OBTAINING AND SUSTAINING DISTRICT LEADERS: MENTORING AND SUPPORT FOR NOVICE SUPERINTENDENTS

By

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To the Faculty of Washington State University:

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Turnover is a serious problem facing the American public school superintendency. Relatively little research has been done to identify and describe the types of support that superintendents and aspirants would find beneficial. This qualitative study examined how novice superintendents describe the support and mentoring experiences they have received throughout their careers. Additionally, it provides insight into the topics and structure of mentoring that they perceive would be useful to them as superintendents. Interviews with novice superintendents identified through a purposeful sampling model were used to collect data for this research. Nine superintendents were interviewed for the study from a variety of locations in a single state.

The study revealed that the supports that superintendents receive throughout their career trajectories are iterative, with both the topics and the sources of that support changing throughout their superintendency journeys. Those journeys included initial interest in the role, training, and aspiration to the role and to a superintendent position, and clear themes emerged in each phase of
their career trajectory. Additionally, a clear delineation between technical and psychological support emerged.

This study contributes to the body of literature on the support that superintendents receive by providing clear information about the types and origins of support from which superintendents benefited as well as the additional support they wished they had received. It provides implications for further research on this topic as well as implications for practice to support novice superintendents.
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CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

Background

During the first decade of the 21st century, accountability for schools and districts in the United States has increased dramatically (Bredeson & Kose, 2007; Lashway, 2002; MacIver & Farley, 2003; Waters & Marzano, 2009). The increase has been characterized as a “relentless growth of standards-based accountability systems” (Lashway, 2002, p. 1). As a consequence of that growth, expectations for superintendents leading school systems have changed (Bredeson & Kose, 2007; Goodman & Zimmerman, 2000; Kowalski, 2013; Marsh, 2003, MacIver & Farley, 2003). The role that superintendents play in districts represents a critical factor when implementing change to try to meet the rigorous demands of the increased accountability, and superintendents “continue to play a large role in the life of public schools” (Massell & Goertz, 1999, p. 1).

Beyond merely playing a role, the superintendent serves as a pivotal conductor in school improvement efforts; indeed, “leadership that is focused on well-defined, instruction-related issues over an extended period of time is most likely to succeed with implementation of policy and improvement in [a] district” (Weinbaum, 2005). Although schools are often considered “the units of change within a school district” (Bauer & Brazer, 2012), the superintendent assumes “district level leadership responsibilities that have a statistically significant correlation with student academic achievement” (Waters & Marzano, 2006, p. 5). Those responsibilities consist in part of collaborative goal setting, use of a multimeasure accountability system, creation of nonnegotiable goals for achievement and instruction, systemic use of data, strategic engagement with state reform policies and resources, targeted and phased focuses of improvement, use of
resources to support achievement and instructional goals, board of directors (sometimes referred to as school boards or simply as boards; the term board of directors will be used throughout this study), alignment and support of district goals, and monitoring goals for achievement and instruction (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Walstrom, 2006; Waters & Marzano, 2006). Additionally, superintendents need strong skills in communication to effect change (Kowalski, 2013) so that they may foster “the rich soil of trust, commitment and collaboration” needed to implement change and increases in student achievement (Duffy, 2003, p. 21).

The role of superintendent has also been characterized as “helping a group develop shared understanding about the organization . . . and its activities and goals that can undergird a sense of purpose and vision” (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008, p. 507). The type of leadership required of a superintendent, in concert with the board of directors, to develop that shared understanding is essential to forming a community vision for children, crafting long-range goals and plans for raising the achievement of every child, improving the professional development and status of teachers and other staff and ensuring that the guidance, support and resources needed for success are available. (Goodman & Zimmerman, 2000, p. 1)

None of the duties ascribed to the role of the superintendent can be accomplished in the short term, and the emphasis on the partnership with the board of directors alone indicates the need for time to allow a collaborative and trusting relationship to develop.

When a superintendent’s longevity in a district in the role of superintendent allows these myriad roles to be successfully accomplished, those serving as superintendents “can have a profound positive impact on student achievement in their districts” (Waters & Marzano, 2009). Additional benefits from successfully meeting these demands of the superintendent role are
indirect and “help to create conditions that are viewed by school leaders as enhancing and supporting their work” (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008, p. 521). Examples of those types of indirect benefits would be perceptions of district staff morale or perceived benefits of continuity and stability in leadership. Frequent superintendent turnover, however, prevents almost all of the positive benefits including the aforementioned shared understanding of purpose and long-term goal development, from being achieved and, therefore, also precludes the positive impacts of such fulfillment. Absent the stability to accomplish those ideals, the entire system may be negatively impacted due to “discontinuity in organization goals, policies and procedures” (Alsbury, 2003, p. 668). Even further, turnovers in either school board of directors members or superintendents “make it difficult to sustain change . . . because needed improvements are often eliminated or de-emphasized after key leaders leave office” (Kowalski, 2013, p. 136).

Given that most of the spheres of influence used by a superintendent to implement instructional change and influence student learning require an extended period of time to develop, turnover is a serious problem facing the American superintendency. Not surprisingly, the turnover in the role has led to the characterization of the position as a revolving door (Grissom & Anderson, 2012). The national average annual rate of public school superintendent turnover is between 14% and 16% with the mean tenure of a superintendent being 5 to 6 years (American Association of School Administrators [AASA], 2013). The nationwide problem is mirrored in the state in which this study was conducted. During the past 5 years in that state, 164 out of 295 districts have changed superintendents at least one time (M. Armstrong, personal communication, February 1, 2013). That number represents 56% of the districts in the state. Many of those districts have had multiple superintendent changes during the same 5-year span; there have been 206 total superintendent changes in the study’s state from 2008–2009 to 2012–
2013 (M. Armstrong, personal communication, February 1, 2013). The numbers and subsequent characterization are interesting but of themselves are not necessarily worrisome; it is the greater impact that this level of turnover has on student learning that is of concern. The turnover creates an environment in which the ability to provide “consistent, strong, and visionary direction to enable schools to achieve their goals and objectives related to student learning” has proved challenging (Daresh, 2004, p. 495).

Before a discussion of how to avoid turnover can commence, it is important to understand why superintendents leave their positions. Most broadly, dissatisfaction on the part of the superintendent, the school of directors, or the community, either individually or collectively, can lead to superintendent turnover. At times, community dissatisfaction leads to board of directors turnover through elections, and then to superintendent turnover (Alsbury, 2003). This type of turnover is a part of the dissatisfaction theory present in research on the superintendency and board of directors relations (Weninger & Stout, 1989). Whatever the genesis of the dissatisfaction, it can be very difficult to determine the actual reasons for a departure given that “superintendent turnover lacks a well-developed research base” (Grissom & Anderson, 2012, p. 1148). That difficulty can be explained at least in part by “a natural and understandable reluctance [of] superintendents who have been fired to want to document the reasons for some researcher” (Eaton & Sharp, 1996, p. 521).

Departures from a superintendent position are generally characterized as either voluntary or involuntary. Both superintendents and boards of directors often strive to make a forced dismissal look like voluntary turnover (Eaton & Sharp, 1996; Grissom & Anderson, 2012). Consequences for both boards of directors and superintendents can ensue when a superintendent is fired. For the board of directors, the consequences of terminating the superintendent’s contract
may include public disfavor, staff dissatisfaction, or monetary expense, which may include compensation of future years’ salary or benefits. For a superintendent, the costs include carrying the stigma of being fired to the next job search and the personal toll that a dismissal takes on a person’s confidence and sense of self-efficacy (Goens, 2005). It is likely that, faced with the challenges of a dismissal, both superintendents and boards of directors are willing to “make dismissal look like voluntary turnover in exchange for [the superintendent’s] quietly leaving before the contract period expire[s]” (Eaton & Sharp, 1996, p. 521). Kowalski’s 2011 work *The Decennial Study of the Superintendency* includes data gathered from 1,838 superintendents and reports that nonrenewal and dismissal combined represent less than 3% of total superintendent turnover rates, but this number is likely suppressed given the host of reasons for which boards of directors and superintendents avoid terminations. Reasons for nonrenewal generally include challenges with interpersonal relations, including problems with the board of directors, central office staff, or community members; incompetence, including the inability to conduct effective meetings or prepare accurate and compliant state reports; problems with facilities; problems with teachers, including unresolved contracts; and problems with finance (Eaton & Sharp, 1996).

Voluntary departures represent a much larger portion of the turnover. Of those, seeking a higher performing district (11%), school board conflict (15%), and assuming a new challenge (30%) were the most frequently cited reasons for leaving a district (Kowalski, 2011). Conflict with the board of directors provides an example in which superintendents were savvy enough to know that their tenure in a district might be at risk. Based on the composition of the membership of the board of directors, and the interactions between themselves and the board of directors’ members, the superintendents recognized challenges to their leadership and to the success of
their relationship. Because of those challenges they could readily see that, if they chose not to leave, they might find themselves grappling with an involuntary termination.

Although the reasons for superintendent turnover may not be widely researched and may be at least partially speculative, the impacts of that turnover on districts and student learning are undeniable and much more thoroughly documented than the reasons behind the turnover, as is indicated by the aforementioned research on the superintendent’s influence on student learning. Given the turnover in the role, the potential positive influence of superintendents on student learning may be suppressed or negated.

**Problem Statement**

The impact of superintendent turnover goes beyond a general sense of lack of direction or staff dissatisfaction. It extends to a negative impact on student learning. Positive school reform, particularly in an environment of change, becomes difficult if not impossible to enact when there is a great deal of turnover in the superintendent role (Alsbury, 2003). Superintendent tenure is positively correlated with achievement, and “these positive effects appear to manifest themselves as early as two years into a superintendent’s tenure” (Waters & Marzano, 2005, p. 4).

Given that successful accomplishment of certain job responsibilities and the superintendent’s length of tenure positively influence student learning and provide other positive, indirect benefits for districts, the next step is to consider what can be done to decrease turnover rates. Unfortunately, the effectiveness of superintendent mentoring programs in mitigating turnover is not a well-researched topic (Alsbury & Hackman, 2005). Research from other management positions and sectors other than education provide insight regarding the potential for mentoring to decrease turnover (Ehrich, Hansford, & Tennent, 2004; Lentz & Allen, 2009; Sosik, Godshal, & Yammarino, 2004). In those fields, mentoring appears to provide a plethora
of options that can help with involuntary turnover as well as with turnover that is characterized as voluntary but, in fact, may not be. Given what is known about superintendent turnover and the positive impacts that superintendent longevity has on a district, it is crucial to continue to study mentoring, specifically as it applies to the unique role of a superintendent of public schools. Little research has been completed to qualitatively examine superintendents’ perspectives on this important topic.

A Call for Action

Almost half (49%) of superintendents who responded to the decennial survey of superintendents indicated that they did not plan to be a practicing superintendent in the year 2015 (Kowalski, 2011, p. xv). This survey result suggests “the probability of substantial turnover in the next few years” (Kowalski, 2011, p. xv). Many novice superintendents will likely be starting their careers as superintendents, assuming the vacated roles. Given that turnover and what the research reveals about the need to have superintendent longevity in the position to maximize positive impacts of the role, it is imperative that mentoring as a potential tool for mitigating turnover be examined and the results used to inform practice both in superintendent preparation programs and in state and regional agencies that support superintendents. As one researcher eloquently stated:

Calls for the “demise” of the school district office appear largely premature . . . it is time to bring the district back into the mainstream of research on school reform . . . the role of the district central office of influencing those factors that raise the quality of classroom instruction cannot be ignored. (MacIver & Farley, 2003, p. 29)

Because of the importance of the district leadership and the superintendent role, it is critical that the superintendency continue to be examined in light of turnover concerns. By studying novice
superintendents, a researcher can discern how new leaders receive and accept support as they consider moving into the role and how they receive support once they assume the role.

**Purpose of the Study and Research Questions**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to answer three research questions in an endeavor to better understand the role of mentoring as it relates to the role of public school superintendent. The three research questions were: How do novice superintendents describe their mentoring experiences? How do novice superintendents describe the role of mentoring in their career? How do novice superintendents perceive mentoring experiences impacting their retention in the superintendency? The insights gained from participating novice superintendents contribute to the research base on mentoring and the superintendency and provide suggestions for additional research in this arena. In addition to those contributions, the results will be used to help guide practice in both superintendent preparation programs and superintendent support agencies in order to provide the types and topic of support that can best serve novice superintendents as they strive to be successful in their role while navigating the challenges and demands of the position.

**Significance of the Study**

The research findings in this study should be useful to novice superintendents, those who set policies in superintendent certification programs as well as those in state, regional, or local agencies that provide support to novice superintendents. From the findings in this study, they can discern that novice superintendents receive support and mentoring from people, organizations, and opportunities. Further, the findings from this study also describe how novice superintendents characterize the formal mentoring programs in which they have participated and have found to be of varying efficacy. The findings of this study also contribute to the research
base on the types of support that novice superintendents indicate would support them in their work, including boardsmanship, evaluation, and ways to combat isolation in their role. This research helps to fill an identified void in research and contributes to the literature on the topic of mentoring and the superintendency. Further, the results and findings from this study inform both suggestions for practice and directions for future research.

**Overview of the Methodology**

In a study of how practicing superintendents discuss their experiences, uses of, and need for mentoring, as in any study, the design is critical; if the study is to produce high-quality research that can be used to increase the understanding of superintendants’ perceptions of mentoring, a deliberate and thoughtful design must be employed. When selecting the design for this study on novice superintendents’ perceptions of mentoring, I considered the research methodology, participants, data collection and analysis, the limitations of the study as well as their mitigation, and my position as the researcher in this work.

An examination of the phenomenon of how practicing superintendents perceive mentoring revealed that a qualitative research approach would best meet the objective to explore this topic and develop a detailed understanding of this phenomenon. A qualitative approach allows the researcher to explore the problem in a “flexible, evolving and emergent” manner (Merriam, 2009, p. 18) when “little is known about the problem” and a deep or detailed understanding of a central phenomenon is sought (Creswell, 2008, p. 51). The dissertation focuses on the phenomenon of mentoring to learn about the “lived experiences” of superintendents (Merriam, 2009, p. 24).

I used a purposeful sampling model (Seidman, 2006) to select participants who represented a typical case: early career (i.e., less than 5 years of experience) superintendents, in
districts of fewer than 5,500 full-time equivalent students in a single state. Nine participants
were interviewed to reach a point of saturation. Interviews were conducted in a “person to
person encounter in which one person elicits information from another” (Merriam, 2009, p. 88)
to gain phenomenological information from the participant’s “everyday lived world . . . and his
or her relation to it” (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009, p. 28). All of the interviews except one were
conducted face to face; due to time and travel limitations, the final interview was conducted over
the phone.

**Terms and Definitions**

Throughout this study, several definitions and terms are used that merit explanation for
clarity of purpose. First, the terms school board, board of directors, and board are used
interchangeably throughout research. For the purposes of this study, except when taken from
direct quotes, the term board of directors will be used to describe the governing board of a
district and the superintendent’s supervising body. Additionally, most states have regional
service areas to serve districts in smaller geographic areas. For the purposes of this study, those
service areas will be called Regional Educational Units or REUs. Statewide agencies, whether
professional organizations or actual state governing bodies, are also included in this study. To
preserve the confidentiality of this study, the state government governing bodies will be referred
to as state agencies (SAs) and the professional membership organizations will be referred to as
professional organizations (POs).

