1988). Yet ultimately, the superintendent must pay ongoing systemic attention to what matters if he or she is to develop and maintain an effective culture (Chapman & Cha, 2003; Schein, 1988).

Yukl (2013) pointed out that organizational culture can facilitate or hinder efforts to make major change. Expanding upon the role organizational culture can play in change,
“organizational theorists suggest that healthy systems can promote disequilibrium in natural ways through the sharing of information and ongoing dialogue, allowing for the information shared to be used to respond to subtle environmental changes in order to stimulate variable and adaptive growth” (Acker-Hocevar et al., 2012, p.171). Superintendents who understand the culture of the group may serve diverse roles at various occasions (Schein, 1984), which is important as they work to change the school’s culture to increase student learning.

Culture change in districts begins with superintendents. The challenge for superintendents is to effectively spread a constructive culture to every school that expects increased student learning for all (Collins, 2001; Firestone, 2009). Superintendents have the ability to change cultures given that they make multiple decisions on a daily basis, and those choices “weave the tapestry that defines the customs, priorities, and way of life” within a district (Supovitz & Poglinco, 2001, p.17).

The role of the superintendent has evolved since the inception of the position. The superintendency is a complex, political position responsible for balancing the external and external environment to create the conditions for change that result in increased student learning for all. In order for the superintendent to be successfully in their role, they need to cultivate trust with their employees at the individual and organizational level. Overall, the superintendent as leader sets the tone of the organization through alignment of their words, actions, and attention.

The superintendent tenure is relatively short with high expectations and an array of responsibilities. Therefore, it is essential to understand how superintendents develop an understanding of school district culture and how they reconcile discrepancies between their core values, and the school district’s culture to assist their successful socialization to district leadership.
CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative research is characterized by its ability to explore problems and to develop a detailed understanding of a central phenomenon (Merriam, 2009). In contrast to quantitative studies, qualitative studies frame the purpose and research questions in a comprehensive fashion in order to garner the participants’ expertise. The purpose of qualitative research is to develop an understanding by what means people make meaning of their lives through the interpretation of what they experience (Merriam, 2009). Qualitative data focuses on organically occurring, normal everyday events in native settings, with the data being collected in close propinquity to the specific circumstance (Miles et al., 2014). Characteristics of qualitative research include the following: The study is generally based on a small number of individuals; the data are collected through words and the participants’ views are obtained; the focus is on the process of meaning making; and the structure emerges through the process (Fraenkel & Wallen, 1996).

The selection of qualitative research for this study is based upon the capacity of the methodology to be successful when the variables are unknown and exploration is needed, when published information provides little information about the phenomenon in question, and when the researcher wants to learn more about the problem through exploration (Creswell, 2012). Additionally, qualitative methods are advantageous when the research problem needs to be explored in order to develop a deep understanding and has a robust possibility for revealing complexity (Miles et al., 2014). Qualitative research’s strength also lies in the researcher’s ability to interpret the meaning of the data as part of a complex picture while being able to contemplate how the conclusions associate to existing research (Creswell, 2012).
Choosing a Research Design

The study design is critical for conducting high quality research that can be used to increase understanding of superintendents’ perceptions of district culture and how superintendents reconcile discrepancies between their core values and the school district’s culture. When selecting the design for my study of superintendents’ perceptions of district culture, I considered the research methodology, participants, and data collection and analysis, along with my positionality in the work. Because I was mindful of these factors, my research on individual superintendents in situ contributes to the research gap concerning the influence of district culture on superintendents and contributes to the literature on the topic of district culture and the superintendency. A qualitative research study was selected because of its emphasis on “people’s lived experiences to locate the meanings people place on the events, processes, and structures of their lives and for connecting these meanings to the social world around them” (Miles et al., 2014, p. 11).

Focus of the Research

The following research questions guided this study:

1. How do second-year superintendents develop an understanding of the school district’s culture?

2. How do second-year superintendents reconcile discrepancies between their core values and the school district’s culture?

The purpose of this study was to examine the impact of culture on new district-level leaders, specifically second-year superintendents. From the superintendents’ perspective, the focus was on how leaders perceived their school district culture, their perceptions of socialization
to the district, relationship building with the school community, and how, as district leaders, they resolved discrepancies between their core values and the school district’s core culture.

In conducting this study, I collected information about the actions, interactions, and processes used by the newly hired superintendents during their first year and a half in a new district and compiled the data and evidence. I conducted the study with 11 superintendents who were hired from outside of the district. To summarize, I designed this study to allow me to gain an understanding of the processes used and actions taken by new superintendents as they were socialized to their new district and of their perceptions of the impact of said processes and actions on the resulting work within the district.

**Methodology**

The interpretive/constructive perspective was used to capture the perceptions of different participants (Noor, 2008). Merriam (2009) explained this point of view as the assumption that reality is socially fabricated and that no solitary, observable reality exists, but rather numerous realities or explanations of single events occurs. Such an epistemological understanding of the subjectivity of social phenomena required the use of a qualitative approach (Noor, 2008). A qualitative approach provided the methods to develop an understanding of the complex issue of superintendent leadership and the reconciliation of potential discrepancies between superintendents’ core values and the school district’s culture (Qi, 2009). Additionally, a qualitative approach allowed the influences of the local context to be taken into account rather than stripped away (Miles et al., 2014). Qualitative methods were well suited for a study of how individuals’ points of view toward the same experienced phenomena may differ.
Participants

Participants were chosen through purposeful sample selection (Merriam, 2009; Seidman, 2006). That purposeful sample was further delineated by a criterion sample (Patton, 1990). An initial list was compiled of all individuals hired as school district superintendents for the 2012–2013 school year in Washington State. This list was used to identify 15 individuals who met the criteria of being in their second year of employment as superintendents in a school district who had been hired as an outside candidate. However, only 11 of the 15 invitees chose to participate in the study. See Appendix A for the participant list. Participation included representation from six of the nine Washington State Educational Service Districts (ESDs). Additionally, the participant sample included four superintendents that had previous superintendent experience and seven superintendents in their first superintendency. Of the 11 participants, six had more than 34 years of educational experience and five had less than 34 years of educational experience. At the time of the study, the districts ranged in size from six districts having fewer than 4,000 full time equivalent (FTE) students to five districts with more than 4,000 FTE students.

Research Design and Data Collection

For this study, data were collected from multiple sources, including document review and interviews. The one-on-one interviews were the main data source used for this study because “interviewing provides access to the context of people’s behavior and thereby provides a way for researchers to understand the meaning of that behavior. Interviewing allows us to put behavior in context and provides access to understanding their action” (Seidman, 2006, p. 10). Interviews are principally valuable for attainment of the story behind a participant’s experience, and the interview permits the interviewer to pursue in-depth information pertaining to a specific topic.
The interviews included structured questions as well as semistructured and open-ended questions, flexibly worded to allow both the interviewee and the interviewer to respond to the topic at hand while ensuring that specific data were gathered from all superintendent participants (Merriam, 2009; Noor, 2008). Interviews were conducted in a 90- to 120-minute block of time and were digitally recorded (Seidman, 2006). Each interview was conducted in a conversational format to enable an informal social relationship to develop and to allow the quality of that relationship to be individualized to each superintendent (Yin, 2011). By conducting in-depth, open-ended interviews with the superintendents, I was able to better document and understand them “on their own terms and how they make meaning of their own lives, experiences, and cognitive processes” (Brenner, 2006, p. 327).

Interview questions (see Appendix B) were designed to stimulate the superintendents’ reflection on the socialization process into the school districts, their core values, the school district’s culture, and how they reconciled discrepancies between their core values and the school district’s culture. The interview guide also provided structure to maintain focus on the key elements while remaining flexible enough to allow the interviewer to probe into specific experiences each participant had. Member checking was conducted throughout the interview to ensure that information was interpreted accurately, to seek clarification, and to synthesize significant elements shared. Finally, closing questions asked participants to pull together their experiences in order to allow the interviewer to draw conclusions about their tenure to date in the district and to provide any closing thoughts they felt were pertinent to the topic.

The interviews were captured through a digital recording device and sent to a transcriptionist. The transcriptionist signed a confidentiality form and was directed to transcribe the interview verbatim, noting any interruptions recorded, such as coughing, phone ringing,
knock on the door (Seidman, 2006). Prior to the researcher’s receiving written permission to conduct the interviews, participants were provided with an information packet containing an informed consent form (Seidman, 2006; Yin, 2014) outlining participants’ rights of protection against vulnerability in the interview process and data sharing (Kelman, 1977), any risks, their right to withdraw from participation, access to data, potential benefits, data confidentiality, a description of potential data dissemination, and contact information (Seidman, 2006). See Appendix C for the research study consent form.

Document data collection took place simultaneously with the interview data collection. Documents included were public records such as board minutes, newspaper articles, memos, meeting agendas, handbooks, and district website pages (Stake, 2006; Yin, 2014) that dealt with the topic of superintendent leadership, superintendent core values, and/or illustrated district culture. In addition, any personal communication the superintendent provided was considered for analysis. However, taken into consideration were each document’s origins, rationale for being written, and author, along with the context in which the document was created. Awareness of these factors helps to frame the authenticity and accuracy of the document (Merriam, 2009). Additionally, field notes were taken during the interview. Time was devoted after each interview to journaling further field notes and jotting down reflections, connections, and other pertinent data.

Data Analysis

Data analysis is a core element of effective qualitative studies. Successful data analysis authenticates study findings and establishes credibility. The process I used to analyze data for this study was a five-phase cycle of compiling the data, disassembling the data, reassembling and rearranging the data, interpreting the data, and finally drawing conclusions (Yin, 2011). I
conducted the individual interviews with each of the 11 superintendents and collected the interview data and documents. I was responsible for the analysis and interpretation of the data. The first phase of the analysis cycle began with the compilation of analysis materials. This process included gathering my field notes, documents shared by the superintendents, and interview transcriptions. The superintendent interviews averaged 76 minutes. The shortest interviews conducted lasted only 30 minutes, resulting in 6 pages of transcription, while the longest interview lasted approximately 2 hours, resulting in 23 pages of transcription. The average interview resulted in 13 pages of transcription. The 11 superintendent interviews provided 147 pages of transcribed materials for analysis. Data analysis was conducted with the transcription of the digital recordings, field notes, observations, and artifacts in order to reduce the data inductively for the purpose of interpreting the larger meaning of the findings (Fraenkel & Wallen, 1996; Merriam, 2009).

I began data analysis phase two, or disassembling the data, by “reviewing the transcripts with an open attitude, seeking what emerged of importance and interest” (Seidman, 2006, p. 117). As I coded, I was mindful that “coding is a judgment call that brings in subjectivities, quirks, personalities, and predispositions of the researcher to the process” (Sipe & Ghiso, 2004, p. 482). Through a process of trial and error, attribute and opening coding were selected as the predominant methods used for first cycle coding (Saldaña, 2009) in order to begin the selective process of data condensation to allow me to retrieve the most meaningful material from the 11 interviews (Miles et al., 2014).

First cycle coding provided the starting point for further leads to explore. The reassembly phase highlighted second cycle coding. Data were grouped based on similar dimensions, patterns, and relationships (Merriam, 2009), which were identified in first cycle
coding. Axial coding was used to regroup the data into categories (Saldaña, 2009). Second cycle coding allowed me to reorganize and recombine the data with the intent of developing categorical, thematic, conceptual, or theoretical organization from the first cycle codes (Yin, 2014). The intended outcome was a smaller, more select list of broader categories (Saldaña, 2009). This process was repeated several times as I worked to develop a graphic to represent the emerging themes.

Software programs were not used to assist in the coding or analysis; instead, physical transcripts were coded multiple times and highlighted. Then chunks of transcript data were cut apart and glued to corresponding color-coded index cards. Then, coded index cards were initially grouped by color and regrouped as patterns and connections emerged. In order to get to categories, I organized cards into larger piles of similar concepts. Eventually, larger piles were regrouped and merged to create themes. This process allowed the data to be physically grouped and regrouped as a tool to allow me to visually see the patterns and connections forming.

The fourth phase of analysis involved identifying patterns among the categories to determine themes present. This phase emphasized interpreting the reassembled data in order to determine themes (Yin, 2014). Analysis ensued to determine whether a core category connected all other categories (Merriam, 2009), from which the interpretation of themes could be derived.

The final phase of the data analysis process included drawing conclusions and finding meaning from the entire study (Seidman, 2006). The conclusions were based upon my interpretation of the findings in phase four (Yin, 2014). Most of the conclusions drawn throughout the interpretation phase were substantive, based on the content (Miles et al., 2014).
Trustworthiness

Qualitative studies require that multiple methods of accountability be used to develop trustworthiness in the study results. Yin (2014) identified three objectives for building trustworthiness and credibility in a qualitative study: transparency, methodic-ness, and adherence to the evidence. The first objective is to be transparent. Transparency means the researcher has described, documented, and written the procedures in such a manner that others can review, interpret, and scrutinize the work and evidence (Yin, 2014). The second objective is methodic-ness, the notion that the researcher follows an orderly set of research procedures in order to minimize carelessness and maintain rigorous field protocols (Yin, 2014). The third objective is adherence to evidence. Adherence to evidence in qualitative research is the representation of the participant’s words as his or her reality or behavioral self-report. However, the words cannot be taken alone but must be corroborated to determine whether the self-report actually occurred (Yin, 2014).

Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014) paired traditional quantitative terms with qualitative alternatives in order to assess the trustworthiness of the study. The five areas are objectivity/confirmability, reliability/dependability/auditability, internal validity/credibility/authenticity, external validity/transferability/fittingness, and utilization/application/action orientation. Overlap exists between their categorization and Yin’s (2014), as well as within their own five categories. Objectivity/confirmability entails the study’s methods and procedures’ being clearly explained, and a research structure was followed for data collection, processing, and conclusion making (Miles et al., 2014). The second criterion of reliability/dependability/auditability attends to the issues of study constancy, replicability, quality, and veracity (Miles et al., 2014). These qualities can be attained by ensuring that data
quality checks have been conducted, forms of peer review are in place, clear research questions are present, and the study design aligns to the research question (Miles et al., 2014.).

Additionally, internal validity/credibility/authenticity is the “truth-value of the study” (Miles et al., 2014, p. 312). That includes determining whether the study seems trustworthy and whether it is logical. Validity can be achieved by providing deep, context-abundant accounts (Geertz, 1973), triangulating, and presenting data in a way that is connected to groupings of previous or emerging theory (Miles et al., 2014). The fourth category presented by Miles et al. (2014), external validity/transferability/fittingness, relates to the conclusions drawn from the study and the degree to which other individuals draw meaning. Techniques to achieve transferability include acquiring a sampling varied enough to foster wide-ranging applicability, as well as using comprehensive descriptions of the sample, situations, and procedures to enable sufficient comparisons to be made (Miles et al., 2014). The final category for building trustworthiness in a qualitative research study consists of utilization/application/action orientation. This consists of consideration that the users of the findings have “learned or developed new capacities, the findings stimulate and provide an intellectual outcome for the reader, and the findings are accessible to any potential user “(Miles et al., 2014, p. 315).

