

EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP PRACTICES: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF SCHOOL
SUPERINTENDENTS' PERCEPTIONS

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SUPERINTENDENTS' PERCEPTIONS

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EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP PRACTICES: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF SCHOOL
SUPERINTENDENTS' PERCEPTIONS

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of successful school superintendents concerning how they carry out effective, research-based leadership practices and to discover if there are additional leadership practices these superintendents incorporate to be successful in leading their school districts. In this qualitative study, in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with six school superintendents from Southwest Missouri to determine the answers to the following research questions: (a) “How” do successful superintendents carry out effective, research-based leadership practices? and (b) Are there additional leadership practices that successful superintendents utilize in order to be effective, district level leaders? The six participants in this study were the only superintendents in the region who met all the specific criteria established by the researcher to ensure the selection of quality participants.

The review of literature identified nine effective district-level leadership practices: (a) establishing and promoting a school vision, (b) serving as instructional leaders, (c) communicating effectively, (d) building and sustaining relationships, (e) employing collaborative and shared leadership, (f) functioning as change agents, (g) displaying ethical and professional behavior, (h) navigating school politics, and (i) effectively managing school operations. These nine leadership practices form the basis of the interview guide and serve as the structure for exploring “how” successful superintendents operate as effective leaders.

Descriptive data was gathered from the interviews and analyzed using constant comparative analysis. The main results of the research include the 24 themes that emerged from the descriptive data pertaining to how the participants carried out each of the nine, research-

based leadership practices, and that no other themes emerged pertaining to additional leadership practices that successful superintendents utilize as effective leaders.

The overall findings from this study support the notion that effective leaders employ a certain set of leadership practices that are valuable in most educational settings. All the participants in this study utilized the nine effective district-level leadership practices identified in the literature. Furthermore, the data identified 24 common strategies concerning how the participants carried out each of the leadership practices.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

“Being an educational leader is difficult. It is complex. It is rarely honored in song and book. But when the final chapter is written, it will be education and educational leaders who will have contributed most to the protection of democracy, to equity, to justice and to human dignity” (Thomas & Brainbridge, 2001, p. 7).

Effective leadership is necessary for any organization to be successful (Bolman & Deal, 2005; Kouzes & Posner, 2007; Yukl, 2006). Superintendents are the chief executive officers of the school district and are ultimately responsible and accountable to students, faculty, staff, parents, and all other stakeholders. School superintendents must have an understanding of what constitutes effective leadership and be able to implement that leadership in their daily practices. Conventional wisdom tells us that leaders are essential for high-quality education (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003). In an attempt to raise its academic achievement, Missouri has launched Top 10 by 20, a major improvement effort that aims for student achievement in Missouri to rank among the top 10 states by 2020 (Retrieved November 23, 2012, from <http://dese.mo.gov/top10by20/documents/10x20-e-flier.pdf>). As school districts are facing increasing accountability for their students’ standardized test scores, school superintendents need to implement leadership practices that effectively lead their districts and positively impact student achievement.

This study is designed to explore how effective leadership practices should be exhibited by superintendents, in an attempt to positively impact best practices. A review of the current literature and interviews of practicing school superintendents were conducted to determine these

practices and how they are carried out. The descriptive data was analyzed and compared against the literature, and recommendations were made for current and future practitioners.

Problem Statement

School superintendents face numerous challenges and high expectations from a variety of stakeholders. New federal and state mandates have established rigorous accountability measures and increased the demands for high levels of academic achievement for all students. School superintendents may not be successful in leading their school districts and responding appropriately to the challenges they face if they do not effectively utilize research-based leadership practices. This study will address the problem of ineffective implementation of research-based superintendent leadership practices.

Research Questions

- 1.) “How” do successful superintendents carry out effective, research-based leadership practices?
- 2.) Are there additional leadership practices that successful superintendents utilize in order to be effective, district-level leaders?