**Limitations and Mitigations**

Though extensive thought and use of research informed the design and methods of this
study, it is not without its limitations. One of the limitations is found in the researcher herself;
given that I was an instrument, my inexperience as an interviewer had to be addressed. For that
reason, I researched interview techniques and carefully applied the techniques I had gained an understanding of through that research in order to compensate for my lack of field experience in this arena. Another limitation of the research is that it was geographically bound to a single state. As is the case in each state, the state agencies and REUs had developed supports for superintendents and mechanisms for mentoring that are unique to that state. This geographic bounding, and the resultant limited mentoring experiences for participants, ties the study to a limited region and lends itself to concerns about transferability. A third limitation of the study is that the time available with each interviewee at each site was limited (Creswell, 2008), which may have affected the trust needed for honest and reflective interview participation. Though I strove to create a risk-free atmosphere, I was nonetheless a stranger to most of the participants and therefore may not have had their complete trust. Finally, my positionality is a limitation of this study; “it [the researcher’s positionality] is still a significant aspect of the ways in which researchers are read and interpreted by research participants. It is therefore also an ethical consideration that requires reflection throughout the research process” (Hopkins, 2007, p. 387).

As a practicing superintendent who received mentoring throughout all aspects of my career, I had to be careful to recognize and acknowledge my own biases on this topic to be able to accurately study and code the responses of the participating superintendents rather than make those responses fit into my own preconceived notions regarding mentoring and the superintendency.

**Organization of the Study**

This dissertation is divided into five chapters. Chapter One introduces the problem and the background of the study. In addition, it provides a rationale for why this research is needed. Further, the first chapter explains the significance of this study and its contributions to the
research on the topic of mentoring and the superintendent. A summary of the methodology and limitations of the study lend further insight into understanding this study.

Chapter Two is a review of the literature that first examines the research to provide historic consideration of mentoring, offers definitions of mentoring, and reviews the functions of mentoring in order to establish a common language and understanding to use when discussing this phenomenon. Next, I examine the literature pertaining to mentoring as it applies to the superintendency. Merits and challenges of mentoring, the following section, provides a summary of the literature detailing the positive and negative aspects of mentoring. Research concerning specific mentoring topics, including superintendent and board of directors relationships, superintendent evaluation, and isolation in the role of the superintendent, are also considered. Finally, the research concerning the most effective practices in mentoring program design is discussed.

Chapter Three details the methodology of the study and offers a comprehensive justification for use of a qualitative research design. The methods used in the study include an explanation of the selection of participants and a detailed summary of the data collection and analysis methods. Also, extensive consideration is devoted to the ethical concerns and limitations of the study. Finally, the third chapter considers the positionality of the researcher and the impact of that positionality on the trustworthiness of the findings of this study.

Chapter Four describes the results of the study. Those results include descriptions of the people, organizations, and opportunities from which novice superintendents received support throughout their careers. Additionally, the chapter provides a chronological analysis of the iterative supports that novice superintendents received during all phases of their careers, including encouragement of an interest in or consideration of the role of superintendent; support
during their preparation phase; support during their aspirant phase; and support during their first 3 years in the role. Finally, the fourth chapter provides an overview of the format and topics of mentoring that novice superintendents indicated would be the most helpful to them in their early years in the role.

Chapter Five summarizes the major findings of the results presented in Chapter Three. Additionally, the final chapter provides recommendations for both future academic research and clinical practice. Topics for future research discussed in this chapter include gender differences in the use and perspectives of mentoring, boardsmanship and its impact on the superintendency, and mentoring programs and their effectiveness. Recommendations for clinical practice include conducting a needs assessment prior to entering a mentoring program, and taking a more structured approach to mentoring. Recommended for inclusion in that more structured approach are an analysis of the needs assessment, training for mentors, inclusion of predetermined topics in mentoring programs, and training in specific and deliberate reflective practices.

Summary

Few studies have been conducted that examine mentoring in its relationship to the role of superintendent. This study will contribute in a meaningful way to both the research and practice of the topic of mentoring and the superintendency. Understanding the impact of the supports and mentoring that superintendents receive during their career trajectories is necessary to better encourage leaders to enter this challenging role and to help them be successful once they have achieved the role of superintendent.
CHAPTER TWO
LITERATURE REVIEW

Turnover in the context of the school district superintendency is a frequently discussed topic in educational leadership circles. A cursory ERIC Proquest search of superintendency and turnover yielded 186 results. A Google Scholar search of the same keywords produced a more spectacular 21,800 results. Superintendent turnover “creates disruption in district management and can negatively affect staff morale, funding for district operations and community support, potentially hurting student achievement” in addition to “diverting funds and other resources away from core district functions” when searching for a new superintendent (Grissom & Mitani, 2016, p. 352). Superintendent turnover comes about for a variety of reasons, including retirement, termination, and resignation. Similarly, a person need not look far to find concerns about current and future superintendent applicant availability and possible superintendent shortages in the future. These concerns, on the other end of the career spectrum from turnover, illustrate that some potential, trained, and licensed superintendent aspirants never obtain superintendencies either because they choose not to pursue the position or because they are never hired for a position. A consideration of the research on mentoring and the superintendency, both for aspirants and seated superintendents, contributes to the knowledge base about superintendent success and failure, attainment of the position, job satisfaction, and job performance. The literature reviewed for this research grounds and provides the foundation for this study. The topics addressed in the reviewed research are: defining mentoring in its many iterations; narrowing that definition as it relates to the superintendency; clarifying positive aspects of mentoring; exploring negative consequences of mentoring; examining ways to design mentoring programs to ensure that the intended outcomes are achieved; considering the research on board
and superintendent relationships; and scrutinizing the body of research on superintendent evaluation. The body of research on these topics yields a compelling argument that more research and thoughtful, deliberate, and well-designed support for superintendents is needed.

**Definitions of the Phenomenon of Mentoring**

Mentoring, as it pertains to the superintendency or any other field or career, is an oft and variously defined phenomenon. Scholars’ definitions range from narrow, operationalized views to broader, more global explanations (Daresh, 2004; Kram, 1988; McClellan, Ivory, & Dominguez, 2009; Mertz, 2004). Some approaches create models in which the mentor’s role is the definition, and others use the actions of the mentor to explain the process of mentoring (Eby et al., 2013; Mertz, 2004). After a common understanding of mentoring as it applies to the field of the superintendency is developed, an examination of mentoring in the career trajectory of superintendents and the strengths and weaknesses of the superintendent mentoring functions is possible. In examining those aspects of mentoring, a researcher can better see the myriad of ways in which the superintendency and various conceptions and functions of mentoring interact.

Mentoring generally falls into two categories: career functions and psychosocial functions, though others may use different terms for those functions (Allen, Eby, Poteet, Lentz, & Lima, 2004; Kram, 1988). Career functions are future-oriented and pertain to helping the protégé move forward or achieve new levels of responsibility or prestige in his or her career (Mertz, 2004). These functions include sponsorship, in which a mentor is willing to be a source of testimony and support for a protégé’s career both within an organization and with external people and entities; exposure and visibility, in which the mentor provides opportunities for networking and recognition; protection, wherein the mentor buffers the protégé from people and events that may prove damaging to his or her career and also mitigates issues if they do arise;
and provides challenging assignments, which allow the protégé to develop skills in leadership competencies and receive credit for visible work (Ehrich, Hansford, & Tennent, 2004; Freeley & Seinfeld, 2012; Kram, 1988; Mertz, 2004).

Unlike career mentoring with its orientation to the future, the psychosocial functions of mentoring are focused on present events (Mertz, 2004). Psychosocial functions of mentoring include role modeling, which provides the protégé with a view of the values and work habits of the mentor; acceptance and confirmation, in which the mentor provides feedback and encouragement to the protégé; counseling, discussion, and feedback to provide the protégé with opportunities for reflection and consideration of leadership issues with an experienced leader; and friendship (Ehrich, Hansford, & Tennent, 2004; Freeley & Seinfeld, 2012; Kram, 1988).

Mertz (2004) provided a very specific six-tiered pyramadic model in order to examine the career and psychosocial mentoring relationships and assigned terms to the people who serve in those roles. The psychosocial mentors include role models, teachers, and advisors, and the career mentors include sponsors, patrons, and mentors (Mertz, 2004). These roles are in order from least to most involved in the protégé’s development, and they vary not only in role but also in intensity and commitment (Mertz, 2004). In this model’s penultimate role of mentor, the mentor becomes invested in the protégé’s success (Mertz, 2004). It is entirely possible that one person may serve multiple functions throughout a mentoring relationship as the needs of the protégé change or the commitment or the intensity of the relationship grows. This summary is not meant to suggest that each of these functions is served by different people; instead, it is meant to demonstrate that different functions are warranted at various times.
Role of Mentoring in the Superintendency

Mentoring of the superintendent specifically, or of educational leaders generally, has traits not found in some other career fields. One scholar suggested that it differs because it focuses on “immediate survivorship and skills needed to ensure personal enhancement” and allows protégés to learn the “policies, procedures and normal practices in a school district” (Daresh, 2004, pp. 501–502). In addition to meeting those most immediate needs, others posit, “administrative clinical practice . . . can be greatly enhanced through focused mentoring provided by qualified professionals in order to provide role socialization and increase the capacity to meet the demands of school leadership” (Brown-Ferrigno & Muth, 2004, p. 470). Another group of scholars operationalize the definition of superintendent mentoring in a much broader fashion, suggesting that, given the communication requirements and job expectations of a superintendent, “everyone is the mentor of the superintendent and the superintendent is the mentor of everyone” (Dominguez, Ivory, & McClellan, 2005 p. 10).

The definitions of mentoring and the operationalization of its functions apply directly to the career trajectories of superintendents. The job of superintendent is a complex one; as one researcher suggests, “The complexities of modern-day education, together with today’s political realities, economic constraints and social problems, make the job of superintendent one of the most challenging of all chief executive undertakings” (Goodman & Zimmerman, 2000, p. 8). To address those complexities, as protégés receive various types of mentoring throughout their superintendency journey, they develop an understanding of the role of the superintendent, acquire additional skills and knowledge, and network and reflect as a result of being mentored (Kamler, 2006). Those understandings and acquisitions occur throughout the career phases of
the superintendent, with some being ongoing and others arising during limited phases in the journey.

When a person is beginning the superintendent journey, frequently someone has encouraged the potential superintendent to pursue leadership challenges in the form of the superintendency and has seen that level of leadership potential in the protégé; this psychosocial function of mentoring reflects the importance of mentoring in the context of encouraging leaders to aspire to the role of superintendent (Freeley & Seinfeld, 2012; Garn & Brown, 2008; Mendez-Morse, 2004). Further, these protégés have often had mentors who provided role modeling in the areas of “work ethic, humility, collaboration, [and] courage” and who have inspired them to consider a leadership position (Freeley & Seinfeld, 2012, p. 94).

A common next step in the career trajectory for the protégé is the undertaking of an academic program in which both technical and adaptive aspects of the superintendent’s role are taught to, and learned by, potential future superintendents. This type of mentoring falls into the category of academic mentoring, which is associated with “improvement in academic achievement, scholarly productivity, professional development, identity development, academic persistence and psychological health” (Eby et al., 2013, p. 442). A part of the program of the superintendency is an internship or work experience during which psychosocial and career functions are, ideally, provided by a mentor. During this phase, the superintendent supervising the intern superintendent may continue to provide psychosocial skills, such as a sense of competency; but they likely also begin to provide career support in the form of coaching, providing challenging assignments as well as exposure and visibility during this important phase of the future superintendent’s learning process.
After completing a superintendent internship, some former interns decide that they wish to become superintendents and become aspirants to the position. Again during this phase, mentors may serve dually in career and psychosocial roles as they both support and encourage the aspirant, but they may also sponsor the protégé through contact with search agents or employees of potential employing districts on behalf of the protégé. All the while, the future superintendent is trying to make network connections, develop a polished application, prepare for interviews, and weigh prospective positions. It is not hard to see that during this process psychosocial functions, providing encouragement and support, and career functions could both profitably be used. However, at this time, career functions become more critical to the aspirant whose primary objective is to find a position in the field (Kram, 1988).

Once a job has been offered, a new superintendent’s mentoring may include technical aspects of accepting a position and creating an entrance plan for the assumption of the role. These duties may fall to an academic advisor or a career mentor who is willing to provide that feedback. An example of the technical aspects is the negotiation of the superintendent contract. The contract becomes “a symbol of the desired relationship between the board and superintendent, and they are very local in nature” (Feuerstein, 2008). Given the contract’s role as a symbol, and because a newly hired superintendent has generally never negotiated an individual contract before, help may be needed in considering the document. A mentor who serves as advisor to provide professional development usually provides that assistance (Mertz, 2004).

After the new leader has successfully negotiated a contract and moved from aspirant to novice superintendent, the learning, and ideally the mentoring, continues. The need for mentoring persists due to the ever-changing public education landscape and the challenges of the
position. As previously indicated, the superintendency is a complex role, and that complexity creates a need to “understand how superintendents learn from others in their world” (McClellan, Ivory, & Dominguez, 2004, p. 349). That complexity and the need to continuously hone relevant skills and knowledge are verified by the definition of the role. In fact:

Most superintendent job descriptions verify the position is demanding and complex. Officeholders are supposed to have knowledge and skills essential for leading and managing . . . in many communities, a superintendent is responsible for the largest local transportation program, food service program, and public facility program. At the same time, he or she must possess substantial knowledge pertaining to pedagogy, psychology, assessment, planning and school improvement. (Kowalski, 2013, p. 25)

Perhaps, given that description, it should be unsurprising that superintendents continue to require mentoring once in the position. At this point in their career, superintendents rely most heavily on peer superintendents, particularly those in similar districts, to “inform elements of their practice” (Kowalski, 2011). More than 65% of superintendents said the influence had on them by peer superintendents was considerable or moderate (Kowalski, 2011, p. 58). A superintendent who has moved through these iterative aspects of mentoring, may cycle back from the psychosocial to the career functions if he or she seeks another position; at that point the phases of a job search, and the mentoring needs therein, may be repeated. Subsequent mentoring takes a less linear progression and a more in a cyclical one.

**Positive Aspects of Mentoring**

Research demonstrates that a different aspects of mentoring in the context of the superintendency are positive. The various psychosocial roles, such as role model, teacher, and advisor, have the benefit of being focused on the present and supporting the needs of the protégé
as they emerge (Mertz, 2004). Those roles are less time and energy intensive than the career functions of mentoring, and a person fulfilling these mentoring functions may efficiently and successfully support many protégés (Mertz, 2004). Additionally, little risk exists for mentors engaged in these forms of mentoring; because they are not sponsoring the protégé directly, it is unlikely that they will be somehow sullied if the protégé’s efforts do not manifest themselves in successful and ethical leadership (Mertz, 2004). Superintendents, particularly women, value the role of mentoring in their career and report that “they perceived formal and informal mentoring relationships to play an important role in the ascension into the superintendency” (Garn & Brown, 2008, p. 55) or report that a practicing or retired superintendent helped them get their position as a superintendent (Brunner & Grogan, 2007). These career functions help to advance the aspirant’s career. Sponsorship, coaching, and protection, all aspects of this type of mentoring, have the advantage of providing that much-needed support to aspirants. Additionally, these functions of mentoring are very time intensive and involve an investment of the mentor’s reputation and, therefore, must be carefully considered before the role is assumed by the mentor (Mertz, 2004). At this level of mentoring, mentors and protégés become linked in a common purpose (Mertz, 2004). Thus, a high level of confidence and trust must exist between the mentor and the protégé to allow them to work together at that level.

**Negative Aspects of Mentoring**

Although mentoring is generally positive, “poorly designed mentoring programs can result in mentoring relationships that are detrimental to protégé development” (Alsbury & Hackman, 2005, p. 170). Mentoring is not a universally positive experience and within any of the functions of mentoring, problems and dysfunctions may arise. At times, protégés receive mentoring from those considered to be marginal mentors, who “may disappoint their protégés or
who may or may not meet some or even most of the protégés’ needs” (Ragins, Cotton, & Miller, 2000, p. 1178). Eby and Allen indicate that these marginal relationships usually suffer from issues within one of five broad categories: “problems with the mentoring dyad,” including mismatched values or personalities; “distancing behaviors,” including exclusion or self-absorption; “manipulative behaviors,” including “inappropriate delegation” or sabotage; “lack of mentor expertise” encompassing technical or interpersonal incompetencies; and “general dysfunction,” including a “bad attitude” or “personal problems” (2002, p. 460-461). Any of these issues can derail any mentoring relationship regardless of the level or function of that relationship. It is critical that both mentors and protégés choose their pairing carefully and, if the pairing is not successful, seek a mentor who can better meet the protégé’s need or a protégé in whom the mentor can invest trust and confidence.