In this study, the techniques of reflexivity, triangulation, member checking, and peer debriefing were used to establish trustworthiness. The maintenance of a reflexivity journal continually prompted me to reflect and conduct critical self-evaluation of myself as the research instrument, as well as of the process, examination of the authority relationships and politics involved in the research process, accountability in data collection, and analysis (Pillow, 2003; Sultana, 2007). In this study, I maintained reflexivity journal entries from the beginning to the end of the research process, in particular after each superintendent interview was conducted.
This activity allowed me to document what I was thinking in relation to what was happening in the field after each interview, for example by making notes about connections I was making, any influence my own bias might be having, and frustration or excitement regarding how the interview went (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I built triangulation into the data collection process by seeking multiple sources and modes of evidence to collect and double-check findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Yin, 2014). Triangulation served as a means to arrive at a finding by seeing or hearing several occurrences of it from multiple sources and squaring the findings with findings of others (Miles et al., 2014). Also, the practice of member checking was used throughout the interview process to ensure that the shared information was interpreted accurately (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, Miles et al., 2014). I engaged in member checking providing participants with their study products to allow them to check the accuracy of descriptions, explanations, and interpretations. In addition, peer debriefing, the use of a peer who is not involved in the research project to assist in probing the researcher’s thinking concerning components of the research process, was used to query methodology, interpretation, and analysis of data (ThểNguyễn, 2008). A colleague of the researcher who was familiar with the superintendency and organizational culture research served as a peer debriefer throughout the study.

Furthermore, analytical memoing was used to document and reflect upon the coding process and choices made during analysis (Miles et al., 2014; Saldaña, 2009). Researcher memoing documented the inquiry process undertaken and the emergence of patterns, categories, subcategories, themes and key concepts (Saldaña, 2009; Yin, 2011). These efforts were incorporated to increase the trustworthiness and credibility of my research findings.
Positionality

It is important for the researcher to be explicit with the reader regarding the researcher’s positionality, including any personal assumptions, values, and biases that may influence the research (Miles et al., 2014). At the personal level, my positionality is that of a female, middle-aged, White, middle-class researcher and mother. Being that the majority of study participants are male, there is a clear gender difference from which I approach the position and work. At the professional level, I am the executive director of teaching and learning in a public school district whose direct supervisor is a first-time, second-year superintendent who was hired from outside the district. My daily experiences with my supervisor, who was new to the district culture, provided potential insider glimpses into the socialization process of new employees to a district. Additionally, as a result of my direct interaction with superintendents during my employment with the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, I have strong collegial relationships with superintendents across the state. I am also a graduate of the statewide superintendent program that provided foundational knowledge and internship experiences related to superintendent decision making and practice within organizations. The program provided me with the knowledge of how superintendents should go about conducting their work. These experiences imparted me a positionality that influences my thoughts, actions, and beliefs related to the superintendency. It is important that I, as the research instrument, attempted to be a skillful interviewer by asking the superintendents quality questions from a neutral stance in order to minimize bias and generate high-quality data, which enabled me to produce valid findings (Roulston, 2010). As a researcher, it was important for me to be cognizant, explicit, and self-aware about my personal assumptions, values, and biases and how they could have influenced the interviews, data analysis, and synthesis of findings (Miles et al., 2014).
Summary

Qualitative research methodology with its “emphasis on one’s lived experiences is well suited for studying the meaning people place on the events, processes, and structures of their lives and for connecting these meanings to the social world around them” (Miles et al., 2014, p. 11). Likewise, qualitative research methods provide several advantages for the study of organizational culture, including providing an insider with perspective regarding what an organizational culture is like and allowing for unexpected findings (Ehrhart, Schneider, & Macey, 2014). Qualitative research enables a researcher to improve comprehension of the deeper structures of the organization and has a strong potential for revealing complexity (Miles et al., 2014; Ehrhart et al., 2014).

The information gathered in this study will provide a more complete understanding of the processes and strategies superintendents new to a school district use to develop an understanding of the district culture and the means by which superintendents reconcile discrepancies between their core values and the district’s culture. In addition to providing insight into how superintendents develop relationships and navigate discrepancies the knowledge gained through this study may help to provide preparatory support for superintendent certification programs, facilitate new superintendent socialization to a school district and potentially increase superintendent retention. It is my hope that information from this research study will assist prospective superintendents in their first superintendency and revise coursework offered in superintendent preparation programs to better meet the needs of today’s superintendent.
CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

This chapter presents data from the one-on-one interviews conducted with 11 school district superintendents in Washington State whose experience as superintendent spanned from 1 year to more than 23 years. The superintendents served as school district leaders in contexts that ranged from large urban districts on the west side of the state to small rural settings in both eastern and western Washington. In spite of the continuum of district contexts and leadership backgrounds, superintendents offered similar responses to the interview questions, which focused on developing understanding of and relationships with district personnel and community members, factors that affect their work, and conflicts between school district and personal values.

To provide a fuller understanding of the findings, it is vital to establish the role of the 21st-century superintendent and to present profiles of the superintendents who participated in the study.

Role of Superintendent

The work of the superintendent during the 20th century was to efficiently run the public school system by developing an integrated system that could plan, organize, coordinate, and control resources in such a manner as to deal with the social problems generated by industrialization, urbanization, and immigration (Beach, 2012; Thomas, 2001). A function of the superintendent’s work was to use existing structures and procedures to enable the organization to achieve its goals while maintain the status quo (Beach, 2012). The superintendent’s work in the 21st century is focused on the distribution of resources according to equity and fairness without
alienating stakeholders both within and outside of the school district; to be a data analyzer; to be a scholar; to know what is good practice (in order to continue it), and what is not best practice (in order to eliminate it); and to boost instruction so that all students can meet the expectations outlined in No Child Left Behind (Pardini & Lewis, 2003).

As if those duties were not enough, the 21st century superintendent’s work is also defined in response to the political pressures within the district, community, region, state, and nation, including financing and increasing state and federal accountability demands (Bredeson & Kose, 2007). The expectation is that the superintendent will create an organization that supports all in becoming high performers. The superintendent’s job is to create the conditions by which this can happen (Scheurich & Skria, 2003). All the while, the superintendent must ensure that the system is focused on providing high-quality education for all students who enter the system, at the same time addressing the political and social realities in which the education of those students is taking place (Williams, 2004). A superintendent who can achieve these goals in the 21st century will draw on all of the superintendent’s previously defined roles—as scholar, manager, democratic leader, applied social scientist, and communicator. If a superintendent is to provide organizational leadership in the area of teaching and learning while maintaining culture, efficiently managing diminishing resources, serving as a public servant, and building coalitions, he or she will have to call upon each of these historically identified roles to be successful (Usdan et al., 2001).

Superintendent Participants

As the school year came to a close, 40 individuals were hired by the school boards across Washington State to serve as their new superintendent. Of those newly hired superintendents, 22 were hired from outside of the school district. The boundaries of this study are limited to the 11
superintendents who accepted the invitation to the study and participated in the one-on-one interviews. At the time the study was conducted, these participants were employed in their second year as superintendents in their respective school districts.

Fifteen of the 22 superintendents hired from outside of the district who fit the established criteria for this study were invited to participate. The purposeful sample was narrowed to 15 to reflect a balanced representation of district sizes. Of the 15 superintendents chosen, 11 accepted the invitation, completed and returned the consent form for the study, and were available to be interviewed. The 11 superintendents represented school districts from six of the nine Educational Service Districts in Washington State, located across Washington in both urban and rural settings. Selection of superintendents for this study was based on the criteria of having been an external district hire, having completed the first year of superintendency in the new district, and size of their district based on student enrollment.

External candidacy was a screening criterion in the selection of superintendents based on the work of Kowalski (2006), which points out that school boards satisfied with the status quo tend to consider, if not give preference to, hiring internal candidates and conversely, school boards dissatisfied with the status quo may exclude internal candidates or give preference to external candidates for hiring. Completion of the first year of the superintendency was a second screening criterion to enable participants to reflect upon their experiences in the new district. The third screening criterion was district size. The purpose was to have representation of Washington State school districts sorted into categories of large, medium, and small. The generalized size groupings are based on Washington State’s enrollment categories.
Table 1

Participant Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Superintendent</th>
<th>Number of Districts Served as Superintendent</th>
<th>Years of Experience as Superintendent</th>
<th>Years in Education</th>
<th>Approximate Student Enrollment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kelly</td>
<td>≤1</td>
<td>1 year 3 months</td>
<td>&lt;34</td>
<td>&lt; 4,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alex</td>
<td>≤1</td>
<td>1 year 4 months</td>
<td>&lt;34</td>
<td>&gt; 4,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chris</td>
<td>≤1</td>
<td>1 year 3 months</td>
<td>&lt;34</td>
<td>&lt; 4,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Devin</td>
<td>≤1</td>
<td>1 year 5 months</td>
<td>&lt;34</td>
<td>&lt; 4,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harley</td>
<td>≤1</td>
<td>1 year 4 months</td>
<td>&gt;34</td>
<td>&gt;4,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jordan</td>
<td>≤1</td>
<td>1 year 3 months</td>
<td>&gt;34</td>
<td>&lt; 4,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peyton</td>
<td>≤1</td>
<td>1 year 3 months</td>
<td>&gt;34</td>
<td>&gt;4,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drew</td>
<td>&gt;1</td>
<td>6 years 2 months</td>
<td>&lt;34</td>
<td>&gt;4,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Casey</td>
<td>&gt;1</td>
<td>22 years 3 months</td>
<td>&gt;34</td>
<td>&gt;4,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Addison</td>
<td>&gt;1</td>
<td>22 years 9 months</td>
<td>&gt;34</td>
<td>&lt;4,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hayden</td>
<td>&gt;1</td>
<td>22 years 3 months</td>
<td>&gt;34</td>
<td>&lt;4,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Three main themes emerged as a result of the one-on-one interviews with the school district superintendents. The first theme was the importance of developing relationships with the school board and with the internal and external school district community to accomplish the superintendent’s goals. The second theme was the overarching importance of working with the school board to accomplish the superintendent’s and the district’s goals. The third theme concerned the superintendents’ leadership ability to enact change in a school district to which they were newly hired.
**Relationship Development**

Tschannen-Moran (2004) noted that a “new employee’s success and continued employment depends on the ability to forge workable relationships with the existing organization players and to serve organizational purposes” (p. 42). Alvy and Robbins (2010) highlighted that school leaders new to an organization are provided the unique opportunity to develop relations with staff and the larger community through their words and actions. Superintendents new to their district must be cognizant that their behavior is always under observation and is constantly being interpreted by members of the organization (Alvy & Robbins, 2010), even though much of the work of the superintendent is done through other people. Leaders need to be mindful of choosing actions that send the message they want to have received by observers (Tschannen-Moran, 2004). Therefore, “one of the most powerful things that a school leader can do in their first year on the job is to articulate and enforce norms of behavior that will foster a greater level of trust within the school community” (Tschannen-Moran, p. 59).

**School Board Relationship Development**

Each superintendent interviewed built a relationship with the board in different ways. Although the approach varied, the goals of building trust, being respectful, listening, and being committed to a clear vision were expressed by all of the interviewed superintendents.

The relationship the superintendent establishes and maintains with school board members not only affects personal survival, but also shapes the organization’s effectiveness (Björk & Keely, 2001; Petersen & Fusarelli, 2001). Hayden captured that sentiment with his comment:

> If the board doesn’t support you, you might as well hang it up and go home. In order to build a different culture, you need to have board support. They are the ones you have to please. They do the hiring and firing.
The relationship with the school board is a pivotal component of the superintendent’s work. Devin noted, “The board is your biggest ally, biggest support center. I have five board members; they are connected, but they are distinctly different. I have to know how to create a relationship with my board because that is my community.” Harley echoed the importance of the board superintendent relationship, saying,

The reality of managing five unique perceptions, perspectives, and agendas could be a full-time job. Keeping the board informed and board communication, kind of finding the sweet spot for communication . . . that’s a whole other job, which is different than answering to the community, which is different than answering to the staff.

The superintendent needs to be cognizant of how to interact with the board members, individually and collectively. Peyton commented,

It’s much like my family. I have kids and each of them is different; they weren’t born with an owner’s manual. They weren’t born with a troubleshooting guide. You have to get to know them and what their personality is like. I have a certain set of core values. How I treat one kids may not be how I treat the other kid. There is such an art to it. When it comes down to it, it is about my relationship with them. I could enter the superintendency and not know policy or may be not know school management, but I have to know how to create a relationship with my board.

In addition to knowing how to interact with the school board, it is important for superintendents to know why, as Drew pointed out:

The [school] board is the eternal piece in this whole thing; liken it to the [role of] Queen of England. It’s the piece that goes on. The Prime Minister [elected in office] is only there as long as they are there. I think one in leadership needs to be extremely respectful
and nurturing and not only deferent to the board but even deflecting to the board. It is all about the school board. It’s always about the board first.

Hayden echoed the sentiment, saying, “It’s all about the board. I’ve had three new board members in less than a year. For a superintendent that’s the most important thing.” The school board has but one employee, and that is the superintendent. Therefore, it is critical that the superintendent develop a strong, positive relationship with the school board, as a whole and individually, in order to lead the district even during board membership turnover.

Addison’s first year found him with two new board members as a result of the elections. He described the new board as a “dynamic of clashing cultures . . . between the new, represented by the board member who moved into the district and the old, represented by the newly elected board member born and raised in the community.” As a superintendent, Addison declared,

You have competing interests, issues, and beliefs [represented by the board] that you have to navigate. I rely heavily on the law to help because the issues are emotional and most often the law is fair and guides what we should be doing, need to be doing for kids. So my job is trying to find that common ground [on the new board].

A leader new to a system should know that communication about organizational issues can foster trust between stakeholders (Mayer et al., 1995). This notion aligns with Kelly’s core beliefs, one of which was expressed in his statement, “Communication and trust making is big for me.” He was presented the opportunity to enact this core value at the first board meeting after he was hired. The situation involved determining whether or not to continue with a significant district initiative. The outgoing superintendent advised not continuing the initiative; however, during hiring interviews the board had asked several targeted questions related to the initiative. Inferring strong board support for the initiative based on the board interview
questions, Kelly was faced with a dilemma. Kelly turned to the hiring search firm consultant for advice. The advice provided to Kelly was, “Do what you want, but if I were you, I would not jeopardize your relationship with the board before you even start day one.” Upon hearing this, Kelly determined that the initiative need to continue to honor the board’s commitment to support continued implementation of the district initiative. As a result of this experience, Kelly contracted with a consulting firm to facilitate his and the board’s work on building and managing culture. The activities led by the consulting firm assisted Kelly in learning about the school board’s vision and beliefs. In addition, Kelly joined his board members at the annual State School Board conference. Kelly commented,

   An eight-hour drive to the conference provided time for me to get to know them and they got to know me. You spend that much time in a car talking, listening, and sharing stuff, you really get to know people.