Rationale for the Study

Increasing local, state, and federal demands for high academic achievement levels for all students have changed the landscape of school accountability and have brought a renewed emphasis on the importance of educational leadership (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003). Bolman and Deal (2008) contend leadership is often seen as a solution for almost any social problem. The purpose of this study is to determine how successful school superintendents carry out effective, research-based leadership practices and to discover if there are additional leadership practices these superintendents utilize to be effective school leaders.

The expectations and pressures that school superintendents are facing are more demanding than ever. While facing budget shortages, growing numbers of at-risk students, and increasing federal and state mandates, school superintendents are expected to be efficient managers and instructional leaders. District leaders must respond to a variety of internal and external demands, efficiently allocate and manage resources and personnel, promote student achievement, ensure federal guidelines and standards are being met, and develop community relationships all while under increasing public scrutiny. All of this calls for a need to identify what constitutes effective, district-level leadership practices and how these practices can be carried out by practitioners so that school superintendents can meet these demands and help their school districts perform at high levels. Yukl (2006) argues most practitioners want immediate answers about what to do and how to do it in order to be more effective as leaders. School superintendents have to deal with the current challenges of their jobs and are interested in finding practical solutions to these challenges. Yukl (2006) further believes it is important for managers and administrators to understand the complexity of effective leadership, be knowledgeable about leadership in organizations, and understand the limitations of this knowledge. This study strives to add to the knowledge base concerning effective superintendent leadership and provide new insights concerning how successful superintendents carry out effective, research-based leadership practices.

With the high expectations placed on superintendents, it is important for them to stay current on the latest research and know how to carry out effective leadership practices. Kowalski, McCord, Peterson, Young, and Ellerson (2011) found superintendents reported they were frequent readers of professional literature and reported what they read to be informative. This study will add to the current professional literature concerning effective leadership practices

for school superintendents and offer insight on how to implement these leadership practices. The findings from this study are intended to act as a guide for superintendents as they navigate the tumultuous waters of the ever-changing educational environment. This study is important because it has the potential to benefit current and future superintendents and the programs that prepare them by highlighting effective ways to implement research-based leadership practices.

Theoretical Framework

Effective school superintendent leadership is a complex yet important topic and has been the focus of many studies. A driving force behind this study is the need to explore “how” successful school superintendents carry out leadership practices that are identified as effective by the literature. Previous studies have been conducted to identify effective school leadership practices (Bredeson, Klar, & Johansson, 2011; Goens, 2009; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003; Wilson, 2010). The researcher accepts most school superintendents can identify some effective leadership practices; however, less is known concerning how to carry out those practices. Even less is known concerning how superintendents who have been identified as successful school leaders carry out these practices. This qualitative study will keep the focus on learning the meaning that these purposefully selected participants have concerning this issue (Creswell, 2007). The researcher believes one of the best ways to learn something is to identify those who do it well and find out how they do it. The famous Confucius quote states: “By three methods we may learn wisdom: First, by reflection, which is noblest; Second, by imitation, which is easiest; and third by experience, which is the bitterest” (Confucius, trans. 1938). This study intended to gather the experiences of successful school superintendents’ leadership practices so others may imitate them and reflect on their own practices.

Previous research on effective school leadership practices (Bredeson et al., 2011; Bredeson & Kose, 2007; Forner, Bierlein-Palmer, & Reeves 2012; Goens, 2009; Laub, 2010; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003; National School Public Relations Association, 2005; Peterson & Barnett, 2005; Portis & Garcia, 2007; Waters & Marzano, 2006) and research on the school superintendency (Glass, Bjork, & Brunner, 2000; Kowalski et al., 2011) supported the conceptual underpinnings for this study. The conceptual underpinnings of this study are further supported by Yukl's (2006) and Bolman & Deal's (2008) work studying leadership in organizations, Senge's (2006) work on learning organizations, Maxwell's (1993) work studying effective leadership, and Kouzes & Posner's (2007) more than 25 years of researching effective leadership practices.