Time constraints, in an already demanding and complex profession, are another very real issue in the realm of mentoring. Some mentoring activities, especially when a mentoring relationship advances to the sponsorship, coaching, and protection levels, can be demanding (Mertz, 2004). These intense activities can be “compromised by the lack of opportunity and time” (Dominguez, Ivory, & McClellan, 2005, p. 15), and absent the opportunity and time, a protégé may not receive the support that he or she needs to be successful.

In addition to having negative impacts for the mentor and protégé, research suggests, ineffective mentoring can negatively affect systems beyond the individuals. As an example, Daresh indicates that “if mentoring schemes are used largely as a way to assist organizational newcomers to fit in and do things as they have been done in the past, a huge potential problem needs to be recognized” (p. 511), because in such a scenario schools will not be benefiting at an organizational level. Grogan and Crow (2004) wrote of the necessity of considering whether
mentoring is a way to preserve the status quo rather than to bring about innovation. Further, through that same preservation of the status quo, “the possibility exists for historically underserved populations, such as women and racial minorities, to not have their voices heard or leadership styles develop more organically” (Clayton, Sanzo, & Myran, 2013, p. 81). Given the underrepresentation of minorities in the superintendency, it is important that mentoring not be inadvertently used to reinforce practices that might perpetuate that phenomenon.

Mentoring Design and Improvement of Mentoring Programs and Relationships

Research indicates that the negative aspects of mentoring can generally be overcome through research-based mentoring program design. Despite having found many negative aspects of mentoring, Ehrich et al. (2004, p. 536) posited that “problems of mentoring are not insurmountable. With careful and sensitive planning and skillful leadership, most problems can be minimized.” That planning and leadership takes a variety of forms, including careful protégé/mentor matching, avoidance of mandatory participation, and application of deliberate and specific mentor selection criteria. Some research indicates that mentor/protégé matches must be made very carefully to ensure benefit to both parties (Allen & Eby, 2004). Factors to be taken into consideration in matches include gender, proximity, and training (Allen & Eby, 2004).

Other researchers concur about the importance of making careful matches but indicate that doing so is often “nearly impossible” (Daresh, 2004, p. 505). In addition to match, participants should “have the opportunity to weigh risk and benefits and opt out if they choose,” suggesting that compulsory participation may be of limited benefit to protégés (Tolar, 2012, p. 185). Once protégés agree to participate, the selection of the mentor becomes critical. One study proposed that participants adhere to very specific selection criteria, including “evidence of four years of exemplary administrative service, a positive influence on student achievement . . . a
commitment to student success and a willingness to provide personal time and attention to a protégé” (Alsbury & Hackmann, 2006, p. 173) to avoid building mentoring relationships that are ineffective. The dearth of research on training programs for superintendent mentors, let alone research on their effectiveness, indicates that little work has been done to prepare experienced superintendents to serve as mentors, creating situations in which the mentor is potentially ill-prepared to meet the varied needs of the protégé. In particular, two arenas emerge among those needs for superintendents, which mentoring programs or individual mentors should be prepared to support. Those two critical areas are the relationship between the board of directors and the superintendent and the closely related issue of superintendent evaluations.

**Board of directors and superintendent relationships.** The importance of the relationship between the board of directors and the superintendent is well documented by researchers. One study indicated “Understanding linkages . . . between school board members and district chief executive officers in essential to effective leadership” (Hoyle, Björk, Collier, & Glass, 2005, 47). Further, another study posited that “a positive and stable relationships between boards of education and school superintendents is directly related to positive school outcomes” (Moody, 2011, 76). The opposite also appears to be true with research indicating “a poor relationship between a superintendent and his or her school board also deters school improvement” (Kowalski, 1999, 141). It is not surprising, given the current educational climate, that “the complexities surrounding superintendent-board relations have not diminished but rather have intensified over time” (Moody, 2011, 80). It is important to sort through those complexities because “defining the relationship between a board and its superintendent is key to leading an effective school district” (Johnson, 2012, 88). One researcher signaled that a positive,
collaborative relationship between the board of directors and the superintendent is one of the penultimate needs to improve education in the United States by writing,

If this country is serious about improving student achievement and maximizing the development of all of its children, then local educational leadership teams—superintendents and school board members—must work cooperatively and collaboratively to mobilize their communities to get the job done! (Goodman & Zimmerman, 2000, p. 1)

This emphasis on the relationship and collaboration between the superintendent and the board of directors signals the importance of the interconnection.

Despite the importance of the relationship, one study found that “during the superintendent preparation process there was likely little, if any, training related to how one deals with establishing and effective board relationship” (Eller & Carlson, 2009, p. 33). The superintendent, probably for the first time in his or her career, is being evaluated by a group of people who are acting as one entity but have a variety of motives for being in the role, have varied expectations of the superintendent, and possess individual personalities (Eller & Carlson, 2009; Mounford, 2004). These factors can create challenges given that the “multiple personalities of school boards . . . resist consistency” (Mayo & McCartney, 2004, p. 19).

Not only is the relationship between the board of directors and the superintendent important for school improvement, but it is also a critical factor in the board’s perception of the superintendent’s success. In a survey of board members nationwide, more than 85% of board members reported that “the relationship superintendents had with their board members was the most important factor in assessing and evaluating their superintendents” (Mountfort, 2004, p. 705). Given that 64% of superintendents indicate that their relationship with all board members
is positive, that emphasis on the relationship between the board of directors and the superintendent is particularly significant (Kowalski, 2011, p. 66).

**Superintendent evaluation.** As indicated, the issue of superintendent evaluation is closely linked to that of the relationship of the board of directors and the superintendent. It is also directly related to turnover in the role. One study indicated that “effectively assessing the quality of the district’s leadership is arguably one of the school board’s most indispensable responsibilities” even while articulating the lack of quality in current evaluation systems (Mayo & McCartney, 2004, 19). Although more than 90% of superintendents are evaluated annually (Kowalski, 2011), the value of those evaluations is questionable. Given that the most often (33.5%) cited primary reason that a board of directors employed their current superintendent was because of the superintendent’s personal characteristics (Kowalski, 2011, p. 74), it is perhaps unsurprising that personality traits and board superintendent relations are heavily considered in formative and summative evaluations by boards of directors (Mayo & McCartney, 2004). Further, one study confirmed that “evaluations leading to termination were too often grounded in personality and board relationship issues” (DiPaola & Stronge, 2001, p. 98).

Little consistency is present in the methodologies of superintendent evaluation, a reality based in part on local control and local expectations and job descriptions (DiPaola & Stronge, 2001; Kowalski, 2011; Hoyle, Björk, Collier, & Glass, 2005). However, that same local control creates a system of evaluation that can seem arbitrary and capricious; developing increased accountability in the role “will require greater compatibility among evaluation instruments, actual duties of the superintendent and the standards that guide the profession” (DiPaola & Stronge, 2001, p. 109). Though an understanding exists about the challenges of current practices in superintendent evaluation and the relative weaknesses of many of those practices, research on
best practices on this topic is limited. The potential for important and consequential piloting and research in this arena is great.

Summary

The research considered in this review supports this study by creating a foundation upon which to build a qualitative study on the topic of mentoring and the superintendency. It provides a definition of mentoring and further hones that definition as it applies to the superintendency. It describes positive and negative aspects of mentoring and considers how mentoring can be designed to best meet the needs of superintendents. Finally, it examines the research concerning topics addressed in the reviewed research, conducted primarily on the following topics: defining mentoring in its many iterations; narrowing that definition as it relates to the superintendency; clarifying positive aspects of mentoring; exploring negative consequences of mentoring; examining ways to design mentoring programs to ensure that the intended outcomes are achieved; considering the research on board and superintendent relationships; and scrutinizing the body of research on board of directors and superintendent relationships and the closely related topic of superintendent evaluation. By examining all of these topics, the researcher for this study was able to develop questions to elicit information from participating superintendents to add to this research base on the important topic of mentoring and the superintendency.
CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

Research Design

In a study of how practicing superintendents discuss their experiences, uses of, and need for mentoring, as in any study, the design is critical; it must be deliberate and thoughtful if the study is to produce high-quality research that can be used to increase the understanding of superintendents’ perceptions of mentoring. The design for this study on novice superintendents’ perceptions of mentoring was selected after consideration of the research methodology, participants, and data collection and analysis. After scrutinizing and carefully considering all of these factors in planning my study, I concluded that the study would fill an identified void in the research and contribute in a meaningful way to the literature on the topic of mentoring and the superintendency.

Methodology

In examining the phenomenon of how practicing superintendents perceive mentoring, I determined that a qualitative research approach best met the objective to explore this topic and develop a detailed understanding of this phenomenon. A qualitative approach allows exploration of the problem in a “flexible, evolving and emergent” manner (Merriam, 2009, p. 18) when “little is known about the problem” and a deep or detailed understanding of a central phenomenon is sought (Creswell, 2008, p. 51). Throughout the research study, it was recognized that the phenomenon being studied had the potential to change and that a new phenomenon could emerge as a result of the open-ended nature of qualitative research (Creswell, 2008). The focus on the phenomenon of mentoring to learn about the “lived experiences” (Merriam, 2009, p. 24) of superintendents provided the basis of the study. In focusing the study there, a depiction was
created of “the essence or basic structure of experiences, how they construct their world and what meaning they attribute to their experiences” of mentoring through sensitivity and attunement to the possibility of the aforementioned emergence of a new or different phenomenon (Merriam, 2009, p. 5).

Participants

Selecting the participants for this study was a critical precursor to its success. A purposeful sampling model (Seidman, 2006) enabled the selection of participants who represent a typical case: early career (less than 5 years of experience) superintendents, in districts of fewer than 5,500 full-time equivalent students. Superintendents were deliberately selected from throughout a single state and the number of male and female participants was nearly equal, though those participants disproportionately included females when compared with the number of females serving in the role in the state. In selecting these participants, I ensured that the research “obtain[ed] the broadest range of information and perspectives on the subject of study” (Kuzel, 1992, p. 37). Further, I actively sought out discrepant cases in an attempt to find superintendents who “might hold different views related to your topic of study” (Yin, 2011, p. 88). In doing so, I made an attempt to “avoid biasing [the] study—or the appearance of bias—by choosing only those sources that confirm[ed] [my] preconceptions” (Yin, 2011, p. 88). The pitfall of “sampling nonrepresentative participants” was avoided by my being tenacious in contacting selected participants since “you can only talk to the people who can be contacted” (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014, p. 295). These participant selection criteria maximized the opportunities to learn and understand more about the phenomenon of mentoring by giving a large enough pool of superintendents upon which to draw while still setting some parameters regarding the characteristics of participants.
Access to participants. My position as a superintendent, a member of a superintendents’ cohort of one of the state’s counties and a regional educational unit (REU), and a member of statewide organizations provided an initial entrée and access to the aforementioned participants. Because of that access, my association with various groups, and the parameters placed on the study participants, the problem of “easy access,” in which friends or evaluees need to be part of the study, was avoided (Seidman, 2006, p. 40). At the outset of the study, the number of participants could not be predetermined; instead I continued to interview participants until the information being gleaned reached saturation; when new information ceased to be brought forward, I stopped gathering participants (Merriam, 2009). The exact numbers, therefore, unfolded throughout the research process; initially I anticipated that I needed to interview at least 12 participants. The final study included nine participant interviews. Table 1 includes demographic information of superintendent participants.

Participants. The participants included representation from six of the nine REUs in the state. Five of the participants were male and four were female. The superintendents represented districts ranging in size from 185 student full-time equivalent to 5,033 student full-time equivalent. The participants were prioritized by geographic location as I sought diversity first in that realm and then by gender. In striving for geographic diversity, I included perspectives from superintendents who represented different REUs and with varying geographic distances from the state agencies. By capturing those varied perspectives, the study ensured that no single program or REU’s impact dominated the study. By seeking a balance of male and female participants, I gathered and represented both genders’ perspectives on mentoring. Beyond looking for geographic and gender diversity, I purposefully sought out “discrepant and negative cases” as the data gathered moved toward the saturation point in an attempt to gain as much information about
this phenomenon as possible (Merriam, 2009, p. 229). Throughout the process, I developed a tolerance for the ambiguity of the saturation process (Merriam, 2009, p. 80).

Participants were assigned pseudonyms to protect their anonymity. Attempts were made to keep the pseudonyms bereft of identifying characteristics other than gender.

Table 1

*Pseudonyms and Demographic Information for Participants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age Range</th>
<th>REU represented</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Andrea Alexander</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>55 – 60</td>
<td>E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beth Baker</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>50 – 55</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carolyn Cassidy</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>45 – 50</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dana Donnelly</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>65 – 70</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evan Edwards</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>60 – 65</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fred Franklin</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>55 – 60</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greg Garner</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>40 – 45</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hans Hanningan</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>40 – 45</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irving Irwin</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>40 – 45</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Data Collection**

Collecting data from the participants was another crucial element of this study. I conducted interviews and attempted to collect artifacts to complete the research. For the interviews, I initially introduced myself to a potential participant, when necessary and if I did not have access to the individual in person, via phone contact to explain the purpose of study and try to garner participation. With those whom I met at conferences or meetings regularly, this introduction was completed in person. I conducted interviews in a “person to person encounter in which one person elicits information from another” (Merriam, 2009, p. 88). In six cases, I traveled to participants’ worksites to enable them to be in a comfortable setting. In one case, the researcher and participant met at a restaurant due to its mutually convenient location. One
interview was conducted in a conference room at an REU because both the participant and I had been attending a meeting in that location. Finally, due to travel and time constraints, one interview was conducted by phone. Prior to each interview, participants signed an informed consent document that detailed information about the use of the interview data, the purpose of the research, the participants’ rights, and the potential benefits and harm they could anticipate from participating in the research. Additionally, each participant received the information that the interview would be audiotaped and transcribed and that he or she would be assigned a pseudonym for the research reporting. Those participants who agreed to these conditions and signed the release were interviewed.

The interviews, conducted over a period of months, consisted of asking participants 12 questions, designed to be open-ended and with a conscious avoidance of leading questions (Seidman, 2006). The questions are included in Appendix B. The questions were designed to encourage participants to tell their stories of personal experiences with mentoring as they related to their superintendent careers (Seidman, 2006). The purpose was to gain phenomenological information from the participant’s “everyday lived world. . . and his or her relation to it” (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009, p. 28). Some questions were followed by additional questions further exploring the response of the participant when I deemed such additional exploration warranted for pursuit of clarity or understanding of the participant’s statement.

In addition to conducting interviews, I attempted to collect training materials provided for either mentors or protégés. Such documents would have offered an advantage that interviews do not provide: They would pose no risk of the researcher’s presence “alter[ing] what is being studied” (Merriam, 2009, p. 155). Unfortunately, both state agencies and REUs indicated that training materials did not exist and were not disseminated to participants.
Data Analysis

While gathering data from the aforementioned interviews, I simultaneously analyzed the data rather than waiting until after completing all of the data collection. This continual analysis created conditions in which “the final product is shaped by the data that are collected and the analysis that accompanies the final product” (Merriam, 2009, p. 171). The analysis’ purpose is to “compare one unit of information with the next in looking for recurring regularities in the data” (Merriam, 2009, p. 177). My goal for the data analysis was to draw conclusions about the data in order to provide answers to research questions, even if those research questions were emergent throughout the research process (Creswell, 2008). Throughout the process, I completed methodological notes (memos) about the “analytic process” (Yin, 2011, p. 177). These memos provided another source of trustworthiness for the data analysis and were a resource for “continued reference” throughout the research process (Yin, 2011, p. 177). The memos allowed me to “trace my thoughts and consideration of ideas, to go back and forth between initial ideas about how to disassemble the data and the actual data, potentially leading to modifications to the initial ideas” (Yin, 2011, p. 186). The memos were “not just descriptive summaries of data but attempts to synthesize them into higher level analytic meanings” (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014, p. 96).