In contrast, Casey put the onus on the board, noting, “That’s one thing I expect the school board to do, is to help me get to know them.”

Devin recalled an experience during the first year that lead to a deeper understanding between the board and Devin while at the same time testing the trust, relationship, and collaboration between new superintendent and school board. The pivotal experience concerned an athletic issue. As the event unfolded, Devin presented the superintendent’s position and recommendation regarding resolution of the athletic issue to the school board. The school board proceeded to vote 4 to 1 in favor of the superintendent’s recommendation. The dissenting board member rallied the community to demand a revote. This tactic generated enough community pressure for the school board to call for a revote. Prior to the decision to revote, Devin told the board, “If you come back for a revote, I am not going to say anything unless I am directly asked.
I have already told you my stance.” The board went through with the revote, resulting in a 3–2 split against the superintendent’s recommendation. However, as additional information was released and the impact of the decision was analyzed, the community was in support of the superintendent’s recommendation. Devin said that the community stance shifted because “it was clear how it [the situation] had been manipulated.” At a later community forum, Devin was asked why did not speak up at the forum focused on the athletic issue preceding the revote, since everyone knew his position. Devin responded, “I’m not going to go against my board. The board knows my position and why. I am not going to agitate.” The aftermath of the experience was a higher level of trust that evolved between the members of the school board, the board as a whole, and Devin. Through this experience, Devin said, “they have gotten to know me. The board knows I interpret the policy and procedures in place and they appreciate the higher degree of accountability.” Devin added I had told the board:

When you hired me you agreed you were willing to take a stance because we have to change. If you are not sure [about what we are doing or why], we can stay and talk about it; but when we leave the room, we have to have consensus.

Devin went on to tell the board, “I want something on the table and that is trust. That’s going to be relationships and collaboration—that’s my mandate.” Devin asserted, after working through the difficulty of the athletic issue, that he and the board had “a better foundation laid and that the relationships are very strong and constantly being reinforced.” It is important to recognize that “probably no relationship in a school district has a greater effect on successful education than that between a board and its superintendent” (Kowalski, 2006, p. 195). However, concurrent to developing a relationship with the school board, the superintendent works to develop strong relationships with the internal and external members of the school community.
Tschannen-Moran’s (2004) research points out the significance of the superintendent’s role in developing relationships: “Because of the hierarchical nature of the relationships within schools, it is the responsibility of the person with greater power to take the initiative to build and sustain trusting relationships” (p. 35). Regardless of the pre-hiring preparation, upon being hired, a priority of each superintendent was to learn about the school district and the community the district was situated in. When new superintendents were asked, “How did you learn about the school district?” the resounding answer was by being present, being visible, and listening. Kelly’s response summarized the approach: “The only way to learn the district is to be open to it.”

Superintendents used both common and singular strategies to develop stakeholder relationships, but the goal was always the same: to know people, who they are, and how they are connected. Regardless of district size, talking to people was the common strategy used by all superintendents to enable them to develop relationships with their new employees. Alex commented,

I spent a lot of time talking with people. I spent a couple hours talking to every single leader. I picked up on a lot of themes. I talked with the school board, principals, vice principals, and the union. So I think by listening to people I was able to learn.

Drew, a school district (of more than 4,000 students) superintendent, stated that he had spoken “one-on-one with all principals in the school district” to learn about them, their buildings, their work, and their perspectives on district initiatives. Kelly, a less than 4,000 student school district superintendent, additionally spoke to the effort of meeting people in order to learn about them and to begin to develop a relationship:
In the first few months, I got here I either stopped by classrooms or had people come in to my office. I took half an hour with everybody. I asked, “What are the things that matter to you? What are you proud of? What are you nervous about?”

Casey captured this general sentiment, saying, “It was a heavy emphasis the first year, meeting with people in a wide variety of settings. One direction I gave my secretary was I would put a priority of meeting with people over email.” This emphasis reflected the superintendent’s understanding that priorities might not remain the same the following year but needed to be foremost throughout the first year.

Harley exemplified the importance of meeting people,

I don’t think I can lead people that I don’t know. If I don’t know them, I don’t know what motivates them and I don’t know how best to lead and sometimes that is really differentiated. So I think it is important for me to get to know the people I lead. When you are brand new to an organization, I think that is a challenge sometimes.

Solomon and Flores (2001) note that trust is “cultivated through speech, conversation, commitments, and action. Trust is never something ‘already at hand’, it is always a matter of human effort. It can and most often must be conscientiously created and not simply taken for granted” (p. 87). Peyton pointed out that as the new superintendent working to develop relationships with district staff, Peyton needed to “make sure the work is transparent, focus on building trust, and demonstrating respect.” Peyton explained that worked to build trust by “listening, making promises, and delivering on those promises.” Peyton went on to note that it takes time to build trust but said believed that it was coming. One specific action that Peyton took was to follow up on a district-required teacher training. In this situation, Peyton contracted with the local educational service district (ESD) to provide a full day of professional
development, which ended up being a bad training experience. In response, Peyton went to every building and apologized to the teachers and promised that wasting teachers’ time with poor quality training was something that would not be allowed to happen again. Peyton then met with the ESD to inform them that they would not be providing professional development to the teachers and the district again. From the perspective of the staff, this behavior demonstrated the respect Peyton had for their time and work. Devin too commented on building trust with the new school community through the means of “hard work, honesty, integrity. And if you say you are going to do something, you need to do it.” Kelly indicated that the focus of the first year, particularly early on, was to develop relationships and build trust. To accomplish this, Kelly said “I had to lead by example, walk the talk, and only ask of others what I myself would do.” An example of this behavior is that Kelly asked the teachers to post one picture and one announcement on the district website each week. So every week, Kelly took pictures throughout the district and posted announcements on the website. Hayden addressed the topic of trust by saying, “In general, people want leadership in motion. Because I have knowledge and expertise, they’ve been willing to move forward.” Both expertise and experience are components of developing trust. Another element of building trust is to give trust. Hayden remarked, “You have to trust your people are doing their job. I don’t have control of anything. What I have are expectations.” In addition to expertise and experience, ongoing conversations about expectations, the work, and decision making coalesce to develop trust. Beyond meeting with people to develop an overall understanding of school district culture and nurture relationships, the next strategy superintendents used to build internal community relationships was to be present in school buildings and classrooms.
Kelly remarked, “Learning about the school district is primarily [done] through direct contact with teachers and schools.” This belief was also reflected the practices of Casey, who was scheduled to go to every school for an hour-long tour and to visit with the building principal. Alex had the goal of conducting 500 classroom visits during the second year on the job. By October of year two, Alex reported visiting a couple hundred classrooms. Drew was scheduled to be in classrooms on a weekly basis and planned to visit six learning locations each week. Two superintendents extended this concept of developing relationships with students beyond visiting classrooms by conducting meetings with students. Harley’s approach was to hold monthly breakfast club meetings at each school, while Drew invited student groups to the superintendent’s office for lunch every 2 weeks. Alex relied on meeting with the high school youth council to develop student relationships, while Jordan rode every school bus route to meet students.

Each step was taken as a means to build trust through words and actions in an effort to develop new relationships. If organizational goals are to be accomplished, the leader needs to build trust at every level (Alvy & Robbins, 2010). Bryk and Schneider (2003) concluded that when relational trust is high—that is, when colleagues can depend on one another to do their jobs—schools are more likely to make the changes necessary to raise student achievement. In addition to personal one-on-one and small group interactions, classroom observations and participation in school functions served as a means for superintendents meet the internal school community and establish a sense of understanding of each school’s context. To varying degrees, the superintendents, regardless of district size, past experience, or location, spoke of using relationships with current and former employees to gain an internal perception of the district and existing relationships within it. Drew summarized how this personally worked:
I double-check my perceptions and my thoughts and ask questions of board members, district administrators, and building administrators because I want to know what are the norms or the past expectations or the stories that are behind the scenes that other people know because they experienced it. I don’t know yet because I wasn’t here to experience it. When you read a policy or memo or hear somebody say something, you don’t always know what the history behind it was. So that is one of the things that I have to continuously explore so that I know where that is coming from.

Chris and Harley had the unique opportunity to gain insight and internal perception through their ongoing relationships with the former superintendent of their respective districts. Harley reported, “When I’ve had a ‘hmm’ moment, I’ve picked up the phone or we’ve gone to lunch. I’ve said, ‘What do you think about,’ or ‘Where did this come from.’” Chris also referenced the former superintendent who still lived in town. Chris states, “He has been a wonderful mentor and has really opened doors. Talking with me, sponsoring me. I couldn’t have asked for a more wonderful person; he’s been great.”

Quite often, when a new superintendent is hired, it is because the former superintendent has left the district via retirement, other employment opportunities, or as a result of board action. Kelly was in an unusual situation in that the superintendent he replaced did not leave the community. Since being hired as superintendent, Kelly had met with the former superintendent a handful of times about the perceived problems and concerns he’s having with my leadership. Which makes everything a bit complicated. Nobody really knows what is going on except my secretary and my business manager because I don’t talk to anyone else about it.
From the beginning, Kelly faced an interesting dynamic as he was trying to create a common cultural goal in the district. This situation highlights that as an outsider becomes part of a new community and district, he or she must address issues related to the existing culture, seen here in how the residue from the leadership of the previous superintendent affected Kelly’s leadership and choices and decisions.

Through internal actions, superintendents worked to develop relationships with members of their new school district community and to develop an understanding of the culture in which they were leading. For each superintendent to be productive and be positioned to be able to accomplish the organizational goals established, cohesive and cooperative relationships must be established between the superintendent and the schools (Baier, 1994; Goldring & Rallis, 1993; Louis et al., 1996). The second priority for each superintendent after developing internal relationships and learning the school district culture was developing strong, positive relations with the external school district community. Tschannen-Moran (2010) notes, “School leaders that have the trust of their communities are more likely to be successful in creating productive learning environments” (p. 13).

**External Stakeholder Relationship Development**

The importance of developing relationships with the external school district community was addressed by nearly all of the interviewed superintendents. A superintendent’s leadership role, professionally and politically, always has extended beyond a school district’s organizational boundaries, because the superintendent is viewed as public property (Blumberg, 1985; Kowalski, 2006).

An emphasis on developing trusting community relationships was evident in the new superintendents’ actions. Drew commented that worked to build trust with the community by the
way in which “you handle resources, instil[ing] the community with trust about how we (the district) support each child and creating real access to post-secondary opportunities for every kid, and how we help parents and children navigate the system.” When these things don’t happen, “those are big compromises of public trust,” reflected Drew. Kelly stated, “Right away you (the new superintendent) start to look at how do I get to know the people in this community?” Jordan echoed that statement: “You have to figure out ways to get to know what is going on in the community.” Chris noted, “Everything in town centers around the school.” Kelly had a similar sentiment, observing, “Everything is wrapped around school. Activity-wise and social connections, it is all school domain. A strong link exists between the school district and local community.”

One strategy superintendents used to build relationships with the community at large was using existing members of the community as sponsors. Addison relied on the office staff to serve as a barometer for community relations, explaining, “The office staff really knows the community as I’m always asking them, ‘Do you know this person? What about this?’” Chris concurred: “My secretary is good about letting me know the pitfalls, who’s who, and what to expect.” Björk and Lindle (2001, p. 87) noted, “School superintendents cannot deny the role that politics and interest groups play in the core of their professional work.” Casey expanded upon the notion of using the office staff as sponsors, saying:

Early on I worked with my secretary, several of the district administrators, and the school board president to identify what groups are in the community that I should meet with. I went to every service club, the chamber of commerce, every government agency or official at the federal, state, and local level. Every group that we (school district) might interact with in some fashion, I went to introduce myself to them and find out who they
were, what they did, what their relationship with the district was, what their needs, perspectives, and opportunities were.

Eight of the 11 superintendents spoke to their membership in community service organizations in their new community. This strategy allowed them to quickly make initial connections with community leaders. Superintendents also made public addresses to local community groups to which they did not belong, such as the senior citizen’s center, county council, county commissioners, and business community, to make community connections and share about what their leadership brought to the school district. Kelly asked the school board president to walk with Kelly to every single business in town and to introduce Kelly to every owner individually. Kelly went on to say, “I felt well sponsored and this was vital opportunities to meet with the important decision makers in town and be accepted.” Chris took an additional tack, having community members from the interview team sponsor Chris throughout the community and in behind-the-scenes work that provided opportunities to meet the important decision makers in the town and be accepted. Casey pointed out the expectation that the “school board members help introduce the new superintendent throughout the district and local community.” Conversely, Drew, when asked who the key players in the socialization to the external community were, posed the question, “Do we wait to be socialized or do we just dive in and just show up? I show up.” Chris, who held a similar don’t-wait-for-others-to-introduce-me attitude, walked the whole town with her family to introduce herself to local business owners.

The role of superintendent is a high profile position, and the superintendent is recognized in the community. Each of the superintendents interviewed spoke to the importance of becoming a member of the community. For example, Harley mentioned that joining the Rotary club, the chamber of commerce, and the local Kiwanis chapter. Drew was a member of the fair
foundation board and the professional education advisory board. Chris indicated joining the grange and the Lions and had spoken to the county council. Chris stated, “For me, it’s being present doing as many things outside of school to learn the community culture and develop relationships.” A component of becoming a community member is learning about the local community and meeting members of the community. Addison commented, “As a superintendent you really have to pay attention to the overarching local culture. The local culture has been around forever. It is important for success in the superintendent role to know all the different dynamics.” As Peyton commented, “Knowing the connections is just part of what it means to be in touch with the community. It is also what makes the culture and everything a bit more complicated.” Addison further remarked:

Being new to the community, it is important to know the people and to know what they do, what they’re interested in, how they spend their time and what those connections are around a community. Just recognizing the players in our community and making these connections.

Kelly offered a word of advice about navigating a new community: “Be really careful about what you say and who you say it to, because more than likely they either know the person or are related to the person.” This advice complements the notion that personal example is the most powerful human resource available to an organizational leader (Alvy & Robbins, 2010).

Addison, an experienced superintendent, shared additional wisdom about trying to learn a new community’s culture and developing new relationships:

Part of the search for the culture and understanding of the culture is learning what is the district way. The whole process is trying to understand the culture and understand what is important for people. What they are saying is important, yet it is not necessarily a
shared view. It is shared by a group but may not be everybody; maybe it’s not a universal belief or value.