Leithwood and Riehl (2003) analyzed the major findings from research on educational leadership and found that a core set of leadership practices form the "basics" of successful leadership and are valuable in almost all educational contexts. It is this idea of a core set of leadership practices that serves as the foundation for the theoretical framework of this study. The theoretical framework for this study is the following nine leadership practices gleaned from the comprehensive review of literature pertaining to effective school superintendent leadership: (a) establishing and promoting a school vision, (b) serving as instructional leaders, (c) communicating effectively, (d) building and sustaining relationships, (e) employing collaborative and shared leadership, (f) functioning as change agents, (g) displaying ethical and professional behavior, (h) navigating school politics, and (i) effectively managing school operations. These nine leadership practices form the basis of the interview guide and serve as the structure for exploring "how" successful superintendents operate as effective leaders.

The nine leadership practices were selected by the researcher, because they were most frequently cited in the literature as effective strategies for school superintendent leadership. Successful school superintendents establish and promote a school vision (Bredeson et al., 2011; Forner et al., 2012; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003; National School Public Relations Association, 2005; Portis & Garcia, 2007; Waters & Marzano, 2006). Maxwell (1993) states all effective leaders have a vision of what they must accomplish. Effective school superintendents develop and articulate a vision and clear direction for the district and ensure that the mission of each school in the district aligns with that vision (Bredeson et al., 2011; Portis & Garcia, 2007).

One of the landmark studies in the area of district level instructional leadership is Waters & Marzano (2006) meta-analysis that examined 27 studies concerning the influence of school district leaders on student achievement. This study involved 2,817 school districts and the achievement scores of 3.4 million students resulting in what McREL researchers believe to be the largest-ever quantitative study on superintendents (Waters & Marzano, 2006). This study found that superintendent instructional leadership matters.

Research supports the idea that effective communication skills are vital to successful leaders (Kouzes & Posner, 2007; Senge, 2006; Yukl, 2006), and that successful school superintendents communicate effectively (Goens, 2009; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003; McCullough, 2009; NSPRA, 2006). The need for good communication is a key component in superintendent leadership, because it is essential for high student achievement and every other aspect of the school system (McCullough, 2009; NSPRA, 2006; Waters & Marzano, 2006). Communication is a key component for developing a learning organization and team learning (Senge, 2006).

The National School Public Relations Association (2006) conducted a landmark study to identify qualities that were essential to the success of school superintendents. The researchers

interviewed 17 superintendents across the nation who had been superintendent of the year in their state or on a national level. The study found the top skills named by the superintendents as being critical to their success were establishing and promoting a school vision and communication.

Successful school superintendents build and sustain meaningful relationships (Goens, 2009; Kelleher & Van Der Bogart, 2006; Philips & Philips 2007; NSPRA, 2006; Richard & Kuse, 2008). Leadership at its essence is in relationships (Bolman & Deal, 2008; Goens, 2009; Kouzes & Posner, 2007; Maxwell, 1993). The leader's relationships ultimately determine the success and effectiveness of policies, procedures, and objectives (Bolman & Deal, 2008; Goens, 2009). Influence is the heart of leadership, and relationships are the avenue through which leaders influence others (Yukl, 2006). The quality of their relationships figures prominently in how satisfied and how effective leaders are at their work (Bolman & Deal, 2008; Maxwell, 1993; Kouzes & Posner, 2007).

Successful school superintendents employ collaborative and shared leadership (EWA, 2003; Kelleher & Van Der Bogert, 2006; Laub, 2010; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003; Richard & Kruse, 2008). As schools evolve as professional learning communities and emphasize the importance of shared goals and effort, effective superintendents promote cooperation and assist others in working together toward common goals (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003). Peterson and Barnett (2005) analyzed research findings from 7 studies and found that superintendents in high-performing schools collaboratively developed goals and a vision for instruction with administrators and the school board.

Superintendents who are successful school leaders effectively enact change within their school districts (Fullan, 2010; Kelleher & Van Der Bogart, 2006; Kotter, 2002; Laub, 2010;

Leithwood & Riehl, 2003; Portis & Garcia, 2007; Reeves, 2009; Waters & Marzano, 2006).