To analyze data from the interviews, I personally transcribed the recordings as soon as possible after the interviews, with the exception of the final two interviews, for which professional transcriptionists were hired. Though this was a time-consuming and somewhat onerous process, it allowed me to note emotion and emphasis while conducting the transcriptions to capture emotion coding as a first cycle coding method (Saldana, 2009). Additionally, “interviewers who transcribe their own tapes come to know their interviews better,” and that
deep knowledge of the interviews proved to be invaluable to the ultimate analysis (Siedman, 2006, p. 115). After the transcriptions were complete, I used descriptive codes to ascertain the topics of each passage to complete the first cycle of coding (Saldana, 2009).

Once each question for each participant was coded, the participants’ answers were entered into a coding program (NVivo) where they could be readily compared with each other to search for patterns in emergent categories and for significant variation for a second cycle of coding to “develop a sense of categorical, thematic conceptual organization” (Saldana, 2009, p. 149). During this phase of coding, I sought “categories that are both comprehensive and illuminating” (Merriam, 2009, p. 187). From the first to the second level of coding, the goal was “to begin moving methodically to a slightly higher conceptual level . . . The conceptual level . . . enable[d me] later to sort the items from different levels in different ways such as into similar and dissimilar groups” (Yin, 2014, p. 187).

**Ethical Considerations**

During my study, it was critical that as the researcher, I “indicate and implement ways of protecting the people in the study” (Yin, 2011, p. 44). The most important ethical considerations to meet that standard that I grappled with for this study were confidentiality and protecting the identity of the participants. To preserve confidentiality, I assigned pseudonyms under which their interviews were transcribed and stored; throughout the research process the recordings and transcriptions of their interviews were kept in secure locations. No personally identifiable information from interviews was shared with others because “when a researcher voluntarily or involuntarily passes on a participant’s comments to another . . . relationships may get strained” (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, p. 57). It was crucial for me to explicitly cover the concept of
confidentiality with the participants when I invited them to participate in the study so that they would be comfortable with their participation and a positive relationship could be established.

Similarly, preserving confidentiality was a very important aspect of the ethical considerations for the study. If I had not assured participants in advance of confidentiality concerning their identity, they would have been more likely to offer “biased data (self-censored, defensive and rosy) if it is believed an accurate, identifiable account would jeopardize some interest” (Miles et al., 2014, p. 57). Superintendents hold politicized and volatile positions, and their confidentiality had to be closely guarded in order to avoid jeopardizing any of their interests. Since I did not conduct a case study, it was relatively easy to preserve the identity of the participants because they came from across the state and from many districts of varying sizes.

**Positionality**

As a final aspect of my methodology, I examined my positionality both prior to embarking on this research as well as throughout the research process. When a researcher is conducting interviews, relationship and age, race, ethnicity, gender, class and hierarchy are all factors in that relationship (Seidman, 2006). At initial glance, my positionality as a middle-aged, Caucasian, female, middle-class researcher is all readily observable. Further, and equally if not more complex as it relates to this study, is my positionality as a novice, and ultimately more experienced, superintendent who has been mentored during every step of my career, including my initial identification as a leader, as a reluctant and eventually enthusiastic aspirant, during my search for positions, through interviewing, during the acquisition of my first position including negotiation of my first contract, and, finally and continuingly, in my role as a superintendent. Those experiences created a positionality that indubitably influenced my thoughts and beliefs about mentoring and the superintendency. I managed and mitigated this positionality during all
aspects of the research, from the development of the study questions through data analysis. The aforementioned development of open-ended rather than leading questions assisted with that management. Additionally, during coding, I searched beyond her personal experiences to the greatest extent possible to surface themes from the data being analyzed. The best tool at my disposal to recognize and manage my positionality was my application of a reflexivity process that allowed me to deeply understand and examine my positionality throughout the study. I implemented that reflexivity process, as was recommended by Pillow (2003, p. 179), “as a tool to help situate oneself and be cognizant of the ways [in which] your personal history can influence the research process and thus yield more ‘accurate’ and more ‘valid’ research” The reflexivity process also forced me to pay attention to researcher subjectivity in the research process—a focus on how does who I am, who I have been, who I think I am and how I feel affect data collection and analysis—that is an acceptance and acknowledgment that how knowledge is acquired, organized and interpreted is relevant to what the claims are. (p. 176)

Because I recognized and kept my positionality under consideration at all times throughout the research process through reflexivity, my research became more trustworthy and rigorous.
The purpose of this study is to facilitate an understanding of how novice superintendents describe their mentoring experiences and the role of mentoring in their career, and to learn whether they perceive that mentoring could influence their retention in the role. Given the well-researched challenges with superintendent recruitment and retention, this study gives a voice to the nine superintendents interviewed to provide insight into this topic.

The chapter is organized to first communicate overall themes shared regarding mentoring and support that superintendents find valuable. It details how they receive that support and from what sources, including both people and organizations. Next, the chapter describes the nuances of that mentoring support throughout a chronology of a superintendent’s career from a leader called to serve, to student of the superintendency, to aspirant, and finally, to novice superintendent. In the last section, the chapter provides the major ideas that the participating superintendents shared regarding a compilation of attributes detailing an ideal mentoring program to contribute to the retention of superintendents in the role.

**Mentoring and Support Come From a Variety of Sources**

Superintendents interviewed for this study indicated that support came to them from a wide variety of sources and that commonalities emerged among participants. This stance mirrors research on the position of superintendent, which suggests that superintendents receive support, and have influence exerted on them, from a variety of sources (Kowalski, 2011, p. 51). The support that participants in this study received can be broadly organized into three categories: people, organizations, and opportunities. Each of these topics is first examined discretely and
then, later in the chapter, most of them will re-emerge as superintendent mentoring experiences are examined chronologically.

**People are a key element of superintendent support.** When superintendents discussed the topic of people and their influence in their career, involvement ranged from role models, both positive and negative, to those who go beyond role modeling but do not rise to the level of individual supporters, and to personal and direct supporters. Superintendent Garner said it most succinctly when he indicated, while discussing influences over him, that “people are crucial.”

All of the superintendents in this study had served as administrators in some capacity prior to assuming the role of superintendent, as did more than 95% of current superintendents (Kowalski 2011, p. 34). As such, they had opportunities to access other administrators. Most commonly in this study, the people they cited as role models were superintendents.

Superintendent Irwin discussed the place of role models in his career trajectory. He had worked with multiple administrators and superintendents and said:

> I’ve seen the positive examples [and] I’ve seen some negative examples as far as leadership and instructional leadership. So some of those things played a role in my determination to become a superintendent as well. And so as much as the positive . . . help kind of lead you along, some of the counterexamples did that as well.

Similarly, Superintendent Alexander had worked with a number of administrators in her career, which had been spent entirely in one district prior to her leaving for a superintendent position in another district. She reported, “I worked underneath various superintendents with different types of leadership styles, and as I honed my own resources and my ability to lead I actually felt that I was ready to take on a district.” Though she did not feel that any of the superintendents provided her with assistance or encouragement beyond role modeling until her actual internship, her view
of them did shape her beliefs about the role. She did have a negative role model as well who asked her to do things, which she considered unethical, and that too shaped her vision of the role. Superintendent Hannigan had both a professional and a personal connection to a role model. He had a family of legacy of educators in his family and a direct relative who was a retired superintendent. Through his relative, he indicated he could see “what’s a superintendent’s role” and that encouraged him to be comfortable thinking about the position for himself.

Bridging the gap between a role model and a direct supporter, Superintendent Garner discussed being a part of an administrative team and the access that his superintendent provided him when he noted:

I’d say one of the biggest things [that piqued my interest in the superintendency] was in that building role, the superintendent was always giving us leadership opportunities. [He would say], “This is what apportionment means. This is what we get from federal dollars.” So it was a kind of a fishing experiment with, “Okay, I’ll give you a little bit information here so that you’ll understand the whole gist of the district, not just your own building.”

Though the superintendent’s commitment to the individual administrative team members with whom he worked was to provide them with general information and an overview, he served to increase the superintendent’s understanding and served as more than a distant role model but less than a supporter of the principal’s individual growth and career development.

Superintendents also discussed people who became significantly more involved in their careers than those they considered to be role models. These relationships are discussed in detail in the “Chronology of Support” section. In general, those who moved beyond the position of role model were initially supervising superintendents or university personnel during the period in
which the participating superintendents were earning a superintendent credential. These supporters provided counsel and became opportunity brokers to provide aspirants with relevant experiences to contribute to their knowledge base. When superintendents moved into the aspirant phase of their career, while they continued to receive support from their supervising superintendents and university staff members, particularly in reviewing application materials and interviewing skills, they also began to seek or receive more support from _______ (PO) and REU staff members. The support from the latter agencies tended to help them investigate and research districts as they considered various positions. Finally, during their novice years as superintendents, they received support from peer superintendents and continued their relationships with POs and the REUs. That support transitioned to include technical support but also included increasing elements of social-emotional support as the superintendents became the sole leaders in districts.

Though the role of the people inspiring or supporting them through their careers changed, the participants greatly emphasized the role people played throughout their careers. More of the iterative nature of the support provided by people will be demonstrated in the “Chronology of Support” section, but it was clear, throughout the study, that the top category cited by participants as having provided them with support through their journeys as superintendents, in all phases of their preparation and attainment, were the human resources in their lives.

Organizations provide support. In addition to the human capital in their experiences from which superintendents benefitted, assistance from organizations, including their university preparation programs, REUs, SAs, and POs, was also available. Though these systems, like all systems, are made up of people, the interview clearly delineated the types of support that superintendents received from individuals as opposed to from systems as a whole.
A number of participants cited their university superintendent preparation programs as a major source of support, particularly during their preparation and aspirant phases. Superintendent Irwin participated in a university program that met on weekends. He expressed his thoughts about the program effusively, saying, “I loved those weekend meetings because we would get different perspectives of current superintendents of different size districts. And it always felt like in that setting that they were really transparent.” Superintendent Hannigan was the only superintendent interviewed who did not have a superintendent’s credential, and though he did not attend a program, he expressed curiosity and introspection about his lack of a program, explaining:

I’m just interested if superintendents feel like that in and of itself a program where they come out of it with their different set of administrative credentials or Ph.D. feel like, okay, now I can be a superintendent because I went through that program. If they feel that way, that’s great and that means there’s some really quality programs that are out there that are preparing people. Or they feel like it’s just been more of a combination of the program plus stay on the job training, or if, like me, they’ve just been propped up and helped by a lot of people that support them.

Though he had not attended a program, he was considering entering one and pondering whether it would add to his skill set in his role as superintendent. Superintendent Franklin noted, “I really liked the program I went through” and observed that the totality of the two-year cohort experience his university provided was instrumental in his development. As will be described in more detail in the chronology section, Superintendent Edwards characterized his university preparation as the penultimate reason for his becoming a superintendent.
In addition to their university preparation programs, superintendents cited statewide educational associations as well as REUs as major sources of support. In both cases, they consulted with a variety of staff members within the organization on a variety of topics, including budgeting, legal matters, board relationships issues, board policy, and crisis management. Superintendent Garner quantified the level of support from his local REU, asserting that he sought their assistance at least twice a month. He added, “And it’s just nice to have somebody that you can trust in that role.” Superintendent Cassidy expressed great appreciation for the work of the SAs and REUs. She revealed that she thought superintendents who wanted to be successful needed to ask for what they needed from these organizations. She said of her own experience, “Every time I’ve called they’ve been great supporters . . . with information with board and my relationship, so I think sometimes it is [a matter of] not being afraid to seek what you need.” She spoke highly of the organizations designed to serve districts and expressed strongly the need for superintendents to be willing to access their services, which most participants in this study indicated they did regularly as they saw a need.

Superintendent Baker expressed a sentiment similar to that of Superintendent Cassidy when she offered an example of her work with her local REU. She said she engaged them in a conversation about a board policy that was being recommended on the state level. She acknowledged that she participated in a conversation on the topic with REU staff. She said, It was a great conversation to have. So . . . listening, but then mak[e] decisions based on your values and your culture of your community after listening to that input and respecting [it]. You respect what others say and do and you support them in what they’re doing, and yet you still are able then to decide what’s best for you.”
Like Superintendent Cassidy, she had the courage to seek out the opinions of the organizations that supported her and had additional courage to filter their recommendations through her district and personal values lenses.

**Opportunities: Given and created.** Opportunities are included in the considerations of where the superintendents received their support because the provision of opportunities were often cited by study participants as a critical factor in their development as superintendents. People and supporters, as will be seen in the chronology section, certainly provided some of those opportunities, but there was also a sense that some opportunities were either simple happenstance or were made to happen by the participants. Superintendent Irwin breviloquently indicated “that, at some point, there’s going to be an opportunity; my superintendent will leave. And I want to be in a position where if that occurred . . . I’m able to take on that position.” His thoughts have both an element outside of his control, the inevitable departure of a district’s superintendent, and within his control, his ability to prepare himself for that time.

Superintendent Donnelly had a similar experience when her superintendent announced his impending departure in a year and her board asked her to prepare for possible assumption of the role. Not all superintendent candidates are geographically mobile and therefore, to a certain extent, those aspirants are governed, as they seek the role of superintendent, by circumstances outside their control.

In other cases, opportunity did not arrive so readily, but several participants expressed a sense of self-determination that allowed them to create opportunities. As an example, Superintendent Franklin was anxious to assume the role of superintendent after completion of his program. Because of that, he said,
I wanted to [have] an opportunity to be a superintendent so bad that I’m willing to try to take that [a very challenging position in a different part of the country] on and it would’ve been an awesome challenge, but it would’ve been tough, you know.

He sought that opportunity against the counsel of his supporters and would have accepted the position, but he finished second in the process. His pursuit of a position, with no geographic or professional limits, indicates the extent to which he was willing to literally and figuratively travel to create his own opportunities.

**Chronology of Support**

Superintendents categorized the support they received during different phases of their superintendent trajectory in distinct ways. For the purpose of this study, superintendent participants were asked to consider what support they received that encouraged them to consider pursuing a superintendent credential or the role of superintendent; the support they received as they were pursuing a course of study to prepare for a superintendency; the support they received as an aspiring superintendent actively seeking the role; and the support they received during their first 3 years in the role. During the interview processes, it should be noted, the interview questions did not include the words mentor or mentoring. I did not want the questions to become leading queries pointing the participants in the direction of dyadic relationships but instead wanted them to consider all types of support. Several participants asked for clarification around the term support and questioned whether it was meant to elicit an answer about mentoring. When I was asked to clarify, I merely indicated that they should include any type of support. In this chronological section, the participants use descriptive language to describe the impact of the support they received rather than assigning a term such as mentor to the support. Thus, they use
the action of the mentor to describe the process of mentoring (Eby et al., 2013; Mertz, 2004) and a richer description of the role of mentoring in the chronology is exhibited.

**Encouragement into the role.** Given what we know about superintendent turnover and recruitment issues, it is crucial to consider the genesis of an individual’s idea of becoming a superintendent. To encourage more leaders to take this next step, we must examine how this idea enters a person’s consciousness and what role, if any, mentors and supporters play in that consideration of the role. In doing so, it is valuable to consider how the novice superintendents in this study described how they first began to consider a superintendent position.