Despite having the opportunity to have insight into the district as a parent, Chris noted that her “preconceived notions experienced as a ‘secret shopper’ were not all accurate.” Hayden admitted, “There was a huge perception difference between what I thought might be and what reality it is . . . huge.” In contrast, after 18 months as the new superintendent, Harley summarized her introduction to the district and community as follows: “The assessment I had coming in is exactly what’s come to pass.” It seems clear that to lead a school district, a superintendent needs to take the time to learn the school district culture and the external community culture to build a trusting relationship. Gabarro (1978) notes that within 18 months of new employee’s being hired, relationships generally become relatively stable.
Working With the School Board

New superintendents walk a fine line between honoring past work and moving forward the work the school board hired them to carry out along with their personal goals for the district. Superintendent selection is high stakes for both the new superintendent and the school board given that the selection of the superintendent is the most important function of a school board. The hiring of the superintendent represents the board’s link to their vision of educational goals.
for the school district (Howley, Woodrum, Burgess, & Rhodes, 2009). Although superintendents are responsible for determining what needs to be improved in the school district and for deciding how change initiatives are carried out (Kowalski et al., 2011), several of the participants in this study spoke directly to the actions they were expected to take by their school board upon their hiring.

Chris reported:

Last year [first year in position] the whole conversation with the board was, “Are we going to close a school?” That is what I was hired under. I was hired to either close an elementary school or transform it. The focus on the middle school was to figure out what was going on there resulting in low scores.

This focus dominated Chris’s first year’s work. What resulted as year 2 began was that the existing elementary school was converted to an inquiry-based K–8 school and a new elementary principal was hired to lead the focus on engineering in elementary school. At the middle school, instructional materials were changed: English language arts teachers were in the second year of implementing a new curriculum; mathematics teachers were piloting new math instructional materials with the expectation that all students would take algebra in the eighth grade; and Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) was being implemented to support high expectations for all students. Chris also hired a new administrative team at the middle school to carry out the initiatives.

In contrast to an academics-first focus, one of Addison’s first directives from the board was to review the district’s open-enrollment policy. A source of growing tension throughout the district and community was the perception that coaches were hired by the district to recruit out-of-district athletes to the district in order to strengthen the athletic program, thereby displacing
local athletes. Addison’s responses to the board directive were to review district policy and all laws related to open enrollment. The solution Addison presented to the board, which was accepted, was to leverage existing language regarding space, thereby “identifying a K–12 number which represent[s] the district’s maximum size. Parents who want to open enroll are placed on a list, and if families leave we allow the next student on the list to open enroll.” The policy revisions were publicized throughout the community and region. Thereafter, an annual letter was sent to all open-enrollment families, informing them that they needed to complete an open-enrollment form by a specified date if they wished to remain enrolled in the district or be on the list for future enrollment. Addison declared, “We are trying to dispel the perception that we have brought athletes in.”

Casey remarked,

It was clear from the interview process that the board was proud of its academic success and were not looking for a superintendent who would come in and have to make significant changes but rather continue and build upon the success and the excellence that they [the school district] already had.

However, Casey said that, because a large construction bond had just passed, “I was given a mandate to make the promises the board had made happen.” Casey’s task was to “build facilities that meet the needs of the students while keeping the promises made to the taxpayers to build facilities in a timely fashion to deliver maximum value for the dollar spent.” Casey’s focus for the first year in office was the immediate construction of multiple elementary schools, with an additional elementary and alternative learning school to begin construction in year two of the superintendency and middle school construction to begin at the 2.5-year mark. Casey reflected,
I think that the triad of goals, needs, and values associated with doing things with building that were good for students but also met the needs of the taxpayers, essentially were managed well to get the most bang for the buck. I think the school board, community and I are on the same page with those mutually supportive goals.

Like Casey, Jordan was confronted with construction issues immediately after being hired. In Jordan’s case, it was an entire campus remodel that included five buildings on their campus. In addition to putting forth expectations regarding construction, Jordan noted, “The school board really expects that when a student enters a teacher’s classroom that by the end of the year there is growth and we can show that.” Jordan stated that in response,

When I started as superintendent we changed the whole structure [concerning the teacher and principal student achievement and student growth goal conferences]. Our teachers do data conferences with the principal to look at the data of current students, last year’s students and how they grew academically. Teachers come back for a second conference a couple of weeks later and we do student growth conferences based upon our district assessment data. Teachers develop their student growth goals based on that information. Then I meet with the principal and develop growth goals based upon what the teachers’ goals are.

Based on the results of the first year implementation of the student growth work, Jordan expected that year two of the superintendency would involve the implementation of a whole new intervention system to address the board’s expectation that students would grow academically in each teacher’s classroom.

Academic success for students was also a charge as Alex embarked on the first year of the superintendency. “As I talked with the board, they wanted to move forward academically,”
Alex said, adding, “The district was known as a really good district, but the board felt like they were not doing anything innovative or remarkable. They had been in kind of a holding pattern because of some personnel and political reasons.” As a means to do things differently, Alex started Hope Academy. The Hope Academy programs are designed to serve specific student populations struggling within the school system. Alex was encouraged by just the way the district embraced the idea, how the school board embraced the idea. They [school board] supported it financially and they supported it with personnel. It is up and going after only 1 year. We have three academies. One for students who are externalizing behaviors, one for students internalizing behaviors, and the third one is for middle school students.

Alex continued: “My board is very happy about the direction of the district, so I’m very blessed on that. I’m thankful for the relationship I have with the school board. It is super positive.”

Each of these examples of the successful execution of a board directive during the first year and a half of superintendency was dependent upon the relationship, trust, and communication established between the superintendent, the school board, internal stakeholders, and external stakeholders. Hence, creating and defining the working relationship between the school board and its superintendent is key to leading a school district effectively (Johnson, 2012, p. 88).

**Educating the School Board**

Another important component in the development of the working relationship between the superintendent and school board is the education of the board regarding their role, the issues facing the district, current trends in education, and working to resolve any discrepancies in core values between the superintendent and school board. Referencing successful superintendent
practice, Shibles, Rallis, and Deck (2001) pointed out that the most effective superintendents are those who “work with their board members to build a team that clarifies purpose and makes decisions based on data that have been analyzed and interpreted according to shared definitions and criteria to become common information” (p. 180). Each superintendent spoke to how he or she worked to apprise school board members of the board’s work, the board’s role, and any discrepancies in core values present between the superintendent and the school district culture. Four superintendents’ circumstances and work to educate their board members stood out as learning opportunities for those seeking to be superintendents and new superintendents.

Hayden, an experienced superintendent, spoke of meeting with the school board during the early days of the superintendency and asking questions about the district and the board’s being unable to provide answers because they themselves did not know. Although the board had hired Hayden to lead the district, to carry out their vision and mission, they could not explain to Hayden about the district, its goals, or intended outcomes. Hayden reported, “I would bring them stuff and they were shocked. We were lacking procedures, systems, and expectations.” Hayden, as an experienced superintendent, realized together the foundational knowledge of the school board had to be built, to begin to establish the responsibility that lies with the school board and the superintendent. It is vital for the school board to be asking the right questions in order to stay attuned to the work, issues, and needs of their stakeholders. In efforts to build the knowledge base and depth of understanding to ask questions, the board must be provided with information. Hayden’s strategy to address building knowledge and common understanding between Hayden and the school board was to provide weekly updates to the board based upon research articles, current educational events, and detailed district data. Hayden shared with the board each school’s school improvement plan with SMART goals; the district’s Washington
State high stakes assessment data; and outside audits of central office departments, such as special education and federal programs. This was the first time the school board had seen that information. The point was to provide the school board with critical information to enable them to define the current reality and learn how to ask the right questions about that reality, and set a course of action. Hayden pointed out, “It is time for the board and district leadership to take responsibility for our reality, accept our reality, and not make excuses for it or blame somebody else for it. It is not okay to be in this reality, so let’s move from here.” Hayden’s focus in terms of educating the school board was to “set up the circumstances and conditions so the people closer to the kids can have a direct impact on student achievement.”

Devin too used current literature to redefine the school board members’ knowledge of their role in leading a district and to close gaps in the expectations between Devin and the school board. Upon being hired, Devin learned the board had previously been present at the bargaining table and was accustomed to calling all the shots. Devin explained, “The board had a mindset of control. If they did not get the decision desired from the superintendent, the board would come together to make a policy to force the superintendent to proceed the way the board wanted.” As a leadership team, Devin and the school board read and discussed the book *Mindset*. Devin was then able to broach the subject of the role of the school board as advisors to the superintendent and the policy makers of the district while outlining his role as implementer of the procedures behind the policies and advisor to the board. Creating common language and understanding led to the development of clear roles and responsibilities that enabled Devin and the board to become a team working together to reach a middle stance on issues.

Addison was faced with a board in turmoil and a community that distrusted the seated school board as a result of board action taken on an issue prior to his being hired. The
controversial actions of the school board resulted in the superintendent, the elementary principal, and a number of teachers voluntarily leaving the district. Those actions ultimately cost two board members their seats on the school board. Addison, immediately upon being hired, was forced to tackle significant issues of distrust with the school board, the school community, and the broader community in general. Addison stated, “The loss of trust is something I’ve been dealing with all the time. It’s been my job to help the board recognize their role and my role as superintendent.” Given the context in which Addison was in, Addison relied on the objectivity of the law as a tool to educate the school board because, as he put it, “Most often the law is very fair and really does try to guide what we should be doing and need to be doing for the kids.”

Drew was hired to lead in a large urban district that operated under policy governance. One key characteristic of policy governance is the notion of the green line. The green line is intended to delineate board roles and functions, and administrative roles and functions. The previous superintendent had managed the green line by creating a gap between the school board and everyone else. This tactic created an organization that did not have the capacity to deal with the board crossing the green line, resulting in a very public departure of the superintendent and high school principal. The premise of Drew’s work with his school board was to bridge the gap and to “bring the school board and administrators to the green line right up against each other.” Drew acknowledged,

At times, both the school board and administrators will get their noses over the fence a bit. But the fact of the matter is we are always checking perceptions. I would say it’s my job to bring the green line into alignment and to manage it from that spot. If it is completely transparent and people are right up there together that is a place from which movement can happen.
A technique Drew used to focus on educating school board members and working through discrepancies was to invite the school board to events, such as professional development offered to school district staff, to learn firsthand what was happening and what staff were learning, and having administrators present and interacting directly with the school board during work sessions. Drew’s assertion was as a team, they “understand our [school board/superintendent] relationship, our core values, and what we are about and then let’s reside here, right on the fence [green line] together” in order to effectively move the district forward.

In each of these four examples, the superintendents’ work reflected Goodman and Zimmerman’s (2000) observation: “First and foremost, the board and superintendent must become a unified governance and leadership team with a unity of purpose, a clear mission, and a shared sense of responsibility for actions to achieve a long term vision” (p. 15). The other seven superintendents also spoke to the ways in which they worked to develop common values, a clear mission and become a unified team with their school board during the first year of their superintendent position.

Harley referred to conducting several board retreats and work study sessions during the first year to ensure that Harley understood the board’s perspective. Chris addressed spending the first 5 months on the job working closely with the school board to develop a strategic plan that embraced their number one value of curiosity. Peyton also referenced formalizing the district’s strategic plan to allow the board to move forward in building the future of their students. Peyton observed,

The vision for our community is every child, every day. The mission is 100% success—nothing less. Everything we do must be focused, aligned, and intentional. If it is not in the strategic plan or doesn’t align with the plan, then we don’t do it.
As mentioned previously, Kelly began the superintendency by bringing in an outside organization to work with him, the board, and stakeholders, including community and staff, in discussing the district’s culture. Kelly commented, “It has been very helpful to start this superintendency discussing culture as a leader with my people. We were able to align ourselves right from the start with what we wanted the culture to be [under my leadership].” The time invested early on with the board was important as they dealt with difficult issues. Kelly noted that at the time of the interview, he was facing one of those difficult moments with his board:

I’m in the middle of an athletic code violation (drinking) and a system designed to catch and punish kids after it’s done. I shared with the board my thoughts of building kids up before it happens to see if we can avoid some of the current problems. The board said, “All right, we like the way you are going, go ahead. We, district committee, are going to develop two–three core beliefs about sports and then figure out as a collective group how we are going to solve this problem.” But that is a direct conflict to how things were and how I do things. Yet, I have board support. My work with the board is to approach the issue from a different perspective.

Hayden also used the board retreat as a mechanism to ensure that the school board and the superintendent were aligned and to develop a clear vision that would enable the board to be sustained and move forward as they underwent a change of leadership after Hayden’s resignation. Hayden asserted:

It is the role of the board to know the direction they want to go and it is my job [as superintendent] to go there. You have to have a vision and direction. The board must be able to describe where they want to go.
Hayden further commented, “If we [board and superintendent] are incongruent with each other or with the community, it will be a very short time before change occurs.”

Drew offered sage advice for new superintendents, saying, “I would offer to you that the moment it [alignment] becomes something else, it not the board that needs to change. It is not the district that needs to change. It is the superintendent that needs to go.” In order to maintain connected, work must be focused on the district’s mission and vision and communication must be strong to nurture the relationship between the superintendent and the school board (both individual members and the board as a unit). Harley noted, “The biggest challenge in some ways is managing the board. Keeping communication open. What’s too much and what’s too little.” Jordan added, “You really have to maintain regular communication with your board.” Harley, Jordan, and Drew recommended meeting with the board president on a regular (weekly) basis to keep them apprised of what is happening in the district. Devin noted that with a board having a history of micromanaging, it was important to have open communication in order to shift to a middle ground on all issues. Devin elaborated:

We’ve gotten to the point of a good understanding in that they will insist on how they would like to see something done and I’ll tell them I’ll take it under advisement. They know how committed I am, so we are hitting a solid middle ground.

Peyton measured the success of communication based on the length of the board meeting. “Usually,” Peyton said, “board meetings are pretty short and kind of boring. If you stay out [in] front of things and communicate with the board, they don’t end up on the agenda.” Jordan echoed that advice:

If there is something going on in the district, you don’t want the board to find out through the gossip ring. [Go by the] no surprises thing and you [as the superintendent] need to
alert them to something that is going on. Then they [school board] get to know you in the process and you get to know them and what their concerns are.

The relationships between superintendents and school boards have far-reaching leadership and policy implications that greatly affect the quality of school district’s educational programs (Conley, 2003; Smoley, 1999). Hence, it is worth noting Drew’s closing comments:

As superintendent, I’m always working on the relationship. If you will, the care and feeding of the school board is all the time. I don’t say that to be funny. The care, communication, and when I say feeding, I mean literally feeding the information and communicating all the time is the one piece that allows us to say the vision of the board is being followed.

Not only do superintendents need to develop relationships with the school board and with the internal and external community and demonstrate management skills to work with the board to accomplish district goals, but the superintendent must also exhibit leadership capabilities to enact change. In education, as in business, the definition of leadership between leaders and management has been delineated (Kowalski, 2006). For a superintendent, simplistically stated, leadership is defined as providing a vision and influencing others to realize it (Heifetz, 1994).

**Superintendent Leadership**

The ability to develop strong, positive relationships while working to resolve discrepancies in values with the school board, the internal school community, and the external school community is a foundational skill critical for creating the conditions needed to conduct the work of leading a school district. This skill is particularly important for an individual who is entering the superintendency leadership position as a newcomer to the school district’s educational system. Moreover, developing a working relationship with the school board,
educating the school board, and resolving value and cultural discrepancies is an ongoing expectation for the superintendent. Leadership is another attribute that must be well developed and demonstrated by the superintendent. Leadership, as discussed by the superintendents in this study, consists of the personal qualities that influence actions taken—the style used to adapt to context, to express expectations, and to manage change.

**Personal Qualities**

Drew expressed the belief that superintendents as leaders must develop positive relationships, speak the truth, give hope, and have great integrity. Casey reiterated that integrity is an important part of superintendent leadership. Casey went on to say that a superintendent needs to be “completely above reproach as far as integrity goes. Not just following the dictates of the law but [in their] personal life and attitudes towards people.” Drew proclaimed, “As a leader one must be very clear on their moral and ethical center.”

Having a clear understanding of one’s values and beliefs is needed as a leader, because as Peyton pointed out, “part of being a leader is standing up for what is right. Situations are going to emerge and you will need to step in and say we are moving; we are going to make some changes.” Alex reported:

> My past experience prepared me to do the right thing. You toughen up your system, your mind, your heart. And that allows you to do the right thing. I can’t say that it is totally without fear because sometimes you don’t want to hurt someone but you realize it is about the kids. I’ll always do the right thing and people know that.

Drew concurred:
The role is doing the right thing when we need to do the right things. It is about going to the pressure; it may not be the most popular thing to do but it may very well be the right thing to do.

Sometimes doing the right thing limits a person’s tenure in the organization, as Harley pointed out:

I remember one Sunday afternoon when I realized the decision I was going to need to make would determine if I was going to be a superintendent here long term or was it going to be a transitional position. Because the things I knew I had to do for the system would not be the things that would help me personally or politically in the system. Well I had to do what was best for the district, but I had to come to grips with the knowledge that those decisions would limit my time here.

Decision making is an essential component of taking action as a leader. Alex observed,

People know I’m really student centered and that goes a long way when it comes to being a superintendent. If they know you are not making a decision about yourself or about some special interest group but rather I’m really looking out for the kids.

Drew noted that decisions must be made based upon the shared understandings held in the district. He reported that guiding questions he used to filter decisions included: “Do the decisions serve a purpose? Do the decisions support the main mission of the district? Who do we serve? Why do we serve them? And are they well served by us and the decisions we make?”

In addition to knowing when to make decisions, another important skill for superintendents is knowing when not to make the decision. Jordan commented, “I need to really focus on when to take a step back and not jump in. I have learned at times I need to sit back and not get involved too early.” Peyton agreed, saying,
My experience has been if you give intelligent people the real data and let them work with it, they’ll come to the same conclusion you did but the difference is they will own it. You help align and focus the conclusion.

This is a strategy Peyton used to begin the process of reconciling differences in the expectations between the superintendent, internal stakeholder community and the external stakeholder community. Jordan summarized superintendent leadership as follows:

It is a journey. The whole thing is a journey and you always have to self-reflect and think what can I do differently? What do I need to do more of, what do I need to do less of? I think you have to be reflective as a practitioner at all times. You have to constantly be learning new things to make sure we are doing what’s best for kids.

The job of superintendent is not for everyone. Peyton noted that “leading is thankless and lonely,” but added, “You’ve got to give kids the best,” Chris elaborated on superintendent leadership philosophy by saying, “I walk my talk. I try to say what I mean and do what I believe.”

Superintendents not only need to have a clear understanding of the core values and beliefs that define their leadership style, but they must also be able to apply and adapt their leadership in their new school district, as they work through any discrepancies in core values and district culture. Both Chris and Devin described themselves as servant leaders. Chris remarked, “I try to be very servantly leading. I try to be whatever you need, whenever. If they need me on the weekend, if they need me to attend, if they need to talk to me, I’m pretty much present.” Devin told the school board and district staff, “I’m here to serve you.” Drew commented,
Service and leadership are synonymous. This job is about service and support. The vast majority of your times as superintendent is support. Support for the school board, support for district leaders, it is support for principal and support for teachers. However, Devin also noted, “It is important to build collaboration, build good leadership and look for opportunities to share leadership. Sometimes I’m going to go off your [building principals’ and school board’s] lead. So it is having different management styles.” Hayden also spoke about the need for shared leadership to enable the needed work to proceed, observing:

It is about teaching people they can be leaders without having the role of superintendent—teaching people they have leadership abilities and they impact the whole organization. It is having all the parts working together and everyone understanding they have a big part in it. Getting that shift in leadership at every building, every classroom, and having everyone taking some leadership creates a change, and that change permeates the entire organization. As a superintendent new to the district, I have been doing this individually with people. It is authentic and a conscious effort.

Peyton described the ideal leadership style as one that “leads with purpose, doesn’t direct, and doesn’t command but leads.” Peyton noted that for a leader, “the context varies but the target remains the same. How you get there is up to you.” Hayden explained further:

Every district is obviously different. Situations are different and you need to be aware of that. You cannot be dogmatic about your style of things. My style needs to accommodate a district and the people I’m working with but my core values are still the same and what I hold sacred remains the same.

Addison acknowledge that
as a leader you must be aware of the culture and dynamics at play in the community.

You have got these competing interests, issues, and beliefs that you [as leader] have to navigate. A major part of the job as superintendent is to know and balance the politics.

My role is trying to help them find that common ground.

Drew agreed, saying, “The superintendency is very political, but again, that’s the deal.” The superintendency is personally trying, complex and challenging yet rewarding and fulfilling for the participants of this study.

**Student Academic Expectations**

In order to provide students with the best and achieve the desired outcomes, the superintendent must hold high expectations that are clearly articulated and supported. Six superintendents spoke to entering their new districts in which high academic expectations were already in place and their values of student expectations aligned with the school district culture.

Peyton described the local community environment by saying, “The community has always expected that the schools are going to be good and kids are going to be taken care of. The staff is committed to the community.” Peyton reiterated that high expectation when challenged the staff to set the goal of “reducing the gap for our minority population by 50% in 3 years and expecting a 100% graduation rate.” Jordan similarly stated, “In the school district and community it is first and foremost: Kids come first, and they want their kids to do well.” Addison noted, “The school district has always had high expectations for academic achievement. That was good to see.” Alex also reported that the school district had been known as “a really good school district.” Chris said of the district, “The community and school district have a huge historical expectation for education. The quality of the schools is very important.” However, an interesting side note was Chris’s mention of the expectation gap between the broader community and the middle
school; in particular. Chris spoke of the need for teachers to have high expectations for all students and be provided with high levels of support. Chris’s specific example was the introduction of the expectation that all eighth graders would take Algebra I, and AVID was the support mechanism put in place for students. Chris said, “It took the teachers seeing the eighth grade students being successful in Algebra I in order for them to believe that the students could do it. Now that they are . . . Wow.” Casey stated that in the community, “Academic success matters a great deal. The belief is that high school graduation is not the end of their [students’] education.” Drew learned during the first year as superintendent that the new district and community high valued “the importance of music, the arts, athletics, and the district being a good steward of the public’s funds and how everyone wants the children well prepared for the future.”

In contrast, four superintendents spoke to the challenge of beginning to lead in a district in which high academic expectations did not align with their core value expectations, were not universal or deeply held within the school district or community. Hayden reported that the school district Hayden was leading had been mediocre for a long time:

For example, 80% of our kids are identified as intensive in reading at the elementary level. Our high school proficiency exam scores are in the dump. We are an underperforming district. We don’t have kids seeing themselves as kids that go beyond high school. The district and community settled for mediocre. They [community and staff] haven’t had the vision of what it’s like to be a top-performing school district. Hayden explained his stance, saying,

It doesn’t matter the size of your district or what your buildings look like. You need to have high expectations. You need to not put barriers in front of kids. As a system, we
should never put limitation on our kids. I don’t care who they are or where they come from. It is not the money; it is the expectations.

One of the first strategic moves Hayden had to make was to have the board collectively describe where as a school district they wanted to go in order to develop a vision, set clear goals, and establish expectations to set a course for the district. The next step was to benchmark what it meant to have high academic excellence. Hayden explained, “It’s about trying to move people to a thinking mode, a pride mode, and shifting the culture. It is about shifting their whole core of what is important to them.”

Devin addressed the expectation gap between athletics and academics in the new school district. An example shared was that during the first snow closure, the expectation of the school board and community was that athletics would go on even if students did not have classes. Devin commented, “I was raised in a similar environment [of strong athletics], yet I have been tooled with an academic stance first.” However, Devin noted a slow shift in members of the community as it was affected by the changing technology in local job requirements and by the initial realization that their kids will need to know how to run and program computers and to mathematically apply different skills in order to run the industry equipment. This realization resulted in the community’s having an increased understanding of the importance of academics for the community. Devin was working with building staff to help them understand that teaching math here is no different than teaching math in Happy Valley. Our kids need to have the same skills, the same computers, and [the] same technology system if they are going to compete. They are reaching an understanding that it’s a big world out there and we [as a district] have to secure more of our kids to graduate and go beyond high school to college.
In a similar strategy, Hayden used Central City as the comparison district. Hayden commented, “Central City is one of the top five districts in the state and that is who our kids are going to compete with for jobs.” Building upon the increasing academic expectations, Devin was using data to drive everything the district was doing as a system. For example, data analysis indicated students were entering kindergarten 2 years behind and on average were making a half of a year’s growth over the course of the school year. In other words, students were falling further behind each year they were in the school system. Under Devin’s leadership of using data-driven decision making and focusing on instruction, student data at the time of the interview showed 1.5-2 years’ growth at the elementary level. This was intentional use of data to reconcile discrepancies between the new superintendent’s core values and the district culture related to student achievement and expectations. The high school was partnering with the community college to offer college classes on campus not only for students but for community members as well. The intent was to demonstrate rigor and high academic expectations at the secondary level. Devin reported, “Last year, 60 students graduated, and of those, 52 had taken and passed college-level classes.”

Kelly, like Devin, had joined a district that was beginning to make academics the focal point of their work. Upon being hired, Kelly contracted with an outside firm to work with the district, board members, classified staff, administrators, teachers, and community members to facilitate a process of culture change. The process allowed a collective body of stakeholders to define what made their district different, who as a district they were, where they wanted to move to, and how to move from a negative connotation associated with the district to a positive belief statement. Kelly described how as a collective body they desired to have the school district become a place where students could get high-quality services, high-quality teachers, high-
quality curricula, and high-quality programs. “That has been a big shift,” Kelly acknowledged, adding, “As a result, we are working together to create experiences that create beliefs, which drive actions where results are created.” This is a long term strategy to reconcile discrepancies between the superintendent, the school board, the internal school district community, and the external school district community.

These three examples illustrate how the development of aligned, trusting relationships with the school board, the staff, and the community can be used to reconcile value discrepancies and enable high academic expectations to be put in place. Harley’s situation was unique in that the circumstances she was stepping into, which included a budget crisis, numerous open labor contracts, and an impending teacher strike, did not afford the opportunity to develop strong foundational relationships with any stakeholders in the early months of Harley’s leadership tenure in a new district that could anchor change to. At the time of Harley’s arrival there was not a district-wide emphasis on academic achievement. There was an overwhelming focus on the empathy side of the child, with academics being seen as a byproduct. “One of my biggest challenges is the culture of expectations here for academic work,” Harley admitted. Harley’s strategy for beginning to align the district’s and community’s academic expectations with the superintendent’s personal expectations was to

put the data points on the table and have a conversation with those involved, construct a plan to move forward, and do so. If something is not good for kids, I’m not going to condone it. I will always strive to maintain high expectations and link those with high support. However, there are people, even at the district office level, who would prefer us to go back. I think fewer of them though. The question I continue to ask is: “Am I willing to do something about the culture?”
Alex captured the essence of the superintendent’s leadership role in promoting and supporting high academic standards with her proclamation that “a district is only as good as their most difficult student’s success.” Additionally, for a superintendent high academic standards and student success is only as good as the district’s weakest teacher’s success in promoting student learning.

**Strategies for Cultural Change**

Although the last four examples demonstrate extreme situations of change, each of the 11 interviewed superintendents spoke to the challenge of creating change as part of their superintendency and of the strategies implemented to initiate the needed change. Creating the conditions for change was a strategy superintendents used to work on the reconciliation of discrepancies between the superintendent’s core values and the school district’s culture. Kelly’s analogy sets the stage for reconciliation of discrepancies through change as a new superintendent:

> Climate is like the temperature of the water in a fish tank and culture is like the quality of the water. Fish can’t tell the difference when they’re in the water unless you switch the tank and all of the sudden there is clearer water in the other fish tank. So it’s all around you, it kind of gets into your gills and gets into your thinking, and everything, and you’re absorbed by it.

A newly hired superintendent is, whether intentionally or not, changing the fish tank’s water. How the fish, in this case staff, respond depends upon the way in which the water is changed. Addison commented,

> I guess my experience has taught me that time is necessary. You do need time. You can’t make changes instantly and be successful as a superintendent. You alienate any one
group too much and you’re not going to be successful. You know the adage . . . go slow to go fast. I believe that is very true. As a superintendent it is important to recognize those areas where maybe you have to go slow now and things will speed up later. I think it is important to recognize that as true and to find those circumstances, those decisions where that really applies and follow it is a good thing to do.

Jordan recognized that there were key considerations needed to deliberate about as Jordan approached potential change. Jordan said I asked myself, “Are you going to fight that battle or are you going to let it go? Can we still move forward and allow that?” Jordan continued, “You have to kind of weigh that with can we still get what is needed. You have to talk with people about that and make sure we are not spending too much time on that kind of thing.” Harley said “I had learned that when I want change, I need to make capacity within the organization to make room for new learning. People really need to understand the why we might need to do something differently.” Chris took it to another level, explaining:

I’m changing culture by doing some real strategic moves. How I behave, what I do, what I attend, where I go is very deliberate. I don’t leave things to chance, and I’m very aware that I live in a fish bowl.

Chris further explained that these strategic moves to support change included hiring the right people and being about building the dream together, selecting and implementing research-identified best practice, and modeling the right mindset. Hayden had similar strategies as he worked to change the total culture of his new district. Hayden stated, “It is important to create a plan, set goals, expectations, and direction. Hire the right people, share the expectations and move forward.” Hayden established at most 3–5 goals to work on and created benchmarks to monitor progress toward the goals during the first year of the superintendency. Hayden shared
with staff that it was key to keep the end in mind and to have everyone realize that the activities and how you got there might change, but the goal remained the same. “How I go there is not as important as getting there” was repeated as Hayden spoke to the change being initiated in the district. This notion relates to being aware that a change of water is needed and, as the leader, knowing how, when, and at what pace to change the water.

Peyton pointed out that the strategy for employing change was to work with the school board, staff, and community members to formalize a strategic plan that defines a future vision for students. We are building a future for everyone in the community. If it’s not in the plan or doesn’t align with the plan and our future vision, then we don’t do it.