In examining this issue with interview participants, two themes emerged along with one outlier. One of the themes that surfaced was that some superintendents pursued this step in their career despite having had an initial aversion or lack of enthusiasm and without the express support of mentors or others, but who received encouragement through programs or opportunities. The second theme that emerged was that some superintendents cited the encouragement of a supporter as being instrumental in their journey despite initially having not been considered for an administration or having faced outright opposition to being hired. The final theme was a single outlier superintendent who fit into neither category and did not cite external influences in her progression toward the superintendency. Rather, her movement was an outgrowth of her career progression and longevity. Examining each of these groups in detail allows for a more nuanced understanding of the support they received and of how to encourage future leaders.

The first group consisted of those who achieved the role despite initially feeling either aversion or a lack of enthusiasm and without the express support of individual people but who received encouragement from other sources. Although they lacked explicit support from
individual people, they did have other types of opportunities presented to them. In this first group, some participants indicated that they had expressed aversion to the role and were, on some level, committed to avoiding the position. Superintendent Edwards characterized his progression into the superintendency as starting with his doctoral program, stating,

(When) I went into the doctoral program I had a top 10 list of why I didn’t want to become a superintendent. And it most of it had to do with superfluous things like lapel pins . . . board meetings, things like that.

Despite having these rather simplistic and somewhat frivolous objections, throughout the progression of his internship during his doctoral program, Superintendent Edwards changed his mind about the position, coming to believe he could be an effective leader in the role of superintendent. He clarified that it was not a person but the totality of his program that made him interested in the role. He explained, “I think because we (his doctoral program) emphasized instructional leadership so much, I was really able to call out of that what my true mark was and put it into words and articulate it.” It was through the totality of his experience that he decided the role of superintendent would be one he would be willing and able to assume.

Another superintendent, Superintendent Donnelly, similarly lacked any explicit encouragement and, like Edwards, recoiled from the idea of becoming a superintendent. She was serving as a building administrator during a period of transition in his district. The board of directors of her district unexpectedly approached her with a proposal for becoming the superintendent, and she succinctly summarized the experience in an understated manner by saying, “So, that’s how that (becoming a superintendent) happened.” Her entire experience of “deciding” to become a superintendent lacked any element of self-determination aside from the
final decision to accept the assignment of the role, and it did not include the involvement of supporters. She did, however, have an opportunity thrust upon her.

In contrast to this first group, the second group that emerged consisted of leaders who cited the encouragement of a supporter in their journey despite their having feelings of aversion to the role that were similar to those of the first group. One participant, Superintendent Baker, whose experience typifies this group, described her experiences this way:

I started out thinking I wanted to be a teacher, and I would give strong credit to my principals and superintendents who mold you and mentor you. So, as I'm teaching and they say, “Hey, why don’t you go take some classes in this,” and then pretty soon they’re saying, “Well, I think you should become a principal,” and it just ventured into this (the superintendency).

Explicit encouragement to take next steps throughout her career led her to the role of superintendent, and she believed that the beginning of the transition was found in her first transition from teacher to building leader. For her, that first transition, like later ones, was sparked by the encouragement of supporters.

Echoing those sentiments almost exactly, another superintendent, Superintendent Garner, cited the origins of his superintendency in his first move from teaching and his initial consideration of the principalship. Prior to that, he had never considered himself a leader. He indicated that when he was first approached to move into a leadership role he had said, “I don’t want anything to do with that!” His mentor gently encouraged him to further “think about it,” leading the superintendent to conclude,
So it was that “think about it” [that started him on his journey to the superintendency] . . . it’s just people like that . . . see leadership and see potential, and then they foster that through that support. So people are crucial.

He did not believe that he would have taken a path other than continuing in his teaching role if not for the explicit and individual encouragement of others.

Superintendent Irwin received less explicit encouragement, but his interest in the superintendency still came from his interactions with one mentor. He had clear role modeling from his superintendent supervisor that made him interested in the position. He explained:

When I was teaching I had a really strong superintendent . . . from which I learned a ton about instructional leadership. That’s kind of where it planted the seed that at some point I want to be a superintendent that has that instructional leadership capacity.

Though he wasn’t tapped on the shoulder in the same way as the others in this group, a passive role model nonetheless encouraged him to pursue the role of superintendent.

Superintendent Alexander fit into neither category because she did not cite external influences, whether people or programs or opportunities, in her progression toward the superintendency. Rather, her decision to seek the position was an outgrowth of her career progression and longevity in the field of education. At the time of the interview, she had been an administrator for more than 20 years and had worked in building and central office level positions. The totality of those experiences led her to conclude that she “really became interested in . . . the entire district and what it takes to run an entire district.” Unlike the other superintendents, she did not see that programs, circumstances, explicit encouragement, or passive mentoring from supporters encouraged her to pursue the role.
Support during preparation. No matter the source of inspiration, once an educational leader has made the decision to consider the superintendency as a career path, the next step in his or her journey is normally, though not always, to participate in a superintendent preparation program. It should be noted that neither a superintendent credential nor a license is required in the state being studied to serve as a superintendent; therefore, not all superintendents in this region go through a preparation program. One of the participants in this study, Superintendent Hannigan, did not go through a program and therefore his interview did not contribute to this section.

Though preparation programs vary in duration and philosophy, key themes nonetheless emerged from the participants. During the preparation and internship phase of a superintendency program, a common single theme emerged. The primary support all of the participants experienced during their preparation and internship was being provided with opportunities to demonstrate leadership. In looking at Mertz’s (2004) definition of mentoring, this type of assistance falls into the advising role. As Mertz puts it:

The intensity of the involvement [in the mentoring relationship] may vary from relatively little to moderate. It is possible to have successful professional development relationships with only a modest investment of time and emotional involvement and although one may be hard pressed to help someone one does not care for much, at least to do it really well; it is possible to help someone and do it really well without investing oneself very heavily in the person. It is possible to focus solely on the business of the relationship and to the achievement of its goals. (p. 554)

In the type of advising described here, achievement of goals speaks to the necessity of having a variety of opportunities that the mentor superintendent or program deem necessary to provide the
aspirant with experiences to prepare for the superintendency. This notion of achieving goals ties directly to the opportunities provided to interns during that phase of their superintendent progression. Though opportunity is the common theme, there are gradations and distinctions within this theme. Most superintendents in the study received ample opportunities to undertake projects and assignments that would give them a sense of the work of the superintendent, with little reflection or direction. Two superintendents, Superintendents Cassidy and Alexander, had very different experiences on opposite ends of the opportunity spectrum. Superintendent Cassidy was given no real opportunities, and Superintendent Alexander was given real opportunities that also contained a meaningful reflection component.

Most of the superintendents interviewed had ample opportunities provided to them with little direction from their supervisor and little reflection provided after an opportunity was completed. The superintendent preparation program and internship corresponded to a series of tasks the aspirant was to complete in order to gain experience. Superintendent Donnely stated, “He (her internship mentor) just included me in as many things as he thought that I needed to be included in and (I) just kind of learned on the fly, I guess,” and this approach seems to be echoed in most of the participating superintendents’ thoughts when considering what supports they received during the internship. Superintendent Baker, upon reflecting on this question, suggested that the role that her supporters played in this aspect of her growth was to serve as “opportunity advisors,” a role she characterized this way:

So, they gave me opportunities— [They were] opportunity advisors saying, “I think you do well, why don’t you try this?” They recognized (my) leadership and then they provided opportunities, saying, “You did a great job here and why don’t [you] work on this?” . . . And so they were . . . opportunity providers.
Those interviewed for this study did not indicate that opportunities without further reflection or absent much support were an impediment to their learning. Superintendent Alexander summarized this phase of her learning arc by noting, “I think one of the most valuable things for me was to get to do something that a superintendent would get to do.” Given the unique nature of the role of the superintendent, those sorts of tasks are different from job responsibilities in any other position in the district.

Only two of the participating superintendents, Superintendents Cassidy and Alexander, experienced situations during the preparation and internship phase that varied from the experiences of the others, though they were both still related to the theme of opportunity. Superintendent Cassidy was given almost no opportunities to participate in activities during her internship. Tellingly, she still characterized her internship by describing it through the lens of opportunity, but in her case it was the absence, rather than availability, of opportunity that defined her internship. She described her experience, saying:

The superintendent at the time (of the internship) . . . did sign the paper that he was supporting me, but there wasn’t a whole lot of things (he did). The program (classes) was on Fridays and Saturdays and he wanted me to take my own time on the Fridays and not get paid, and I was the only person on the program that was dealing with that . . . he did it (give her leave) at the end, but I kind of had to fight. I was never in a board meeting. I was never in an executive session. He would never let me run it or even be part of it. Superintendent Cassidy indicated that because of her lack of opportunities during the course of her internship, she had needed to seek experiences through later employment prior to seeking a superintendency. In doing so, she gained the experiences and training to give her the skills for the role.
Superintendent Alexander, the second superintendent whose experience varied from that of the majority of the participants, described an internship that stands in stark contrast to that of Superintendent Cassidy and also differs from that of the other participating superintendents. Not only was she provided with extensive opportunities, but, unlike any of the other participants, she was given support for reflection upon those activities during the internship. She described opportunities she was given to help create a transformational environment in which principals shifted, under her direction with the help of the superintendent, from being managers to being leaders. She developed a deep, trusting relationship with her superintendent and became an advisor to the superintendent through this process. They worked through a difficult situation together, and she characterized the reflection piece by saying, “There was reflection and process as we were working through it. ‘What do you want to achieve?’” and then indicated that she was a part of a critical decision-making process for the district. Her description of her opportunity stood apart from the description of others with its emphasis on the reflection and teamwork she experienced.

**Support during the aspirant phase.** Once students have completed an internship or program, as the majority of superintendent candidates do, they must choose whether to pursue a superintendent position. Some program participants progress to central office roles excluding the superintendency as a first step of their leadership trajectory. Others decide to delay changing career paths for a period, and still others never decide to pursue a superintendency. Those who do choose to pursue the role enter the aspirant phase of the trajectory, which is to say they are actively aspiring to a superintendent position and participating in the attendant search, application, and interview processes.
The superintendent selection process is unlike any other in K-12 education. The superintendency is the primary position in K-12 educational administration for which boards of directors often engage the services of outside facilitators. Known in the field vernacular as search consultants or headhunters, these individuals or firms help boards find, attract, and select the district’s new school superintendent (Tallerico, 2000). Superintendent interview processes can be grueling and arduous; often they involve multiple public meetings. In some processes, those meetings take place with other candidates simultaneously. In others, the interview process may stretch out over several days and may include a visit by members of the board of directors to the candidate’s home district. Superintendent Baker opined with laughter, “I don’t know if anybody could have prepared you for that first superintendent interview.” Thus, prospective first-time superintendent candidates must be prepared to fulfill requirements and to participate in processes that are unlike any other that they have experienced during their educational careers.

Given the differences between application processes for previously held positions and the superintendency, it is no surprise that superintendent candidates applying for jobs knew that they needed to have the support of others with more expertise in this realm. The support they received during this time demonstrated a shift in intent, when considering Mertz’s (2012) framework, from professional development to career advancement and brokering. The participants’ reflections on the assistance they received at this time echo Mertz’s supposition that “the broker is not unconcerned with the protégé’s current capabilities and development, but the concern is in the service of career advancement” (p. 553). At this phase in their relationship, the supporter and the aspiring superintendent became “inextricably linked together in their common purpose, the advancement of the protégé” (p. 554).
Paralleling that link between supporter and aspirant, three themes emerged through the interviews in the arena of support during the aspirant phase. First, it was clear that the candidates required a level of understanding of the technical aspects of applying, and they detailed how they received that support from mentors. The second theme was that candidates needed help in determining whether they would be a “fit” for the district they were considering, and they described how they made that determination with the assistance of others. Finally, the candidates described ways in which their supporters made personal contacts for them to support their job search endeavors. Most of the participants in this study indicated that they needed to find supporters at this time in their career that were different from those who had encouraged them to move toward administration. Having taken this next step in their progression, they looked in new directions for support during this pivotal time in their career.

When it came to the technical aspects of applying for superintendent positions, participants expressed a variety of types of assistance they received in the first identified theme. As aspirants, this study’s participating superintendents looked for help with writing cover letters, framing their resumes for systems-level leadership, reaching out to search agents, and interview tips. Several of them had not been in the job market for many years and needed reminders about pursuing a position in addition to the other assistance. For example, Superintendent Alexander said,

I looked at a different group (of supporters) to help me advertise myself or put my best foot forward because I was in [a single district] for 25 years. I had not been seeking another job and didn’t really know: How do I market myself, what do I need to say, what do I need to do, what does my cover letter need to look like, how do you respond to the questions, what should my vita look like?
She needed very specific information about how to market her materials in order to be considered for a superintendent role. She sought and received that information from active superintendents as well as from search agents before participating in a specific search. Superintendent Edwards mirrored this response and reinforced this theme when he indicated that he’d had three superintendents look over his cover letter and resume. He explained that this type of support wasn’t provided within his credentialing program, so he sought out the assistance of individuals with expertise who were outside that program.

Superintendent Cassidy reported that there was a gap between her first and unsuccessful application for a superintendency and her second application. As a result, she approached a supporter and “met with her and I said, ‘Okay, it’s been a few years, so let’s run through these things; give me some advice.’” Even though she been through the process previously, given her lack of success in her initial attempt as well as the time that had passed, she felt the need to hone her materials with the support of someone who had more expertise than she possessed as an aspirant.

Superintendent Baker needed specific assistance with interview skills as she sought the role of superintendent. Her resume and other materials had gained her entry into the interview phases of searches, but she was unsuccessful in securing a superintendent position through several search processes. She sought assistance and counsel to improve her presentation and interview skills, reporting:

I went to my current superintendent and asked him for advice. So, he would give advice, helped me prepare. We did a mock interview . . . [Superintendent Smith] was my superintendent at the time and said, “You might think about . . . ” and offer[ed] some advice.
Her seeking that advice after several fruitless interviews suggests that she felt a need to monitor and be reflective, with the support of someone with expertise in the field, about her performance and to adjust it to be more successful in the future.

In contrast to very specific, quantitative advice about application products and interview processes, the second theme that emerged in this section was the much more nebulous concept of finding assistance to determine whether a position would be a “fit” for a candidate. During this portion of the aspirant process, the participating superintendents indicated that they searched for insight into this somewhat ambiguous concept. A number of the superintendents interviewed reported that they had needed coaching to learn how to research a district themselves in order to make sure that they were applying to lead a system they would be comfortable working within. Superintendent Alexander discussed how she sought counsel to learn that process:

I also talked with the [REU] fiscal people in both E and F and [asked] how do I [do] research on the district to see financially where they are, get some past history on them . . . I don’t want to take on a sinking ship and then I started looking at demographics. I only speak English, so going into a community that was 70% Hispanic wasn’t anything that would work for me. So I started looking at demographics in different districts and then talking and calling the different [REUs] from those areas to find out more about those districts before I submitted the applications.

The superintendents were able to do much of the historical, fiscal, and demographic research on potential districts themselves once they learned to navigate those data.

In some cases, the hard data such as financial information or demographics was less of a concern than gathering more esoteric insights into a district and the possible fit for a candidate there. Superintendent Irwin noted that
when I was looking at a position (in fact the one I’m in now) I called Superintendent Holyan to ask his opinion. He knew me well, and he knew my work well. He knew the situation I was looking at . . . from his perspective, it was a fit. I also talked with other administrators that I know, just asking, “Do you think this is a fit and how does it fit me in my leadership style, what they’re looking for?”

There was a great deal of respect for the opinions of trusted advisors regarding this concept of fit and emphasis was placed upon the counsel provided in this arena. When aspirants received information suggesting that a position was a fit, they gave that position due consideration.