As superintendent, Hayden moved the plans of change into action by “being with staff during training, working with and encouraging people to move the plan along. You need to celebrate and leverage their abilities to get to the goal that is different from what’s been in place before.” Kelly observed, “I know the most effective change as far as culture comes from leadership by optimism and doing everything I can to build things up with the knowledge and skills of your people.” Drew had a similar change strategy:

The superintendent must be able to assess the capacity of the people within and how much that capacity can be developed if change is going to occur. One thing in coming here to this district was to make sure we are all on the same page with a core understanding and beliefs. There is no theme from year to year; it boiled down to the clear vision of the improvement of student instruction, student growth, and achievement. This is it, all it’s ever going to be. These three components of the district vision can grow as the organization grows but they won’t change. If “it” doesn’t fit into these three things
it doesn’t come into the district as a change. It is important that everyone knows fundamentally at the core, the vision doesn’t change. What we do might change, but not the why.

Peyton articulated a similar approach, saying, “Year 2 of my superintendency will focus on nothing new. Not one more new thing for anybody. Let’s get good at what we’re currently focused on. I need to take care of my people.”

Chris also commented on this topic, saying:

It’s only October (of year 2) and people are already tired because there’s a lot of new initiatives being implemented this year. However, there is real energy and power, along with a sense of pride in the work that is going on here. As a leader, I am always a learner. Sometimes, I press the change to happen because I know in the long run the disequilibrium will cause the system to be healthier for it.

The study participants indicated that change comes from high expectations and high support. The interviewed superintendents provided multiple strategies of support to make opportunities available for staff to learn, to move to a thinking mode, and to begin to resolve discrepancies by implementing change.

Devin spoke to the importance of providing staff with collaboration time to listen to each other, examine the data, draw conclusions based upon the data, and create a plan, saying, “It can’t just be by emotion. We need to ask a lot of why question in order to develop consensus.”

Additionally, Drew, Jordan, and Harley spoke to the use of early release time for teachers to participate in Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) as a change mechanism. Peyton reinstated early release Mondays to demonstrate that the superintendent and the school board were committed to spending the time and money to train teachers to implement the changes
expected. The mantra in the district was “focused, aligned, and intentional.” Hayden thought it was important to allow the district teaching staff “time to think, collaborate, innovate, be creative, and do things” in efforts to make change, move the plan forward, and take action toward achieving new goals.

In addition to providing allocated time during the work schedule for managing change, superintendents used outside experts to facilitate change within their districts. Kelly expressed that as a new superintendent, rather than coming in saying

“Here are my values and beliefs, now let’s try to navigate the discrepancy between the two [his beliefs and the district’s],” I hired a company to lead us through the process of cultural change. This allowed me to input my feelings about my beliefs into our culture and then have everyone have an equal opportunity to shape defining what those cultural values were to be. Kelly noted, “We did this together, as a unit. Now everything we do drives us to student growth. We need our actions to lead to some key result which creates energy and urgency to perpetuate cultural change.”

Whereas Kelly relied on outside experts to support the cultural changes that would bring focus to expectations of student academic achievement, Peyton hired outside experts to assist with the district’s focus on quality instruction. The team of facilitators increased teacher knowledge of instructional practice by training everyone in how to participate in instructional walkthroughs and how to use the adopted instructional framework as a tool to isolate what was happening in the classroom. This strategy provided the needed structured instructional pieces and focus on organizational effectiveness to enable the system to smoothly begin the process of changing their instructional practice. Chris also contracted with an outside group to work with
the high school mathematics department and a second outside group to work with the middle school mathematics department. Both groups focused on student discourse in mathematics and instructional pedagogy to improve students’ math achievement.

Hayden used an outside audit team to initiate needed programmatic change during his first year as superintendent. The experts were hired to thoroughly review district, state, and federal programs and to provide specific recommendations for change. Hayden said of this strategy, “It allowed someone without a dog in the fight to say what needed to be said and to have it in writing.” At that point, as superintendent he was then able to work with the teachers and program directors to learn how to use the recommendations to make programmatic changes, learn how to use the data to improve instructional practices, and require the building principals to be instructional leaders.

The heart of all changes being implemented by the 11 interviewed superintendents was to do what they deemed to be best for kids. Addison pragmatically pointed out, “There is great resistance to changing. There is a strong challenge in place not to change, and it does take time to make changes.” Jordan reiterated that notion:

A lot of adults don’t like change. Change is really hard for a lot of people. But kids today are not the same as they were 20 years ago. Take technology. It’s not okay that we don’t want to learn how to use a Chromebook because it is not what we’re used to. If that’s the system that is best for our kids, then we better figure out how to use it. The question is what support people need so they can learn the new system, learn the change so they can in turn do what’s best for kids. I’m not afraid to disagree with people if I believe it’s not what’s best for kids. Sometimes that’s not popular.
Addison reflected, “From the superintendent’s perspective we are working for kids, we are working for all kids, and as leaders we are working to create change and systems that benefit all kids.” Peyton stated that at times this meant that “sacred cows are being butchered.”

The modern public school superintendency comprises a multitude of roles and expectations. However, it is first and foremost a business relationship in which the superintendent requires more than an educational knowledge base to be successful. The superintendency is a leadership position that is conducted with integrity (Casey, Chris, Harley), honor (Drew), service (Chris, Drew) and with the political will (Peyton) to do what is right for all students. At the same time, it is a job that is exhausting (Alex) and lonely (Peyton) that requires the superintendent to be an advocate (Chris) and a filter (Peyton) who sets or creates the conditions for achievement (Hayden).
The role of the superintendent has evolved since the inception of the position in the 1830s. Paul Houston declared:

Superintendents were considered successful if they could manage the “B’s” of district leadership: buildings, buses, books, budgets, and bonds. Today, the challenge is to shift the focus of district leadership to the “C’s.” Things like connection, communication, collaboration, community building, child advocacy and curricular choices that lead to academic progress for all children. (As cited in Pardini & Lewis, 2003, p. 5)

Today’s superintendent is tasked with leading an organization that exists and competes to meet the multiple needs and demands of the district educational system. A superintendent’s work is demarcated by his or her responses to the complexities and challenges of political pressures both external and internal; conflicting interests at the local, state, and federal levels; unpredictable funding; moving reform targets; and greater accountability for all students’ academic achievement (Brederson & Kose, 2007; Feuerstein & Dietrich, 2003).

The goal of the superintendent is to develop an organizational system that focuses on quality education experiences for all children by attending to the political and social realities of the environment in which education occurs (Williams, 2004) while recognizing that school districts are not independent, self-sufficient organizations (Johnson, 1996). The superintendent is surrounded by directives and expectations for the effective operation of the school district. Externally, these include state and federal policy, the state board of education, and community and parent beliefs and expectations; internally, they include student, teacher, and administrative
wants, needs, expectations, and beliefs as the superintendent works to increase student learning in the age of accountability (Cuban, 1988; Grogan, 2008; Williams, 2004).

**Review of the Study**

Using basic qualitative methods, I sought in this study to learn about how new superintendents hired from outside the school district navigated the new school district and the new culture while moving forward the work and goals of the superintendent and school board. The study explored the superintendents’ perceptions, the actions taken during the superintendents’ first year, and the superintendents’ reflections on their first year and a half in their leadership position in a new school district. Participants in this study represented administrators with a span of years of educational experience, varying number of districts served as superintendent, and districts of varied enrollment sizes. Additionally, selected superintendents were from across Washington State, providing a purposefully geographically varied sample of superintendents.

Fifteen superintendents were selected to participate in the study, of whom 11 accepted the invitation and participated in the semistructured, one-on-one interviews, which was adequate given that saturation began to occur at interview eight (Merriam, 2009). The method chosen for data analysis was coding constant comparison (Glaser, 1978). The methods for establishing trustworthiness were reflexivity, triangulation, member checking, and peer debriefing (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Miles et al., 2003; Pillow, 2003; Yin, 2014). The study addressed the following research questions:

*Research Question 1:* How do second-year school district superintendents develop an understanding of the district’s culture?
Research Question 2: How do second-year school district superintendents reconcile discrepancies between their core values and the school district’s culture?

Several key themes emerged from this study, including the development of relationships with the school board, the internal and external school district community, the working relationship with the school board, and superintendent leadership to enact change. The first theme, relationship development, described the process and strategies superintendents used to build relationships in their new school district, with their community, and with their school board, regardless of their experience as superintendent, size of district, or geographic setting (Alvy & Robbins, 2010; Bryk & Schneider, 2003; Tschannen-Moran, 2004; Solomon & Flores, 2001;). Within this theme, several subthemes became apparent in the data. The first subtheme was the development of a strong, positive relationship with the school board as a whole and with each individual member of the school board (Johnson, 2012; Kowalski, 2006; Peterson & Fusarelli, 2001). The second subtheme was the relationship development process and strategies with the internal school stakeholder community. The third subtheme involved how superintendents developed relationships with the external school stakeholder community (Hannaway, 1993; Kowalski, 2006).

The second theme in this study was the importance of working with the school board as a means to accomplish the superintendent’s goals and reconcile discrepancies between the superintendent’s core values and the district’s culture. The first subtheme was the superintendent in the role of trainer or educator of school board members regarding topics such as the district’s current reality, expectations, issues facing the education of the student population, and accountability. The superintendent acted a facilitator to ensure that the beliefs, values, and expectations of the school board, superintendent, and the internal and the external school
community members were aligned (Bird et al., 2009; Hannaway, 1993; Williams, 2004). The second subtheme associated with working with the school board was the component of communication. The superintendents emphasized the importance of ongoing, open communication between them and the school board as a key element to resolve discrepancies between core values and the development of a strong, positive working relationship.

The third theme of this study was the superintendent’s leadership for a successful tenure in the school district. Several subthemes emerged within this theme. The first was the self-identified leadership attributes required to effectively lead a school district to meet the demands of 21st-century expectations of student learning success, accountability, diminishing and unstable fiscal resources, and political decrees (Pardini & Lewis, 2003; Jenkins, 2007). The second subtheme was student academic expectations, the alignment of expectations held by the superintendent, school board, internal and external stakeholder community, as well as the misalignment or gap that existed between the superintendent and the broader stakeholder community, which included students, teachers, administrators, board members, parents, and community members. The final subtheme, strategies for change, relates to how the superintendents approached change within their new district. Collectively, the themes provided answers to the research questions.

**Discussion of Results**

The superintendent plays a decisive role in the organization of the school district. The superintendent is the singular person within the school district who has the positional authority to engage and impact the stakeholders of the school district: the school board, district office personnel, principals, teachers, union representatives, parent groups, community organizations, and local/state government officials (Bird et al., 2009). Additionally, as Susan Moore Johnson
(1996) explained, “The social and political environment in which schools operate is dynamic, even turbulent . . . districts are not free standing, self-sufficient organizations” (p. 273). The superintendents interviewed spent intentional time early on and throughout their first year of employment in the new district getting to know and develop relationships with individual board members, the board as a collective, the internal school community, and the external community to develop an understanding of the district’s culture. The work conducted by superintendents, particularly those hired outside of the school district, is nonlinear (Marion, 2009), and the leadership behavior exhibited by the superintendent transpires from the context and is a result of the ongoing interactions among the organization’s individuals and groups (Plowman & Duchon, 2008).

**Relationship Development**

The increasing number of difficult school district superintendent assignments have heightened the critical nature of superintendent relationships, credibility, and trust with school boards, district employees, and all other stakeholders (Kowalski, Petersen, & Fuserelli, 2007). It is important to note that the development of natural relationships does not fit a linear model (Snyder et al., 2000). This was evident throughout the superintendent interviews. Superintendents were simultaneously learning about their leadership role and the school district’s culture while developing relationships with the district’s school board members, internal school personnel, and the broader external school community. The superintendents’ entry efforts were supported by socialization research that concluded that newcomers to an organization who proactively sought out information about the organization, its employees, and their new role tended to achieve more positive entry outcomes (Ostruff & Kozlowski, 1992). Throughout the entry process into a new organization, the new employee, in this case the superintendent, needs
to make a focused effort to gather information and seek organizational support that will assist the
new employee(superintendent) in learning about and navigating, the new work environment
(Bauer et al., 2007). As Kowalski (2006) pointed out, “Behavior in a school district is not
random” (p.100). Behavior is affected by the web of interactions conducted between individuals,
formal groups, and informal groups in any given context (Robbins, 1986). The superintendents
verbalized during the interviews that they understood that their actions would be under
continuous scrutiny. They acknowledged that stakeholders would be analyzing their words and
actions to determine alignment independent of the individual or group with whom the
superintendent was interacting. Examples of how superintendents sought information during
their early entry period into the school district included joining community service organizations,
serving on a variety of local boards, inviting staff to individual interviews, and conducting small
internal and external stakeholder focus groups. Each strategy enacted by the new superintendent
supported Kowalski’s (2006) conclusion that “district culture and community politics are
intertwined and this union requires superintendents new to their districts to foster both
organizational and community relationships quickly” (p. 102).

Petersen and Barnett (2005) wrote:

Despite the remoteness of their central office from the classroom, the empirical evidence
strongly suggests that given their position within the district organization,
superintendents are in the best position to foster the necessary organizational relationship
and resources to support and facilitate [the district’s vision]. (p. 125)

Although all of the superintendents interviewed approached relationship development based
upon their unique selves, they did so in such a manner as to elicit the history, expectations, and
practices of the school district they were entering as the superintendent. The hierarchical
structure of relationships in school district systems means that the responsibility for taking the initiative to develop and sustain trusting relationships defaults to the superintendent (Tschannen-Moran, 2004). Specific strategies employed by superintendents to develop relationships within the organization included systematically visiting teachers’ classrooms, meeting with students, asking questions throughout all levels of the organizational structure, providing opportunities for ongoing communication such as weekly newsletters to staff, having an open door policy to allow people to meet with the superintendent, hosting monthly “coffee talks,” tweeting district news, and being present and visible at school events. For a new superintendent, as for any new employee, success and continued employment with the organization hinges on the person’s aptitude to cultivate relationships with current organizational members and to attend to organizational purposes (Tschannen-Moran, 2004).

Not only is it vital for new superintendents to learn about the district culture through relationship development with internal stakeholders, but the superintendent also needs to simultaneously make connections with the external community, because the school district is a reflection of the community. The tenure of a school district superintendent is dependent upon not only the superintendent’s knowledge and skill but also upon both his or her ability to conform to general societal expectations and to manage the local political realities (Hannaway, 1993). The role of the school district superintendent is very public and requires the superintendent to become actively involved in business and community organizations (Fusarelli & Fusarelli, 2005). This study supports those findings: The interviewed superintendents expressed the importance they placed on their membership in community service organizations such as Rotary and Kiwanis; service on boards such as local college boards, fair boards, and charities; work with government officials such as those in the Chamber of Commerce and the
city council, along with county commissioners and legislators; and attendance at community events such as fundraisers, parades, concerts, ceremonies, celebrations, and memorials. All of these measures served as means to develop external stakeholder relationships, develop an understanding of the community expectations, and participate in the local political landscape. Begley (2004) stated, “Any school administrator who attempts to lead and manage without reference to the broader environmental context will quickly encounter difficulty” (pp. 8–9). Begley went on to assert that, “School administrators have learned that it is necessary to pay a lot more attention to the community as a relevant administrative arena and source of influence on school leadership” (p. 10). The superintendents acknowledged the vital role the broader external community played in the school district.

**Working With the School Board**

The relationship between superintendents and school boards and their ability to reconcile discrepancies in values have extensive leadership and policy implications that can substantially shape the quality of the school district’s educational programs (Conley, 2003). Johnson (2012) stated:

> Researchers found that effective boards of education work in concert with the district superintendent, beginning with the establishment of a district vision. In fact, the theme of an effective school board and superintendent team is consistently found throughout the literature. (p. 91)

The superintendents in this study described their efforts to ensure that the school board of directors and the superintendent were aligned in their values, their goals and their approaches. Superintendents took strategic, targeted actions to develop a common vision and sustain alignment with their school board members. Specific examples included conducting board
retreats that were facilitated either by the new superintendent or by an outside consultant; hiring outside experts to facilitate change initiatives with the board and the superintendent; weekly confidential written communication from the superintendent to the board; and holding ongoing one-on-one meetings between the superintendent and board members. Each superintendent interviewed was keenly aware that his or her reputation and job survival were dependent upon his or her ability to effect vital policy decisions, made by the school board, that affected the school district (Kowalski, 2006). Even with that pressure, each superintendent was clear about basing his or her decisions on personal core values and beliefs rather than on fear regarding what the school board might do (Scheurich & Skria, 2003).

This study supports Kowalski’s (2006) identified factors for developing and maintaining positive relations with the school board: planning, effective human relationship skills, and philosophical alignment. As noted by the interviewed superintendents, the development of board relationship began during the hiring process and continued on a daily basis throughout their employment. Each superintendent worked to nurture the collective school board relationship by planning opportunities for him or her to work with the school board as a collective group by means such as school board retreats, entry plans, and school board study sessions. The superintendents promoted alignment of values, actions, and expectations through ongoing two-way communication with the school board members through weekly confidential written communication, individual meetings, and phone calls and e-mails as needed. Consequently, the strategies superintendents used to work with the school board simultaneously assisted in the education of the school board, the alignment and reconciliation of any value discrepancies, and served as communication tools. These strategies also provided the superintendents with the
opportunity to assist the school board and themselves with their roles in the district’s organizational structure.

Petersen and Fusarelli (2001) identified three factors that challenged superintendent and board relations: changing demographics within the school district; the requirements for school reform; and the preparation, socialization, and experience level of the superintendent. Each of these factors was present in the superintendent interviews as a factor the superintendent and school board were grappling with. Superintendents spoke of the challenges of and potential solutions to the changing school population as a result of open enrollment; the impact of new business bringing diverse families to the district; the pressure of federal requirements such as No Child Left Behind; high-stakes accountability assessments; and new standards such as Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts, Mathematics, and the Next Generation Science Standards. The superintendents also spoke of their personal journeys through the socialization process in their new school districts. The superintendents’ entry experiences ranged from one school board president personally introducing the new superintendent to each business owner in town to another superintendent gathering information about the district by visiting with community members at the local mall.

**Superintendent Leadership**

The superintendent role has expanded beyond managerial attributes to be successful (Bredeson & Kose, 2007); instructional leadership, resource management, and accountability are all expectations of today’s effective school district superintendent (Kowalski, 2006; Williams, 2004). Needing to perform all these functions, superintendents must hone their skills to accomplish change in multifaceted, politically charged, and sometimes combative educational systems (Pardini & Lewis, 2003). If individuals are to flourish in the role of superintendent, they
need to understand and be adept at each of these critical areas (Pardini & Lewis, 2003). The
superintendents’ responses spoke to the increased emphasis on student achievement,
accountability, and community expectations they were facing. They spoke of their core values of
social justice, equity, integrity, and strong morals as what enabled them to lead in a complex,
dynamic, changing system. They relied on their educational experience, knowledge, and skill to
make decisions, to work with a variety of stakeholders, and ensure any discrepancies in core
values were being undertaken. As superintendents, they had diverse skills, personal qualities,
and a social conscience that guided their leadership. Osborn, Hunt, and Jauch (2002) concluded
that “effective leadership is not universal but depends on a wide variety of environmental (e.g.,
culture, economic, industry setting) and organizational (e.g., strategy, size, technology, structure)
conditions. The meaning and importance of various leadership dimensions varies by context” (p.
807). In reading and rereading the interview transcripts, it became apparent that the interview
questions often forced the superintendents to reflect on their first year in the role, the conclusions
they drew, and what information they shared. Bredeson, Klar, and Johansson’s (2008) research
furthers this notation by their conclusions:

Leaders who employ context responsive leadership strategies recognize that contexts vary
and that they can both enable and constrain behavior. Leaders know when, where, why
and how to push back or reshape elements of context in order to provide a more favorable
environment for achieving priorities and goals. (p. 7)

Each superintendent’s first year was guided by the context and circumstances of the district he or
she was leading.

Each superintendent was aware that he or she was hired for a reason—either to create
change, such as bringing new programs such as AVID, International Baccalaureate, or a STEM
focus to district school(s); or to build upon the change currently taking place, such as the implementation of a one-to-one initiative, new facility construction, or new curriculum adoption. Snyder et al. (2000) point out that it seems change is inevitable; however, progress is not guaranteed. Progress toward change as a school district system is dependent upon common assumptions, values and choices, shared beliefs, and the influence shared beliefs have on the school district’s effectiveness (Kowalski et al., 2011). The superintendents were cognizant that every day, through their actions and words, they, as the superintendent, were creating experiences that affected the organizational culture (Connors & Smith, 2011) and that the effectiveness of their leadership as superintendent is shaped by and responds to the limitations and opportunities available within their given organizational environment (Bossert, Dwyer, Rowan, & Lee, 1982). As Harley, a superintendent study participant, noted about superintendent leadership, “One must leave nothing to chance.” The superintendents reflected on how some actions resulted in more positive results than others. Their experiences supported Schein’s 1988 statement: “One can best understand culture when one is trying to change it” (p. 3).

Williams (2004) notes, “The French sociologist Michel Crozier explained that the process of change in complex systems is never a unilateral process of heroic leadership but a communal process that is embedded in the values of the various factions” (p. 41). The superintendents spoke of this through their efforts to engage all stakeholders in the initiatives such as having community members, staff members, parents, teachers, and administration serve on committees to have a voice in the change, triangulating information to ensure all perspectives were being taken into consideration as decisions were made, alignment of values occurred, and simultaneously educating the board to ensure their understanding and ownership of the change. The superintendents’ actions throughout their first year supported Rodrigues’s 2006 research,
which found that cultural change in a complex organization, such as a school district, is a multifaceted and multilevel process that cannot be attributed to a single individual but rather to the facilitation and mobilization of different groups within and across the organizational levels. Leaders, in this case superintendents, who attempt to create major change through a simple, linear, analytical process almost always fails (Kotter, 2012). As Benson and Trower (2012) point out, there are six things that really matter for changing the workplace culture: process, context, transparency, timing, disaggregation, and leadership (p. 33). The superintendents’ interview responses supported their understanding as leaders the importance of each of these elements in their work. The interviewed superintendents were cognizant of each of the six elements in their daily work, and the elements were integrated into their planning and decision making as they took action to shift beliefs. The superintendents understood it was their responsibility to set the expectations for the district’s work culture because doing so would either stimulate organizational growth or ensure stagnation (Snyder & Anderson, 1986).

**Discussion and Conclusion**

The superintendency is a leadership position that requires balancing numerous competing factors both internal and external to the school district, including outside influences and internal expectations. The position requires the superintendent to make decisions that move initiatives forward and take action to stimulate change, all while attempting to ensure that the elected school board officials’, their boss’s, expectations are met and their needs collectively served.

The position of the superintendency has continued to evolve since its inception as a full-time position in the 1830s. The changes to the superintendent’s role parallel the changing role of public schools in the United States. The goal of education today is no longer to produce higher test scores but to educate a diversifying student population to become responsible individuals
with well-developed minds and strong characters who are capable of continuous learning to be competitive in a global marketplace (Kelley & Shaw, 2009; Scheurich & Skira, 2003; Schwahn & Spady, 1998; Ravitch, 2010). Usdan, McCloud, Podmostko, and Cuban (2001) point out that these changes “require the superintendent to tackle more complex and sophisticated demands on their time and energy than at any time in the history of education in America” (p. 2).

How the superintendent chose to tackle the demands of the position was associated with his or her depth of knowledge, experience level, district context, and personal leadership style. Globally, the interviewed superintendents approached their first year on the job using a transformational leadership lens. The superintendents initiated interactions and conversations with staff to raise consciousness of the issues facing students regarding their achievement levels, opportunity gaps, and systemic barriers. Those strategic interactions led to superintendents’ mobilizing staff and community energy and resources to work on reforms within the school district system in order to attain the outcomes. Another conclusion drawn from interviews with the superintendents was that their anticipated tenure in the district influenced the pace at which they conducted the transformational work. Four superintendents spoke of retiring from education after completing their current superintendent contract. Five superintendents spoke directly of being invested for the long term in their new district and community, while two superintendents acknowledged that their tenure in the district would likely be short. Although no superintendent was unwilling to address the issues facing him or her and all presented themselves as having the political will to enact change, the amount of time spent raising system consciousness of the issue before mobilizing resources to address the issue did vary. All of the superintendents pointed out that during the first year they had selected a few high-priority goals that would have early success and a visible payoff to begin to build momentum (Hassel &
Hassel, 2009). However, the superintendent who self-characterized as a turnaround leader instituted a fast track of new initiatives and expected change as mandatory rather than optional. In contrast, another superintendent who intended to stay long-term entered year 2 continuing to work with all stakeholders to raise consciousness of the issues and appeal to their morals to build a common culture before mobilizing resources to begin new initiatives.

Figure 2. Contextual factor interactions. The model breaks down the multiple factors that influence the superintendent. The arrows represent the ongoing connections between the different factors.
Various studies concluded that the work of the superintendent was defined by superintendents’ response to the complexities and challenges of leading an educational system influenced by political pressure, conflicting interests, unstable funding, reform efforts, the accountability demands of increased student learning as measured by high-stakes assessment, and state/federal legislation (Brederson & Kose, 2007; Farkas, Johnson, Duffett, & Foleno, 2001; Feuerstein & Dietrich, 2003; Lecker, 2002; Sherman & Grogan, 2003). The priorities of today’s superintendent were found to be collaboration, communication, connection, child advocacy, and community building (Usdan et al., 2001). This study supported all of those previous research findings. The superintendent interview responses in this research study emphasized connections, collaboration, and communications as key factors that affected Washington State superintendents’ work during their first year in the position. The results of this study also support Bredeson, Klar, and Johansson’s (2008) research conclusion:

Despite similar tasks and functions commonly used to describe the work of school superintendents it seems reasonable to assert that each district leader enacts his/her administrative role uniquely given such factors as district size, community demographics, organizational culture, history, geography, and local political realities, not to mention personalization of the role. (p. 3)

After interviewing the 11 superintendents, I concluded that although each enacted his or her role as superintendent as influenced by contextual factors, common values were held by the group that guided their work of leading a complex educational system to which they were new. Beyond the time and attention paid to relationship development, work with the school board, resolution of core value discrepancies, and leadership attributes by superintendents newly hired to the school district, 10 overarching common values were expressed. These common values
held by the interviewed superintendents offer sage advice for aspiring or veteran superintendents transitioning to a leadership position in a new school district: (a) be clear in understanding your beliefs as a leader in order to follow your moral compass at all times; (b) as superintendent, be constantly conscientious that language and word choice are critical to convey purpose and intent; (c) be intentional about the decisions made, events attended, money spent, and respect given because the superintendency is a high-profile position and everything is under scrutiny; (d) be able to take action for what you believe in, even if it is not the popular decision; (e) be aware of the time and attention needed for the position, and be prepared for isolation; (f) be able to develop a support structure—find a mentor; (g) be able to recognize your ability to make a difference on a larger scale regarding social justice; (h) be able to recognize it is about the district . . . get out when it becomes about you; (i) be able to acknowledge change is hard even if it is the right thing and that it does not happen overnight; and (j) research the district when seeking employment. When superintendents took time to research the district, the process elicited strong matches between candidates and district; but even with a “match” and extensive district research, gaps exist between the expectations, beliefs, and results.

**Implications for Practice and Research**

**Implications for Superintendent Practice**

An examination of the themes of this study reveals that several key elements aid in the successful transition of a superintendent new to a school district, regardless of the superintendent’s experience as a superintendent or number of districts led. First, new superintendents need to simultaneously develop trusting relationships with individual school board members and with the board as a whole, as well as with the internal school community and the external school community. Each group plays an integral role in the entwined dynamics of
the school district. Strong relationships allow the work to continue and provide stability during the uncertain times associated with change.

The development of relationships assists with other district-related initiatives, such as the passage of bonds and levies, contract negotiations, and facility construction and renovation. Success of each initiative is in part dependent upon the superintendent’s ability to assist stakeholders in understanding the short- and long-term goals of the school district, the intentions of the superintendent, and the alignment of the district’s values with that of the community. An aptitude for developing relationships early on in the tenure of the superintendent promotes a strong link between the school and the community, fostering trust in the intentional decisions being made by the superintendent. Examples provided by the interviewed superintendents included making the fiscal decision to invest in smaller class sizes to align with community values rather than renovating buildings, implementing all-day kindergarten, and funding people rather than replacing an aging bus fleet. The strength of the relationship and the alignment of values were also tested in superintendent examples of athletic issues, such as hiring and firing of coaches, player recruitment, student open enrollment, and eligibility.

Relationships also enable constructive conversations to arise related to gaps identified between superintendent expectations and district beliefs. The superintendents addressed the role internal and external relationships have in providing a forum for discussing provision of equity and access for all students throughout the school district.

The superintendents’ insight into what makes a working relationship with the school board successful provides new superintendents with a blueprint for communication strategies, outlining expectations, and developing alignment with and providing assistance to the board to support the superintendent’s success. By beginning to take action with the board, the
superintendent is setting the stage for changing beliefs. New superintendents need to be cognizant of the political lens that is a part of today’s superintendency. The political lens was evident as each superintendent responded to the questions posed. The superintendents conveyed that it is important for new superintendents to use insider relationships to help identify key stakeholders, potential sponsors, and pitfalls as they pursue their goals.

**Implications for Superintendent Preparatory Programs**

The common experiences of the first-time superintendents show that the preparatory programs future superintendents enroll in for certification should be refined. Traditional superintendent programs offer similar courses on leadership theory, school improvement theory, and organizational theory (Glass, Björk, & Brunner, 2000). Conclusions drawn from this study regarding key topics for superintendent coursework support the 2010 American School Superintendent study in suggesting that the three courses superintendents felt were most important were school law, school finance, and public relations (Kowalski et al., 2011). However, I offer the following suggestions for university program administrators to consider as course content is evaluated and revisions are made to ensure that quality superintendent programs are in place to meet the needs of 21st-century superintendents.