In an example of that due consideration, Superintendent Garner carefully researched and opened his mind to a position because a supporter presented him with a particular job opening that he considered to be a fit for him. Superintendent Garner had not been considering the position until, he said,

He (Garner’s superintendent at the time) called me into his office and said, “Hey, I got an opportunity that you should think about.” And so that was . . . an April day and we (Superintendent Garner and his family) drove up for spring break and spent a couple of days up here and thought, “This is neat”; the kids liked it. And so, it was that role (the person who shared a fit) that was a huge support of somebody that said, “Hey, I think you have the ability to do this, think about it. Talk to your family about it.”

Superintendent Garner reflected further upon that situation, stating, “In my roles through the years, I was always content doing what I was doing.” His superintendent’s encouraging him when he was an aspirant to consider a role he would not have known was a fit for himself allowed him to take his leadership to the next level.
In much the same way that mentors and supporters were willing to share about positions that they considered a fit with aspirants’ skill sets, values, attitudes, and intangible attributes, participants reported, the supporters who provided them with counsel during this phase of their search were not hesitant to warn them about positions that they thought were *not* a good match or a good source of career advancement. In some cases, aspirants heeded the advice. It made Superintendent Irwin feel more confident to know that “enough folks, you know . . . they have been superintendents; they had experience around the state; they know people. In response, he said, “I just really trusted what they said and what they felt, and it felt like they were honest’ about whether a position would be a good one for the candidate. He further explained that those supporters would tell him, ‘You might want to avoid that,’ because they just knew.” Though he didn’t put his finger on exactly how they knew, he trusted their experience and expertise.

The advice of supporters wasn’t always heeded in the cases when the elusive fit was being considered, however. In one case, Superintendent Cassidy consulted with her supporter during that phase and learned that “she did not think this would be a good first superintendency for me and I did it (applied for the position) anyway” based on her own knowledge of the context of the district. She indicated that she felt very conflicted about her decision to apply against the advice of a supporter.

The final theme within the aspirant phase involved the ways in which candidates described how their supporters made personal contacts for them to support their job search endeavors. For this third type of support, superintendents reported, their supporters during this phase offered letters of recommendations and made personal contacts. Superintendent Franklin characterized that support by explaining that his superintendent during his application process
always wanted to have an opportunity to talk to anyone who was interested in me, and I couldn’t think of a better mentor and supporter. He wrote a letter of recommendation.

He would always want to make a phone call too.

His description is notable for his use of the phrase “always want” rather than “was willing.” It reemphasized the link between the candidate and the supporter and the depth of the level of investment that the supporter had in the candidate during this phase of their relationship. Other superintendents too reported that their supporters and mentors engaged in active advocacy during this phase.

Similarly, Superintendent Baker indicated that superintendents reached out to support her during her aspirant phase. Though the applications were competitive she noted that the superintendents and supporters who she worked with during her applications “were very collegial and collaborative and they were never threatened. They were always looking for opportunities to help grow their profession. So, it was a very collaborative process.” She had a sense of their support and advocacy for her throughout the process rather than a sense of competitiveness.

**Support as a novice superintendent.** Superintendent candidates who pursued the role and who have successfully navigated the preparation and aspirant phases become superintendents. When asked what types of supports they received during their first 3 years in the role, called their *novice* period in this study, participants’ answers varied significantly. Given that the participants were from geographically varied sections of the state and had initially entered the superintendency holding positions ranging from principal to central office administrator, it is perhaps not surprising that both the type of mentoring as well as its sources were varied. Most had a mentor assigned to them by a PO or an REU, and this section begins
with an examination of the perceived efficacy of those assigned relationships. That examination is followed by a description of the types of assistance they received from a variety of sources organized into two broad categories—technical assistance and emotional support—that emerged as needs during their novice years.

**Novice superintendents’ perception of the efficacy of assigned mentors.** As indicated, a state PO or local REU assigned most of the interviewed participants a mentor when they became a superintendent. This type of assistance was considered and examined in this study separately from other types of assistance, which were less dyadic and in most cases more organic in nature, because of its potential ramifications for state-level policy. Currently most states do not have an organized, state-sponsored and -funded mentoring program, whether mandated or invitational, for novice superintendents. The pairings discussed here were loosely organized and were introduced with no oversight, training, or guidance provided. In general, though the success of these pairings organized and arranged by POs or REUs varied, most of the interviewed participants did not consider these facilitated relationships to be of particular assistance once they had become a superintendent. Superintendent Edwards couldn’t recall whether he had been offered a mentor but said, “If I was, it didn’t stick since I didn’t remember.” Superintendent Alexander furthered this point, recalling her assigned mentoring relationship by saying:

> Once there (in the role of superintendent), I was assigned a mentor so for the first year I had a superintendent within this region that I met with monthly. We visited, I got some ideas . . . as we were talking we would share information back and forth. I would say that that wasn’t the most effective help that I got.

Though she committed to the experience for a year, she did not have specific, value-added recollections about their relationship.
Superintendent Hannigan reported having a similar experience insofar as his relationship with his mentor was cordial but not goal oriented or well defined. He explained,

So I actually contacted (his assigned mentor). I said, “So I guess you’re going to be mentoring me?” And he said, “Oh, hey, I didn’t know that.” And he was great about it. And he was funny. We went out and have lunch and had a good laugh about it. He said, “I’m going to trust you on that one. I guess I am.” And, you know, honestly, we met a couple of times and he’s a great person and I didn’t bother him. So he reached out a couple of times and we had a lunch or two, and I was able to ask him a few questions . . . I honestly couldn’t tell you what his role and responsibility was supposed to be. No one really went down that path of explaining it to me. I just figured, well, there’s a person I can talk to if I get stumped on something.

Though this is the most extreme example, in that the mentor did not even seem to know about his assigned role, the sense of a lack of understanding of the purpose of these pairings was common among the participants.

An example of that lack of understanding is demonstrated in that even when these pairings were better organized or facilitated, the assistance that novice superintendents received was described in very general terms, with little structure assigned to the roles. As an example,

Superintendent Franklin characterized his assigned relationships by saying,

One of the things that was nice the first year was [the PO] provides a mentor and my mentor was a phenomenal person that I could count on . . . we met monthly for lunch. So he was the guy that if I had a question I could call and bounce things off of. I didn’t do that very often, because [he] always said, “Hey . . . you’ve got 10 years as an assistant in
good size or very large districts, you’ve seen a lot of things, it’s not like you are totally
wet behind the ears.”

Though this superintendent and his assigned mentor met regularly, and the superintendent found
it to be a positive experience, he did not describe or illustrate any specific examples of assistance
he received.

Superintendent Baker had a more positive overall assigned dyadic mentor experience.
She indicated that she felt fortunate to have had an appointed mentor and noted that her mentor
“made sure to say ‘Hey, we’re going to go to this . . . meeting. Let me introduce you to some
people.’” She further explained how this advanced her leadership in the position, stating, “I’m
very reserved, but after a year [of] kind of stepping into a role of meeting some [people] that
have the similar interests and similar personalities,” she began to take on more leadership roles
because of the introductions her mentor made for her. Her mentor paid specific attention to, and
sought to understand, Superintendent Baker’s needs and her personal and professional attributes
and was able, therefore, to provide her with assistance accordingly.

Similarly, Superintendent Cassidy felt that she benefited from her pairing despite the fact
that she and her mentor “don’t do the same job.” She characterized their roles as different
because there was a gap of more than 20,000 between the sizes of their two districts. Even so,
she described their pairing as helpful to her, explaining, “Superintendent Martin was amazing.
He gave me . . . every one of his numbers and he said, ‘You call me when you need me; no
question is a bad question.’” They met monthly and she felt that the differences in their districts
were ultimately beneficial to her.
Given the size of her district, Superintendent Cassidy further explained that she was “embedded into my day-to-day minutiae.” However, she benefitted from her monthly interactions with the mentor superintendent; as she put it:

Every time we talked my last question was, “What are you working on?” And that was probably one of the best questions that I could ever ask because he would give me sometimes the next step of things that I needed to do with my board or conversations that need to be had at that more removed level, and I don’t think I would have had that perspective would I have not had that mentor, so that was wonderful.

The contrast between the sizes of their districts provided her with knowledge and perspective, which she was able to use to advance her work in her own district.

**Technical assistance received during the novice period.** In addition to the mentoring dyads that many novice superintendents were assigned in their first superintendency, most of the superintendents described the need for other technical assistance and support during the first 3 years of their superintendency. This assistance included topics such as effective running of levies, student bullying, superintendent evaluation, legislative advocacy, implementation of the Common Core State Standards and the Teacher Principal Evaluation Pilot, finance, and construction.

That assistance came most commonly from one of two sources: either their local REU or a countywide meeting of superintendents. REUs generally provide support to more than one county and have larger numbers of superintendents than countywide meetings. They may invite statewide speakers from the SAs or provide professional development or legislative advocacy that is larger in scope than the county specific meetings. In many cases superintendents participated in both types of meetings, with the county agenda being more tailored to local needs.
Most participating superintendents described a process similar to the one depicted by Superintendent Alexander, who reported:

So at REU E . . . every other month we meet as a superintendent group and we meet for half a day and we have agendas with professional development plus being able to talk to each other. Plus, in Hamilton county, superintendents meet once a month. And so we spent half a day and we generate our own agenda, speakers, what’s helpful, and then we share things back and forth.

The superintendents saw value in both of these types of meetings, with each serving a discrete purpose to meet different needs.

Superintendent Cassidy, discussing her county meetings in a similar manner, echoed Superintendent Alexander’s thoughts. She characterized the county meetings as a conversation and shared how she felt about those meetings as a new superintendent, explaining:

As a brand new superintendent, those meetings were . . . “What are they doing? What are they working on?” and they were—sometimes it would give me ideas and sometimes it made me feel validated: “Okay . . . I am having the same conversations they’re having” . . . and it was also a great group because at the end we always [said], “Okay, any questions,” or—so I could ask my silly questions and get tons of support immediately.

Superintendent Cassidy said she appreciated that the meetings were a place where she felt safe and supported to ask questions to get assistance in a timely manner. The perceptions of superintendents in this study mirror the conclusions of a study that found that more than 65% of superintendents report that the level of influence on their work by peer superintendents is considerable or moderate (Kowalski, 2011).
In addition to their REUs and their local county meetings, several superintendents expressed that they received technical assistance from within their own staff. This too mirrors a national study in which 96% of superintendents reported that administrators within their system had considerable or moderate control over them (Kowalski, 2011). It should be noted that whether a superintendent received technical support from within his or her own district was not dependent on the size of the district. Superintendent Franklin, serving in one of the largest districts of superintendents in this study, expressed the internal support he received regarding technical issues this way:

The biggest confidence I have are the people right here. I have two wonderful assistant superintendents. I have a phenomenal HR director and there is not one thing that they don’t know about me, about what we’re doing, what our challenges are.

He believed that their expertise both in terms of their familiarity with the work of his district and their knowledge about the areas in which they served the district made them the best technical resources to support him and his work as a new superintendent.

Similarly, Superintendent Hannigan, who led a much smaller district than Superintendent Franklin, indicated that he received guidance from those within his system. It is notable that he did not have central office positions, such as assistant superintendent, as did Superintendent Franklin in the larger district. Nonetheless, Superintendent Hannigan still depended on guidance from people in the district, “including our finance manager, extraordinarily knowledgeable. It’s kind of that person who knows everything that goes on in the district—probably should be running the district, quite honestly.” Additionally, he expressed his reliance on the superintendent’s secretary, adding, “but as we all know, they’re way more than that. And so she was in charge of policy and just a variety of things.” He also listed the transportation director
among those who provided him with technical insight. He did not have a traditional cabinet of administrators but found internal technical support nonetheless.

**Social-emotional support from peers.** Support for superintendents seemed to transition from technical to social-emotional in the arenas where there were no technical fixes, checklists, or template letters. Though they received that support from the same sources as their technical support, including the assigned mentors, REU meetings, and county meetings, this type of assistance supported them in a way that was different from that offered through the technical support. Despite the fact that superintendents spent much more time in the interviews discussing the technical support that they received, when asked whether technical assistance or social-emotional assistance was a more prevalent need in their role as novice superintendent, they generally indicated that the latter was more valuable to them.

Superintendent Garner indicated that this type of support was distinctly different from the support he had received at other points in his career. He stated, “When you were a principal, you were kind of protective of your building and you wanted to be better than any other building and it was very territorial.” He contrasted that with his experiences as a superintendent, during which he found that “it’s like all those barriers are away and I can call my neighbor superintendent and say, ‘Hey, this is the situation we’re dealing with,’ and he will be the first one to offer support.” Superintendent Garner recognized and appreciated the greater collegiality and support provided by district leaders as compared to building leaders.

Like the remarks of Superintendent Garner, the participants’ discussions of the social aspects of support were generally less specific than their remarks regarding the technical aspects. As an example, Superintendent Donnelly characterized the social-emotional support she received this way:
A lot of emotional support—just kind of talking about things and laughing, you know—you kind of get a different perspective . . . We usually try to meet away from campus. When you’re sitting there listening to some of the difficulties that other people are having or questions that they have, it makes it feel as though, you know, “I’m not alone . . . everybody is having these same issues.”

Though the superintendents may have gathered for technical purposes, the meetings served the dual purpose of also meeting some of their social-emotional needs. Superintendent Donnely clearly demonstrated that even when superintendents are discussing technical situations, their camaraderie provides emotional support.

Superintendent Edwards explained the bridge between the technical aspects of the meetings and the social-emotional aspects he experienced by saying,

We had our Quincy County sups meeting today and you know it’s only once a month and it’s short, but there’s a just a very supportive element when you can get together . . . I mean sometimes just laughing with people. It’s having people just say, “Hey it’s okay.” You know it’s not like it’s group therapy where everybody’s . . . baring their soul but on the other hand, when you share common struggles and things, it’s just, it’s pretty therapeutic because I heard going into the superintendency, “Oh yeah, it’s a lonely job.”

Superintendent Edwards found that his experiences in his meetings countered the commonly held belief about the isolation of the role.

Social and emotional support was the only arena within the interviews in which participants considered gender and its role in the support needed to navigate the superintendency. Consideration of gender arose only among female participants. Superintendent Alexander offered her thoughts:
I think quite often the technical piece is easy for us to do, the emotional piece a little different. We have a group of female superintendents that are in the region. Not just REU E but down into the [REU F] area, and occasionally we get together and have dinner and support each other because being a superintendent as a female is different from being a superintendent as a male. So and that’s our time to just kind of talk about that role . . . if a man comes into a meeting and his hair is a little messed up, he is a hard worker. If a woman comes in, you are disorganized. And so what . . . is . . . different and how do you need to put together that package? How do you have the strength as a female and be taken seriously as opposed to a place where they are used to dealing with men and they have got their football league jokes.

From her description, it is clear that for at least some women, reducing the isolation also meant reaching out to and interacting in a reciprocal way with other women in the field.

Similarly, Superintendent Donnely noted that the emotional support she received from others during the first 3 years of her tenure trumped the technical support; she explained that she generally met in a group with four superintendents and revealed,

It just so happens that these other three superintendents are women, and it’s just kind of a coincidence. It just happens that they’re geographically in districts close by. I’ve known all three of those ladies before. Superintendent Jefferson–this is her second year as superintendent so she is even newer than I am. So, she kind of sought me out for some help as well.

Even as Superintendent Donnely has benefitted from the assistance provided to her by others, she was passing those same privileges and benefits of the role on to a novice superintendent.
Thoughts for Ideal Mentoring Structure and Topics to Encourage Retention in the Role

All participants, as indicated in the previous section, had support through mentoring, though its time, intensity, duration, and efficacy varied. Each participant was asked to reflect, based on her or his experiences, on what they believed would be most helpful if a program were being designed to provide mentoring for new superintendents to encourage retention into the role. As the literature review described, maintaining superintendents in the role is a significant issue. To answer the third research question for this study, it was necessary to delve into this issue to learn what components participating superintendents believed would be most important to include in a support program in order to achieve this important goal. In this section, their thoughts regarding both the structure of an ideal program and potential information outcomes to be gained through mentoring are considered. The outcomes they would find most beneficial—skills in boardmanship, knowledge about effective superintendent evaluation, and minimization of the isolation that can be felt in the role—are discussed individually.

**Structure of an ideal program.** Participants had specific ideas when it came to the specific structures necessary to support superintendents. Topics included the time and level of involvement for internships and mentoring relationships along with ideas for needs assessments. Superintendent Garner expressed strong feelings about this issue, indicating that he had never “walked in his (a superintendent’s) shoes” prior to assuming the role. To counter that lack of experience, he suggested,

A year internship would be bottom line, the best thing. And giving them (superintendent interns) what you did when you were a [student] teacher and a[n intern] principal would be to put them in that role of a mentorship. It (his internship) wasn’t as formal as it
should be. A more formalized internship that says . . . this is the daily routine, this is the budgetary process.

Superintendent Edwards agreed with the idea of having a more formal program but thought it should happen during the first year of service. He observed, “Having somebody beside you when you're learning, I think, goes a long way and I [think] then again in the best-case scenario it best carries through.” His explanation of this type of job-embedded mentoring didn’t deviate in intent from that of Superintendent Garner’s enhanced internship. In looking at the first year of his superintendency, he indicated that he regretted not having had better support and said,

I think if I had to do it over again I would have made a commitment to having a regular mentor during that first year and not just on an as-needed basis but to have somebody and say, “Let’s commit to checking in every so often in regular intervals.” And maybe do some kind of needs assessment at the beginning or to gather some kind of data and, you know, formulate some kind of plan.

Superintendent Edwards expressed the belief that the development of a successful mentoring program would have a required element with accountability for the regular meetings as well as a needs assessment. After the needs assessment was conducted, the mentor would have the information that he or she needed in order to help in “holding your feet to the fact because the learning curve is so steep . . . I don’t want to say like training wheels but . . . to kind of help you.”

Several superintendents further opined that an assessment of needs, skills or coachability would be an important aspect of a successful program. Adding to his previous thoughts, Superintendent Edwards said:
I’m not sure in a lot of our professional preparation if we pay enough attention to “Are you coachable? What’s it like to be on the receiving end of being supported or mentored?” And so I think it’s a more explicit discussion around what is that, what’s it take [and] how do you to accept that kind of support. And so having that in a training program and even ideally to have that extended into one’s first year on the job, I think, would make a lot of sense.

Superintendent Franklin indicated that when his mentor was selected there was a sense that the mentor did not bring knowledge that Superintendent Franklin could benefit from, despite his having a great deal of respect for the man. His mentor told Superintendent Franklin that given the mentee’s previous experiences, he had little to offer because Franklin “had seen a lot of things and it’s not like you are totally wet behind the ears.” A needs assessment would have prevented this missed mentoring opportunity by allowing Superintendent Franklin to be matched with someone with skills he identified as needs.

**Outcomes of an ideal program.** In addition to their thoughts on the structure of the program, participants shared their thoughts on topics for mentoring. When these superintendents, all with at least 2 years of service in the role, were asked what they would have liked more support with during the genesis of their superintendency, three key themes emerged. Boardsmanship, most narrowly defined as the ability to work successfully and productively with a multiple member board of directors, was an oft-mentioned need. Understanding of the superintendent evaluation process, which is closely linked to boardsmanship, was also identified as a need. Finally, support to combat the loneliness and isolation of being the superintendent of a district was identified as a need. All of these issues suggest that confidentiality and an inability by mentoring superintendents to be transparent for intern superintendents due to either
contractual or personnel issues could play a role in the inability to truly gain experience in those elements prior to assuming the role. Superintendent Garner illustrated this paradox when he said, “I think everybody puts a little bit of a wall up between them and their relationship with the board and sharing that out with others, which is probably appropriate and professional.” Given the necessity of maintaining confidentiality during the internship phase, novice superintendents expressed a need for novice superintendents to receive more explicit mentoring regarding these issues.

**Increased support and knowledge in boardsmanship.** Leaders new to the role of the superintendency do not have a clear sense of their role with the board, given that most new superintendents have previously had only one supervisor at a time and “during the superintendent preparation process there was likely little, if any, training related to establishing an effective board relationship” (Eller & Carlson, 2009, p. 33). Further, none of the superintendents interviewed for this study suggested that such training was a significant part of the pre-service mentoring or programs in which they participated. Superintendent Donnely explained the need for additional new service training in this area:

I think that boardmanship [is a need]. When I first became superintendent, he (an REU superintendent) came up and met with the board and we talked about what [the] board’s roles are because . . . from a principal perspective, when you’re in the audience at a board meeting, which I did for years and years, it’s a whole different thing than . . . when you are on the board and you’re communicating with the board.

No amount of observation of the interaction between the board and a superintendent can replicate the experience of being a part of a team in which five of the team members are simultaneously your evaluators. A researcher in this arena notes that “rapid turnover in the superintendency is
often attributed to poor relationships between a superintendent and his or her school board members” (Kowalski, 1999, p. 139).

Superintendent Franklin reinforced the notion that a new superintendent can learn boardsmanship only while serving in role of superintendent. Because of that required positionality, he would have appreciated support for that work once in the role. He explained, “You could tell me all you want what it is to have five board members, you could explain that till the cows come home, but I’m not going to get it until I’m doing it and I can understand.” Superintendent Franklin reported that he had very open access to the superintendency during his internship and yet still expressed the challenges of understanding the complexities of the board–superintendent relationship, and the of the superintendent’s unique responsibilities within that relationship, prior to achieving the role of superintendent.

Several of the study participants, early in their superintendencies, expressed a need for and sought out assistance with boardsmanship. That assistance came in the form of paid consultants who worked with them and their board of directors to help them begin to forge a relationship. Superintendent Alexander described that initial work:

One of the things that really helped when I first started is the relationship you need to have with the board. And I think as long as your board is strong and supporting you, people feel satisfied and want to be there. We did a board retreat when I first came and so it was really good and really well run.

Superintendent Alexander indicated that the work of that retreat, facilitated by someone from a PO specifically designed to support the work of boards of directors, determined what her board hoped she would accomplish and subsequently directed and set the course for the early years of her superintendency. She noted that at the time of the interview for this study, she had
completed most of that work and that she and the board of directors would be participating in another retreat to bring new members of the board of directors onto the team and to set new goals “to really make sure that the school board members and myself are on the same page.”

Superintendent Donnelly demonstrated a similar need for facilitated support when she indicated that she had contracted someone from the REU to host a board retreat. In that meeting, she said, they talked about the role of the board of directors. She wanted to make sure that expectations and roles were expressed clearly so that no conflict would arise later.

As a final expression of the critical nature of understanding and being competent in boardsmanship, Superintendent Alexander emphasized:

I think sometimes when I have talked to superintendents and they start getting disillusioned, it’s that the relationship between them and the board is not as strong and so they end up being in isolation. And when you are isolated, you have more problems.

Superintendent Alexander highlighted frustration and problems in a superintendency, which she thought were caused by dysfunction in the relationship of the superintendent and the board of directors.

Information about and support for superintendent evaluation. This increase in isolation and lack of communication and teamwork likely contribute to the next issue for which the superintendents expressed a need, which is evaluation of the superintendent by the board of directors. As indicated in the literature review, superintendent evaluations are conducted inconsistently and often provide little value to the superintendent or the district he or she serves. Evaluation is related to boardsmanship and is a critical piece of the relationship between the superintendent and the board of directors. Superintendent Donnelly illustrated this point when she said,
The other thing, and maybe this goes hand in hand with that [boardsmanship], that I’m still frustrated with is evaluation of the superintendent. Our board, if I didn’t push, they would never evaluate the superintendent and I just think evaluation . . . it should be a good thing. And last year, I had to just push and push and push and I don’t feel like what I got from an evaluation was very helpful. I don’t think they take it very seriously, and I think part of it is because they’re happy. I think if they weren’t happy they’d probably take it real seriously, which is okay, but for me to grow as a superintendent—and I would really want that process to be specific and come away with it knowing these are the areas I’m going to work on, so I don’t know, that kind of goes with boardsmanship too.

Superintendent Donnely is not alone in her frustration with evaluations. Although her board, with her repeated urging, falls into the nearly 80% of boards who formally evaluate the superintendent once a year, they also fall into the 22% who provide only summative information (Kowalski, 2011).

Superintendent Donnely further explained that the board of directors in her district didn’t seem to see the value or potential of a superintendent evaluation to leverage success on both the board of directors and superintendent levels as well as on a systems level. She explained,

I don’t think they see their role. They don’t really feel the need to evaluate the superintendent, and it’s almost like the superintendent has to just create this document . . . “Here’s the timeline, this is what you need to do.” And to me it seems like they should be doing that as a board, and so it’s February and they haven’t even talked to me about an evaluation, and I actually put it on the agenda for this next board meeting Wednesday night and the Board Chair—I meet with the Board Chair to go over the agenda—she took it off. She said, “Oh, no, let’s not do it yet. Let’s just wait. We have other things to do.”
So I was like, “Okay.” I think that’s just because it’s always been that way. We’ve always had superintendents that stay 3 or 4 years and then move on. And you know, there’s never been a superintendent that’s been here long enough to really get that [superintendent evaluation] as part of the expectation for the board.

Superintendent Donnelly is not alone among participants in her frustrations regarding implementation of the superintendent evaluation process and her interest in having more support for herself that would allow her to better serve the board of directors’ interests. There in an implicit awkwardness in providing your supervisors with templates, trying to arrange their schedules, and encouraging them to complete the work when the work is one’s own evaluation.

This is not to say that evaluation has been completely without innovation in the work of novice superintendents from this study, and several participants did find support from mentors in this arena. Specifically, two superintendents in this study, Superintendent Alexander and Superintendent Garner, received counsel from mentors, which made them outliers in this arena. Superintendent Alexander, at the time of our interview, was participating in a group to pilot new evaluation processes and said,

I’m also in the group within our REU where we are piloting the superintendent new evaluation and so we’ve [superintendents] been meeting once a month going through . . . our goals, . . . the rubrics that we are trying to work through, what evidence are you giving your school board to show that you are meeting those goals, and so that’s very beneficial.

Interestingly, the focus group of Superintendent Alexander’s pilot evaluation work was other superintendents rather than the superintendent and the board of directors working together. Though the superintendent was working on new evaluation processes, that learning and
experimentation was still her responsibility, with her newly gained expertise and skills to be shared with the board of directors.

Superintendent Garner also received support in this arena. That support suggested an innovation in evaluation to him. Unlike the work of Superintendent Alexander, which focused on the evaluation itself, Superintendent Garner focused on the dissemination of his evaluation. He indicated that one of his supporters advised him to “run it by your board but ask that you can give your evaluation to all your cabinet members and each union leadership.” After getting the board of directors’ agreement, he shared it with those groups to be transparent and allow all of them to see that he was going to “set goals to continue improvement along that path.” He used his own evaluation to model a growth mindset and be open with groups in the district. Again, this speaks more to his innovation than to his evaluative relationship with the board of directors, but it was a novel use of his evaluation.

**Assistance with combating isolation.** The final need expressed by participants closely mirrored the social and emotional support discussed in the previous section on support received as a novice superintendent. A number of superintendents expressed the need to have more support to combat isolation in the role. Several superintendents reinforced the unique nature of the job and the resulting need to have people who understand your work be a part of your experience. Superintendent Garner expressed the need to have support with

the understanding of what truly [it] is we’re getting into. I don’t think there’s a better job than what we have. But there’s not a job out there that is 7 days a week, 365 days a year that we worry about our kids.

Reinforcing the unanticipated relentlessly relentless nature of the work and the need to combat that isolation with peer interaction, Superintendent Edwards explained:
It is a lonely job because nobody . . . is going to quite understand the sense of responsibility I feel 24/7. So having frequent contact with peers and—regular and frequent contact I think is important, and where we’re also our own worst enemies because those are the first meetings sometimes we skip when we get busy and bogged down. So it’s a paradox . . . you got to keep those things sacred.

Superintendent Donnelly, who said that “being able to reach out to local superintendents is huge” also expressed the lack of understanding about the nature of the work. She expressed that in the absence of that connection, “in a small district you do feel a little isolated.” All three of these superintendent indicated that having more of these opportunities to interact with peers would have made their novice years in the role of superintendent less isolating.

Superintendent Hannigan observed that he would have felt less isolated had assigned mentors had a more formalized role. He suggested:

It would be extremely valuable to have that superintendent mentor that it wasn’t as kind of, “Hey, let’s get together and if we can” type of relationship, but it was . . . part of your superintendent’s program, but you had somebody that you were going to be meeting with on a regular basis. I think that would be pretty valuable.

Implementing Superintendent Hannigan’s suggestion of having a superintendent be mentored beyond the internship phase, while he or she is actually doing the work, would remove the barriers erected by the need for confidentiality and the lack of transparency. Superintendent Baker was able to find those types of relationship without a formal mentor and said,

Knowing that there’s got to be many challenges and many challenges you’ve never faced before, but then knowing that there are others around you that you can call upon for support, because you are the only one in the district and you can’t really do it . . .
yourselves in the districts and knowing that there’s others outside that you can really rely and trust on.

She expressed the belief that it is critical for a novice superintendent to receive that type of support and to have trusting relationships if he or she is to navigate the early years of the role successfully.

Summary

Participating superintendents indicated that support came to them from four primary arenas. People, critical to their support, ranged from role models, to those with moderately more involvement, to those who had much more significant support roles, including advocates and brokers of their careers. In addition to people, organizations, in particular university preparation programs, SOs, and REUs, played a variety of supporting roles in the superintendents’ experiences. Those roles included building a knowledge base; developing oneself as a leader; and offering technical support, including support for budgeting, legal matters, board relationships issues, and board policy and crisis management. Finally, superintendents characterized opportunities, both those provided to them and those they worked to make happen, as intrinsic to their success.

In addition to sharing the sources of their support, superintendents shared the role of mentoring throughout their career: from encouragement to enter the role, o the preparation phase through the aspirant phase, and, finally, to the mentoring they received during their first 3 years in the program. In the encouragement into the role period, superintendents expressed, people played the largest part in their decision to pursue the role, helping them at times to overcome an initial lack of consideration or aversion to the role. During the preparation phase of their trajectory, the superintendents were given opportunities through their university programs and
internships to gain experience in the field and try their hand at the work of superintendents, but these opportunities generally lacked a reflective component. One superintendent was not provided adequate opportunities, and another received both opportunities and a genuine opportunity to reflect on her experiences. During the aspirant phase, superintendents were given support with the technical aspects of applying for a superintendent position, including applications, letters, and interviews. They were also given help with discerning whether they and an open position would be a fit. Also during this stage, their supporters drew on their connections to help the aspirants secure a position. After achieving a superintendent position and during the first 3 years of their role, the superintendents experienced support from assigned mentors in addition to technical assistance and psychosocial support. The assigned mentor relationships’ efficacy was varied, with some superintendents benefiting and others not feeling that the assistance was an added value. The superintendents also received technical assistance on a variety of topics, including running levies, bullying, superintendent evaluation, legislative advocacy, and construction. That support generally came from either the superintendent’s local ESD or a countywide meeting of superintendent. Finally, the superintendents received psychosocial support, generally from their peer superintendents. This type of support was considered by the participants to be the most valuable.

In the final section, superintendents shared their thoughts on the ideal structures and topics for a mentoring program to be used to support retention in the role. They noted that they thought programs should be more formal to give fledgling superintendents the best preparation possible and to provide more structure, a vital element of which is needs assessments. They suggested that the most important outcomes of a program, areas that were lacking or insufficient
in current structures, included boardsmanship, superintendent evaluation, and the challenges of isolation.