Administrators of university programs need to examine the time allocated to course topics and more closely align the time devoted to the topic with the level of need and complexity future superintendents will face. In today’s environment of unstable funding, inadequate state funding formulas, and reliance on local taxpayers to fund basic education (Kowalski, 2006), future superintendents need to have significant time devoted to the fiscal responsibilities of the superintendent. Course topics could include budget development, the budget cycle, legal deadlines pertaining to the budget, fund balance, financial ratings of a district, audits, and budget
monitoring strategies. Additionally, within the fiscal course would be exposure to bonds, levies, and risk pool. It would be of benefit for prospective superintendents to learn from currently seated, experienced superintendents, finance directors, and experts in the field of school elections. The opportunity to hear firsthand about issues and the reality of the work, and to see tools and resources being used in school districts, would be invaluable. Course assignments could mimic actual budgetary scenarios in school districts.

A second shift in course offerings would be to present the human resource responsibilities with more practical application rather than focusing solely on the theoretical frameworks of organizational structure. Emphasizing the day-to-day superintendent responsibilities associated with personnel would be of significant support to the aspiring superintendent, given that the size of the school district will determine the size of the district administrative team; a new superintendent could experience being the only district-level administrator responsible for all aspects of operating the district to being the supervisor of a number of assistant superintendents who oversee the actual day-to-day operations. It is recommended that Human Resource course topics include the evaluation system for teachers, principals, and central office administration; investigation protocols; how to obtain legal counsel; working with legal counsel; contract negotiations; working with unions; and school law as it relates to personnel issues.

A third recommendation would be to offer a general course or seminar that addresses the “nuts and bolts” of the superintendent position. Course time may already be devoted to how to get the job, but this course would explore the wide range of duties, outside of educating students, that superintendents are responsible for. Topics would include media 101: social media, working with news reporters, website, marketing, branding; Crisis Management: bomb threats, active
shooter, faculty/student death; and Networking: creating a support system, dealing with the isolation of the position. Although significant time is often spent focusing on educating students during the superintendent certification program, time also needs to be devoted to helping prospective superintendents gain an understanding of the basic workings of school district transportation, food service, information technology, and facilities, all of which they will be responsible for.

A fourth recommendation to implement in superintendent certification programs is to spend time teaching future superintendents how to work with the school board. The school board plays a pivotal role in the success and tenure of a superintendent. Learning how to work with the school board as a whole, and individually with each member, is critical for prospective superintendents. Essential questions to be addressed could include: What are the predominant governance structures of a school board? What role do the superintendent and the board play in each structure? What are the legal requirements associated with school board meetings? What are effective strategies for communicating with the school board? Again, hearing from current superintendents regarding the strategies and tools being successfully used in the field would be extremely valuable for an aspiring superintendent. Learning what has worked and what didn’t work, and being exposed to a variety of methods, would begin to create a resource bank and network for future superintendents.

The overarching idea of the recommendations for revising the coursework for aspiring superintendents is to have the theoretical and conceptual material presented by faculty be paired with and presented by experienced superintendents representing urban and rural districts, as well as districts ranging in size from small to large, allowing for practical application of the information in a real-world context.
Implications for Future Research

I conclude my dissertation with four formal recommendations for future research.

Continued research on superintendents’ initial year in a school district is critical, particularly given that the average tenure of an urban superintendent is 3 years (Williams, 2004) and nationally the average tenure is 5–6 years (Glass, 1992; Hodgkinson & Montenegro, 1999), to enable leaders to increase student achievement.

A future study could examine the superintendent’s relationship with the internal school community from the perspective of both the superintendent and the internal community. The study would seek to determine what process and strategies were employed by the new superintendent and how effective the superintendent was in developing a trusting relationship with internal stakeholders. Interviews with classroom teachers, classified staff, administrators, and school board members would offer insight into their perspective on the relationship, its development, and level of trust attained with the superintendent.

A second research recommendation would be to continue to study the relationship between the school board and the superintendent in terms of the impact the quality of the relationship has on the educational system’s ability to increase student learning. It would be beneficial to examine those structures and relationships that have produced positive results in raising student learning levels. What are common characteristics possessed in those relationships and structures? What systems were established to sustain increased student learning as board membership changed during the superintendent’s tenure? How were discrepancies between the school board and superintendent handled to sustain the relationship?

A third future direction for research would be to conduct a follow-up study with superintendents in their second year and follow up with them again 3 years later. How effective
were the changes that they implemented and sustained? What is the current status of the relationship with the school board? Relationship with the district staff? With the community? Over time, how were the superintendents able to address discrepancies to achieve increased student learning during their tenure?

A final research recommendation is to examine the skillset demonstrated by superintendents who were able to increase student achievement while maintaining a positive relationship with stakeholders during their leadership tenure. What are common attributes, regardless of size or geographical location of superintendents, that allowed a superintendent to have a positive impact on student learning?

Today’s superintendent is faced with numerous competing factors that divide their time, energy, and effort. It is important, particularly for a new superintendent, to be attuned to the development of relationships with the school board, the internal school community, and the greater external community. No longer will strong managerial skills be sufficient to allow a superintendent to have a successful tenure in a school district. The ability to increase student learning, manage conflict, collaborate with others, develop community, and serve as an advocate for public education is of utmost importance to today’s superintendent.
REFERENCES


Callahan, R. E. (1962). *Education and the cult of efficiency: A study of the social forces that have shaped the administration of public schools.* Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.


APPENDIX A

SUPERINTENDENT PARTICIPANT LIST
### Superintendent Participant List

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Superintendent</th>
<th>Number of Districts Served as Superintendent</th>
<th>Years of Experience as Superintendent</th>
<th>Years in Education</th>
<th>Approximate Student Enrollment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kelly</td>
<td>≤1</td>
<td>1 year 3 months</td>
<td>&lt;34</td>
<td>&lt;4,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alex</td>
<td>≤1</td>
<td>1 year 4 months</td>
<td>&lt;34</td>
<td>&gt;4,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chris</td>
<td>≤1</td>
<td>1 year 3 months</td>
<td>&lt;34</td>
<td>&lt;4,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Devin</td>
<td>≤1</td>
<td>1 year 5 months</td>
<td>&lt;34</td>
<td>&lt;4,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harley</td>
<td>≤1</td>
<td>1 year 4 months</td>
<td>&gt;34</td>
<td>&gt;4,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jordan</td>
<td>≤1</td>
<td>1 year 3 months</td>
<td>&gt;34</td>
<td>&gt;4,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peyton</td>
<td>≤1</td>
<td>1 year 3 months</td>
<td>&gt;34</td>
<td>&gt;4,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drew</td>
<td>&gt;1</td>
<td>6 years 2 months</td>
<td>&lt;34</td>
<td>&gt;4,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Casey</td>
<td>&gt;1</td>
<td>22 years 3 months</td>
<td>&gt;34</td>
<td>&gt;4,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Addison</td>
<td>&gt;1</td>
<td>22 years 9 months</td>
<td>&gt;34</td>
<td>&lt;4,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hayden</td>
<td>&gt;1</td>
<td>22 years 3 months</td>
<td>&gt;34</td>
<td>&lt;4,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Interview Guide

Participant Name______________________________ Code # ______________

District:____________________ Years in District:_________ Years in Education____

Number of Years as Superintendent:_____________

Number of Districts Participant Superintendent of_______________________

Age*:__________ Ethnicity*:_______________ Gender:  Male_______ Female_______

Date of Interview:_________________ Location of Interview:___________________________

1. Tell me about your educational career history beginning with your first educational position to your current position as superintendent.

2. Tell me about the ___________ school district.

3. What really matters to the district?

4. How do you know these things matter in this district?

5. Describe what is at the heart/core of the ___________ school district.

6. How do you know that is the heart/core of the ___________ school district?

7. Recall your understanding of the district’s culture as learned from the search and interview process. How does your current understanding of the district’s culture differ from 18 months ago? (Potential questions: What has changed? Why has it changed?)

8. How have you gotten to know the district’s culture?

9. Please describe your socialization process into the district culture.

10. Describe the beliefs and values that guide you.

11. What really matters to you?

12. What is at the heart/core of what really matters to you?
13. Tell me about a time when the district’s culture and your values were most aligned.

14. How were you able to use this alignment to accomplish a goal/priority?

15. Tell me about a time when there was a gap between the district’s culture and your values.

16. What was challenging about this time?

17. Describe how you handled/navigated those differences.

18. What have you learned about yourself, the district’s culture, and your relationship with the district during your superintendency?

19. What else should I know that I haven’t asked?
APPENDIX C

RESEARCH STUDY CONSENT FORM
Research Study Consent Form

Study Title: Superintendents’ Perceptions of District Culture

Researchers:
Primary Investigator: Kristin S. Huggins, Ph.D. Education Department
Assistant Professor, Educational Leadership
Phone: (360) 546-9410

Co-Investigator: Shannon K. Thompson
Doctoral Candidate, Educational Leadership
Phone: (360) 271-3107

You are being asked to take part in a research project carried out by Dr. Kristin S. Huggins and Shannon K. Thompson. This form explains the project and your part in it if you decide to join the project. Please read the form carefully; take as much time as you need. Ask the researcher to explain anything you don’t understand. You can decide not to join the study. If you join the project, you can change your mind later or quit at any time. There will be no penalty or loss of services or benefits if you decide to not take part in the project or quit later. This study is part of a dissertation research study.

What is this study about?

This research study is being done to understand superintendents’ perceptions of their district culture, their own values, and the intersection of the district’s culture and the superintendent’s values and beliefs.

You are being asked to take part because you are in your second-year as superintendent in the district in Washington State.

Taking part in this study will take about 2 hours.

You cannot take part in this study if you are unwilling to be audiotaped.

What will I be asked to do if I am in this project?

If you take part in the project, you will be asked to answer questions in an interview either in person or via computer applications used for video conferencing. This interview will take approximately one and a half hours to two hours. The interview will be audio recorded. You may, at any time, decline to answer a question in the interview. Additionally, you will be asked to provide the researcher artifacts related to the topic of district culture. Finally, you will be asked to review the initial conclusions that the researcher draws from your interview via e-mail if you so desire. This will take approximately thirty minutes.
Are there any benefits to me if I am in this project?

There is no direct benefit to you from being in this study. However, if you take part in this study, you may help others in the future.

Are there any risks to me if I am in this project?

The potential risks from taking part in this project are discomfort, distress, or stress in discussing perceptions of district culture and potential gaps that may exist between the district’s culture and superintendent’s values. Additionally, the loss of confidentiality is a risk but steps including keeping data in password protected computers and assigning pseudonyms to participants are being used to minimize this risk.

Will my information be kept private?

The data for this study will be kept confidential to the extent allowed by federal and state law. No published results will identify you, and your name will not be associated with the findings. Under certain circumstances, information that identifies you may be released for internal and external reviews of this study.

Your privacy will be maintained because the interview will be done privately. Additionally, data will be stored in a password protected computer and you will be assigned a pseudonym for the collection of all data. You will not have interaction with other participants to further protect your privacy.

All researchers and the Instructional Review Board (IRB) for Washington State University will have access to the data in this study.

Voice recordings will be made of your interview. They will be stored on a password-protected computer.

The results of this study may be published or presented at professional meetings, but the identities of all research participants will remain confidential.

The data for this project will be kept for 3 years.

Are there any costs or payments for being in this project?

No, there are no costs associated with participating in this study.

You will not receive money or any other form of compensation for taking part in this study.
Who can I talk to if I have questions?

If you have questions about this project or the information in this form, please contact one of the researchers

Kristin S. Huggins, Ph.D., Education Department
Assistant Professor, Educational Leadership
Phone: (360) 546-9410
Email: k.huggins@wsu.vancouver.edu

or

Shannon Thompson
Doctoral Candidate
Phone: (360) 271-3107
Email: thompson4junior@wavecable.com

What are my rights as a research study volunteer?

Your participation in this project is completely voluntary. You may choose not to be a part of this study. There will be no penalty to you if you choose not to take part. You may choose not to answer specific questions or to stop participating at any time.

What does my signature on this consent form mean?

Your signature on this form means that:

- You understand the information given to you.
- You have been able to ask the researcher questions and state any concerns.
- The researcher has responded to your questions and concerns.
- You believe you understand the project and the potential benefits and risks that are involved.
Statement of Consent

I give my voluntary consent to take part in this study. I will be given a copy of this consent document for my records.

________________________________________
Signature of Participant       Date

_______________________________   __________________
Signature of Person Obtaining Consent   Date

_______________________________   __________________
Printed Name of Participant   Role in the Research Study

Statement of Person Obtaining Informed Consent

I have carefully explained to the person taking part in the project what he or she can expect.

I certify that when this person signs this form, to the best of my knowledge, he or she understands the purpose, procedures, potential benefits, and potential risks of participation.

I also certify that he or she:

- Speaks the language used to explain this project.
- Reads well enough to understand this form or, if not, this person is able to hear and understand when the form is read to him or her.
- Does not have any problems that could make it hard to understand what it means to take part in this project.

________________________________________
Signature of Person Obtaining Consent       Date
Dear (Title). (Last Name),

My name is Shannon Thompson and I am working on my doctoral program at Washington State University in Educational Leadership. I am the Director of Teaching and Learning for the South Kitsap School District in Port Orchard, Washington. My dissertation research is to examine the impact of culture on district level leadership, specifically the superintendent. The study will explore the experiences and perceptions of second year superintendents regarding their school district culture, the district's cultural socialization, and how superintendents reconcile any discrepancies between their core values and the school district's culture.

A review of the list of superintendents hired for the school year identified you as a potential study participant. I would like to invite you to participate in an interview that will enable me to collect qualitative information on how superintendents develop an understanding of the district culture and how that understanding influences leadership. The study population will include superintendents across Washington State representing male and female, large and small, urban and rural districts, and Eastern and Western Washington.

If you agree to take part in this study, you will be asked to participate in one (1) interview that will require approximately ninety minutes to two hours of your time. The interview will be scheduled based upon your calendar and availability, if possible during April or May.

Your participation is greatly appreciated and your leadership experience would enhance the research study. Please find the interview questions and consent form attached for your reference and review. I would like to follow up with a phone call during the week of April 7 to discuss your participation and potentially schedule the interview, which may be conducted via telephone, Skype, or in person at a location of your convenience.

I would be happy to answer any questions you may have about the research study. I can be reached at thompsons@skitsap.wednet.edu or thompson4junior@wavecable.com or by phone at 360-271-3107 or 360-874-7051 (work). Additionally, you may contact my program chairs, Gay Selby at gselby@vancouver.wsu.edu or Dr. Kristin Huggins at k.huggins@vancouver.wsu.edu.

Thank you very much for considering participation in my dissertation research.

Take care,

Shannon Thompson