The findings of the study suggest that although superintendents find support in a variety of places on many topics throughout their journey to becoming a superintendent, more work should be done to support superintendents in their unique roles. Chapter Five includes implications for practice and opportunities for further study that could improve programs and provide additional information about this topic.
CHAPTER FIVE
CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

The purpose of conducting this study was to examine and develop an understanding of novice superintendents’ perceptions regarding mentoring and the superintendency. Specifically, the researcher for this study identified participants who could help to illuminate the central phenomenon being studied (Creswell, 2008) and used qualitative methods to gather and analyze the “thick descriptions” (Patton, 1990) gained by interviewing nine novice superintendents in a single state. Those thick descriptions were then deeply examined through multiple levels of coding, whereupon major themes emerged. By completing those processes, the researcher addressed the research questions, allowing the study to provide insight into how the superintendents viewed mentoring and support throughout their careers. This chapter has three objectives. First, a summary of the most significant findings of this research provides a compendiaiy account of most salient themes from the interviews. In addition, this chapter explores and articulates recommendations for further research that could advance the study of mentoring and support for the superintendency in significant and potent ways. Finally, this chapter provides recommendations and implications for practice, which emerged as a result of this study, that could have beneficial results for practitioners.

Major Findings

The findings from this study emerged from the three research questions that guided this study. Those questions were: How do novice superintendents describe their mentoring experiences?; How do novice superintendents describe the role of mentoring in their career?; and How do novice superintendents perceive mentoring experiences affecting their retention in the superintendency? From the answers to those research questions, a number of themes emerged
that lend insight into the impact of support and mentoring on the participating superintendents. Those findings included the sources of support for superintendents; the role that mentoring played throughout novice superintendents’ careers; and superintendents’ beliefs about the composition of an ideal mentoring program and how such a program could support the work of practitioners in the field.

The first theme, the sources of support for superintendents, revealed that those sources of support originated from several different agents. People in the participating superintendents’ lives, whether serving as role models or playing more intensive support roles, were cited by most participants as primary and significant sources of support. Additionally, the superintendents acknowledged the role that organizations, including university programs, state agencies, and regional education units, played in their interest in the role and in the myriad of support that the participants received once in the role of superintendent. Finally, opportunities, whether offered or seized, emerged among the superintendents as a source of support to them. Those three categories represented the major sources of support described by the participating superintendents as having shaped their experiences during various phases of their individual career trajectories.

In those individual career trajectories, the superintendents clearly articulated the role of mentoring and support in various phases of their career. While the sources were the people, organizations, and opportunities listed previously, the superintendents spoke of their experiences throughout their career, and these revelations allowed the impact of support to be considered chronologically as it functioned throughout their collective careers. As discussed in the findings section in the previous chapter, the phases of their career that emerged as distinct were during their development of an interest in the role of superintendent, during their preparation phase,
during the period in which they were actively seeking a superintendency, and during the mentoring period in their first 3 years in the role. Their expressed needs and sources of support were fluid and iterative during those periods as their needs changed.

Finally, participating superintendents’ interviews contributed to an understanding of the types of support that they reported would be most helpful to them. That understanding included both the format and the topics that the superintendents indicated would have been most helpful to them. Two important subthemes emerged in the theme of the format, or structure, of the mentoring of novice superintendents while they are in their initial superintendent position. First, the participants indicated that an assessment of their needs would have been helpful, both in selecting a mentor and in providing a guide for the mentoring relationship. Additionally, participants evidenced a desire for a better-articulated and more formalized structure in their mentoring relationships as novice superintendents. In the final finding, the superintendents articulated the mentoring-related topics that they would have found most helpful. Those included boardsmanship, or the ability to get along with and support the work of a board; superintendent evaluation; and combating isolation. Superintendents expressed the importance of knowledge in those areas but indicated that little support was provided to them in dealing with those specific issues.

In examining the findings from the study, several strong links to the research base can be discerned; at the same time, deviation from that research was demonstrated as well. The experiences of participants in this study mirrored the research pertaining to the positive aspects of mentoring including its role in helping them become a superintendent (Garn & Brown, 2008), and having a practicing superintendent support their efforts (Brunner & Grogan, 2007).
Additionally, participants described many parallels to the positive implications explicated by Mertz (2004) including role modeling, advocacy, sponsorship and patronage.

The participants’ experiences also echoed the research by Eby et al. Kamler (2006), Kowalski (2013) and Mertz (2004), which indicated that mentoring is a broad-based and multifaceted process. Those facets include both changing needs of the protégés throughout the superintendent journey that cut across a period of time and iterative support being offered to protégés depending on those needs. Mentoring may start much earlier than provided for by conventional dyadic mentoring programs. For example, an educator may receive support to encourage them into consideration of the role at a very early phase of their leadership trajectory. This type of support need not be particularly intense as indicated by the interviews but can begin to socialize an educator into the role by planting that seed of consideration of the role of superintendent into someone who had not previously considered it. At the other end of the bookends of support would be help with the ongoing isolation, which the superintendents in the study indicated they experienced as a part of their role.

This ongoing isolation represents the one primary deviation from the literature used as the foundation for this study and the experiences that participants in this study described. None of the research place the same emphasis on the loneliness, isolation and lack of ability to understand the role prior to assuming it as the participants in this study expressed. The participants passionately described the challenges and stress around the relentless nature of the role of the superintendency and that aspect of the role is largely overlooked by most of the literature on support needed or received by superintendents.
Recommendations for Future Research

Several areas for future research emerged through both the literature review and the analysis of the interviews that were conducted for this study. Most significant among the topics for future study are the opportunity to explore gender differences in how superintendents use and perceive mentoring; the need to more thoroughly study, examine, and draw conclusions from board/superintendent relationships; and the potential to gain additional information about how mentoring programs can be designed to support both aspiring and novice superintendents as they aspire to, and achieve, the role of superintendent.

Gender differences in mentoring use and perspectives. Though only one area of gender specific differences in themes emerged in this study, in the category of social-emotional support, this study did not aspire to study gender differences in support needs of aspiring or practicing superintendents. In 2012 only 23% of superintendents in the nation were women, and that percentage is rising at a glacial 0.7% per year (Wallace, 2015). In the 2011–2012 school year, 76% of public school teachers were female (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). Even if the goal is only to achieve representation of the male-to-female ratios present in the general population, it will take several generations to achieve at this rate. Given those disproportionate numbers, it is imperative that that the social and emotional supports expressed in this study, as well as other types of support, be examined more closely to determine whether support and mentoring of women influence their ascension into the role. Though gender and the superintendency is a complex issue, and many factors are at play, there may be potential for deliberate, discrete support for women that could remove barriers, encourage female leaders to consider the role, and support them once in the role that could increase their numbers. Researchers must also examine whether mentoring and support for
encouragement to consider the role is being given disproportionately to those who are male and White thereby serving to preempt early consideration and socialization into the role of superintendent by educators who do not meet those criteria. For those reason, this arena support needed by women deserves more research consideration.

**Boardsmanship and its impact on the superintendency.** The subject that the superintendents referred to as *boardsmanship* is neglected among researchers. Though research in this arena is scant, whether it is called boardsmanship or board of directors and superintendent relationships, it emerged as a significant concern for interviewed superintendents. Superintendents indicated that they understood the importance of this topic and the grave risk that mistakes in this area of their work could pose to their career. Their interviews suggested that, despite that awareness, they did not believe they received adequate information about this topic from their programs or from individual supporters or mentors. However, given the dearth of research on this topic, it is perhaps unsurprising that they received little assistance in this specific arena. Additional research into the relationships between superintendents and their boards of directors could increase the likelihood that relevant information will be given to superintendents as they progress throughout their careers.

**Mentoring programs and their effectiveness.** A final area of research suggested by this study is the evaluation of formal superintendent mentoring programs and their effectiveness, both in terms of their perceived efficacy by participants and their ability to encourage a more diverse workforce to enter the field, along with their effectiveness in supporting the success and retention of superintendents in the role. Given that mentoring can represent large investments of time, financial resources, and personal commitment, it would be prudent to evaluate whether formal programs can, in fact, influence those topics. A few states have implemented state-
funded mentoring programs and quantitative as well as qualitative research to determine the
efficacy of those programs and whether they add value to the superintendency and to
superintendents. The replicability and scalability of the programs could also be revealed through
this further research.

Recommendations for Future Practice

In addition to the recommendations for future research, a wealth of information to inform
future clinical practice emerged from this study. Existing mentoring programs could be
improved, with little additional financial investment, to better support superintendents based on
the information gathered in this study. The improvements that could most readily be made to
support mentoring relationships include conducting assessment prior to arranging mentoring and
creating a more structured approach to mentoring.

Assessments prior to entering a mentoring program. This study suggests that a
multipronged needs assessment could support the mentoring process during the early years of the
superintendency. Such an assessment could include data about the type of support that protégés
need, whether that be technical support or support of a social-emotional nature. A
superintendent who has never worked outside of a building before, for example, has significantly
different needs than someone who has spent years working in a district office environment.
Additionally, the assessment could include an evaluation of the openness of the new
superintendent to a coaching relationship and of his or her learning styles to help the mentor best
meet the needs of the protégé. This type of assessment, whether a formal inventory prior to the
assignment of a mentor or simply a candid discussion of needs and preferences once a mentor
has been assigned, could help prevent missed opportunities and maximize the efficacy of the
time that the protégé and mentor spend together. Additionally, if mentoring dyads are not being
used, this type of assessment could be used to provide new superintendents with information useful for forming interest groups. Perhaps some have never had experience with collective bargaining, or others need assistance with running levies or bonds; even outside a 1:1 mentoring relationship, the new superintendents could form groups to support their identified needs.

**Structured approaches to mentoring.** Superintendents in the study suggested that there was also an element of “you don’t know what you don’t know” when they assumed the role of superintendent. Thus, a more structured approach to mentoring, with guidance for the mentor, could prove to be an effective addition to these relationships. Such a structured approach could include an analysis of the aforementioned needs assessment, training for the mentor, inclusion of predetermined topics, and specific techniques for reflection and coaching.

**Analysis of needs assessment.** Before superintendents and mentors are matched, a formal needs assessment could be conducted to determine the type of mentor and skill set that would be most beneficial to the intern or novice superintendent. Once a match was made with that information taken into account, it would be imperative that the mentor and protégé have the opportunity to discuss the results and decide how best to proceed. In doing so, they would avoid the phenomenon of having a few meetings with no real purpose and then drifting apart, as was the case with many participants in this study. Additionally, the mentor could recognize his or her own shortcomings in an attempt to best meet the needs determined by the assessment. If the mentor realized he or she did not have the skills to meet the needs of the new superintendent, the mentor could facilitate introductions and referrals to support the work of the new superintendent as needed.

**Mentor training.** It is also important that mentors receive training. This training could include coaching techniques, metacognitive strategies, and the identification of areas in which
the new superintendent needed support. Many experienced superintendents attained their role without mentoring peers; some may have been instructional coaches, but most, if they have ever served as mentors, were mentoring student teachers or administrative interns rather than peers in an identical role. Learning coaching techniques for adult learners could increase these superintendents’ skill sets in working with a new career superintendent. Mentors in this study did not receive training prior to being assigned a support role and, as evidenced by the interviews, the support they were able to provide varied in efficacy.

**Inclusion of predetermined topics.** Superintendents providing mentoring could be apprised of rising issues in the field, whether those stem from technical, philosophical, or social-emotional arenas. In the ever-changing landscape of public education, topics emerge that superintendents should be able to address, and mentors could be given insight into how to work with novice superintendents regarding those topics. Additionally, the mentors could provide insight into common challenges superintendents face, such as boardsmanship, labor negotiations, and isolation. The mentors could also, given a formal structure for mentor meetings, provide a calendar-based menu of support to superintendents throughout the school-year calendar. A single entity, whether a regional educational unit or a state-wide organization, would best be able to collect data about needs for predetermined topics, stay abreast of emerging topics in the field, and disseminate that information to all mentors in a given year. Centralizing that work would prevent individual mentors from having to replicate those efforts. Though individual pairings could still individualize the learning path based on needs, mentors would have a wealth of information available to them to use as a resource.

One topic that superintendents in this study universally recognized as a need was training on and information about the evaluation of the superintendent. It is likely that such information
would be valuable not only to novice superintendents but also to experienced superintendents. As indicated in the review of the literature, more specific training and support in this arena is needed. Though school boards are ultimately responsible for providing the superintendent with his or her evaluation, the superintendent often provides guidance and support for the board of directors in this endeavor. As a result of providing those superintendents, particularly novice superintendents, with support in this arena, it would be expected that their evaluation could better contribute to understanding between the boards of directors and the superintendents they supervise, inform their practice, and provide them with support for improvement.

Specific and deliberate reflection. Notably absent from most of the novice superintendents’ experiences were structured opportunities to be metacognitive or reflective about their own learning. A structured program could provide them with the opportunity to take the time for reflection, through coaching or strategies such as journaling or group discussions. Training in metacognitive practices could encourage the educators to become more reflective practitioners throughout their careers and such reflection could support superintendents as they strive to be successful educators and leaders in their communities. Centralizing this support through a state agency or regional educational unit, as with the predetermined topics, could allow the training and information to be most efficiently gathered, prepared, and disseminated to the superintendents. If mentors and novice superintendents are provided with protocols for reflection and metacognition, they will not be burdened by the need to create these tools but will be empowered to best use them to inform and enhance their practice.

Conclusion

The literature supporting the importance of superintendents in public school districts unequivocally suggests that superintendent longevity and efficacy supports the work of districts
and student learning. Important contributions of the role, which can be made only in the context of superintendent longevity, include developing a common understanding of the district, shaping long-term goals, and creating an environment of stability and trust. Given those critical roles and taking into consideration national shortages of superintendent aspirants and applicants, encouraging leaders to consider becoming superintendents and supporting those who have achieved the role becomes of paramount importance. By presenting the collected and examined experiences of practicing superintendents, this study was able to contribute to the knowledge base on this topic, identify areas needing further study, and identify implications for further practice.

In this study, the novice superintendent participants shared their experiences of receiving support from a variety of sources throughout various stages in their careers. The interviews provided insight into common themes as well as into outlier experiences in the support that superintendents receive that encourage them to take on the role and support them once they assume it. Careful examination of the themes and outliers contributed to the recommendations for further study. Additionally, examination of those themes shaped and informed the implications for clinical practice that could further support the work of superintendents in their roles.

Given the critical nature of the work of those who choose to serve as superintendents, this research should lend support to the recruitment, support and retention of superintendents. By doing so, it can support this role during these extremely complex and changing times in public education.
REFERENCES


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Interview Guide

1. Tell me about your journey to becoming a superintendent.

2. As you were preparing to become a superintendent, what role did supporters play in your efforts?
   a. What specific assistance did those supporters (explore each supporter) provide during your preparation?
   b. In what ways did you interact with those supporters?

3. As you were actively seeking a superintendent position, what role did supporters play?
   a. What specific assistance did those supporters (explore each supporter) provide during that process?
   b. In what ways did you interact with those supporters?

4. During the first three years of your superintendency, what role have supporters played?
   a. What specific assistance do those supporters (explore each supporter) provide?
   b. In what ways do you interact with those supporters?

5. From your preparation through the present, describe how your relationships with your supporters changed.

6. How did a supporter become a part of your experience?

7. As a person receiving support from others, what do you believe are your roles in your relationship with them?

8. What is your opinion about the role of supporters in becoming a superintendent?

9. What is your opinion about the role of supporters in a superintendent’s career?

10. Tell me about a specific time when you think your decision-making processes were impacted by a supporter.
11. Tell me about a time when you did not take the advice of a supporter.

12. What were the 2–3 areas in which support in aspiring and being a superintendent was the most valuable to you?

13. What kinds of things, in your opinion, should superintendents receive support for, in an ideal situation, that would help retain people in this role? (Probe for what that would look like.)