Leading change is one of the most important and difficult leadership responsibilities (Yukl, 2006). The measure of the effectiveness of the educational leadership superintendents provide is the educational change produced (Kelleher & Van Der Bogart, 2006).

Successful school superintendents must display ethical and professional behavior as they interact with all stakeholders and make decisions (Goens, 2009; Laub, 2010; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003; NSPRA, 2006; Thomas & Brainbridge, 2001). One of the top four skills listed by recognized superintendents as skills important to the success of their job was displaying high moral and ethical character (NSPRA, 2006). One of the most important qualities of leadership is integrity (Kouzes & Posner, 2007; Maxwell, 1993; Yukl, 2006). Kouzes and Posner (2007) consistently found the top characteristic that people look for and admire in leaders is honesty.

Superintendents who are successful school leaders effectively manage politics (Ball, 2012; Bolman & Deal; 2008; Bredeson et al., 2011; EWA, 2003; Yukl, 2006). Effective superintendents use politics to bring about change, leverage their relationships with school board members, and have the political will and personal commitment to stay the course (Ball, 2012; EWA, 2003; Mountford, 2004). Yukl (2006) states involving others in making decisions is often a necessary part of the political process for getting decisions approved and implemented in an organization.

Successful school superintendents effectively manage their time and the school operations (Kelleher & Van Der Bogert, 2006; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003; NSPRA, 2006). People in leadership positions face relentless and often conflicting demands on their time (Yukl, 2006). Effective superintendents pay attention to the organizational structure, because structure can enhance or hinder performance and the accomplishment of school goals. Successful

superintendents emphasize the use of systematic evidence, ask critical and constructive questions, and encourage careful monitoring of both teaching and student progress (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003).

Limitations/Delimitations

Limitations.

In a qualitative study, researcher and participant bias is a possibility. This study is limited to the truthfulness of the participants' responses and by researcher bias. The researcher attempted to establish credibility through triangulation, member checking, peer examinations, and clarifying the researcher's biases. This study acknowledges the perceptual nature of the data being collected. The researcher is not a practicing superintendent and therefore analyzed and interpreted the data through his own experiences and knowledge. Lastly, school leadership is a complex issue and therefore if this study were replicated, it might produce different results. Furthermore, the recommendations from this study may not meet the needs of every superintendent.

Delimitations.

Delimitations of this study pertain to the boundary of the problem, the participants studied, the methodology employed, and the setting of the study. This study focused on conducting in-depth, semi-structured interviews with six purposefully selected school superintendents from Southwest Missouri who work at school districts located in Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) supervisory region C.

Summary

Successful leadership has the ability to positively impact school districts. As schools face increasing pressure to raise student achievement, superintendents must ensure they are

employing leadership practices that positively impact their districts, and ultimately, their students. This study will explore how superintendents in the Southwest Region of Missouri who have been identified as successful school leaders carry out effective, research-based leadership practices. The study will utilize qualitative methodology. In-depth, semi-structured interviews will be conducted to gather the perceptions of the purposefully selected participants. Descriptive data will be collected from the interviews and analyzed using constant comparative analysis. The descriptive data will be analyzed and compared against the literature, and recommendations will be made for current and future practitioners and the educational institutions that prepare them. Chapter 2 will present the review of related literature, and Chapter 3 will include the methodology of the study. Chapter 4 will present the analysis of the data, and Chapter 5 will include the conclusions and recommendations of the study.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

“Conventional wisdom sees leadership as a good thing that we need more of, at least the right kind” (Bolman & Deal, 2008, p. 342). As the leader of the entire school district who must oversee a wide range of responsibilities from finances to personnel to public relations to student learning, superintendents must ensure they are employing the right kind of leadership. The educational landscape is continually changing. Today’s superintendents must guide their school districts through the challenges posed by an increasingly complex environment and government mandates. Curriculum standards, achievement benchmarks, and numerous policy initiatives from various sources create unpredictable and complicated requirements for school districts. In these times of increasing pressure and heightened concern for student achievement, school superintendents are being held accountable for how well teachers teach and how much students learn. Additionally, schools must respond to increasingly diverse student characteristics, growing requests to work with various outside agencies, and rapid advancements in technology for teaching and communication (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003). Today’s school leaders also face increasing political pressure and decreasing financial support. Superintendents often must meet these various challenges by enacting change that produces immediate and desirable results. Considering the state of the superintendency and the increasing demands facing it, Batagiannis (2007) writes:

In our world, frustration is expressed by some, not because programs are not in place, but because *perfect* programs or policies have not been created and implemented. And never mind the deep issues involved; the easy surface ones will suffice. Perfection is all we need, and perfection implemented yesterday. (p.150)

These examples illustrate some of the growing challenges facing schools and thus the thought that effective school leadership is more essential now than ever. As a result, superintendents must be equipped with the skills necessary to effectively lead their districts towards achieving its goals. Farkas, Johnson, Duffett, Foleno, and Foley (2001) note that dedicated, stable leadership can positively impact a school district. The many challenges facing leaders today suggest that success as a leader in the twenty-first century will require a higher level of skill and possibly some new leadership practices (Yukl, 2006).

Amidst the seeming certainty that leadership matters, the knowledge base about effective educational leadership is constantly growing (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003). The attraction of leadership as a subject of research and the many varying concepts of leadership has provided a vast array of literature (Yukl, 2006). This literature review will carefully examine the vast array of literature to determine the leadership practices that current research supports as effective for school superintendents. The relevant literature was gathered utilizing online databases and analyzed for effective district-level leadership practices. The articles were grouped into categories and then the key ideas were organized and summarized in tables. The leadership practices were tabulated and nine practices emerged from the literature as most frequently cited as effective leadership practices for school superintendents. The literature reveals effective school superintendents focus on these nine leadership practices: (a) establishing and promoting a school vision, (b) serving as instructional leaders, (c) communicating effectively, (d) building and sustaining relationships, (e) employing collaborative and shared leadership, (f) functioning as change agents, (g) displaying ethical and professional behavior, (h) navigating school politics, and (i) effectively managing school operations. The literature also

shows that school superintendents who desire to be effective in leading their school districts employ contextual leadership and face numerous challenges.

Leadership

An abundant amount of literature supports the importance of leadership (Bennis & Nanus, 2007; Bolman & Deal, 2008; Bredeson et al., 2011; Kotter & Cohen, 2002; Farkas et al., 2001; Hoyle, Bjork, Collier, & Glass, 2005; Kouzes & Posner, 2007; Fullan, 2010; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003; Maxwell, 1993; Senge, 2006; Waters & Marzano, 2006; Yukl, 2006). Despite its importance, leadership can be mysterious (Yukl, 2006) and difficult to define (Bolman & Deal, 2008; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003; Maxwell, 1993). Leithwood and Riehl (2003) state leadership is difficult to define, because it is like many other complex human activities, and contend it might even be unwise to narrow it unnecessarily. Yukl (2006) states like constructs in social science, defining leadership is arbitrary and subject; there is no single correct definition, but some are more useful than others. Bolman and Deal (2008) contend leadership is not tangible and only exists in relationships and in the perception of the engaged parties. Leadership is often confused with other imprecise terms such as power, authority, management, administration, control, and supervision (Yukl, 2006). Bennis' (1959) statement seems as true today as it did more than five decades ago:

Always, it seems, the concept of leadership eludes us or turns up in another form to taunt us again with its slipperiness and complexity. So we have invented an endless proliferation of terms to deal with it: leadership, power, status, authority, rank, prestige, influence, control, manipulation, domination, and so forth, and still the concept is not sufficiently defined. (p. 260)

Although it might be difficult to define, a working definition of leadership can provide a useful framework for all who are impacted by its intricacies. There are many definitions of leadership, but Yukl (2006) found most of these definitions reflect the assumption that it involves a process whereby one person exerts intentional influence over other people to guide, structure, and facilitate activities and relationships in an organization or group. However, Yukl (2006) contends these definitions differ in several aspects, including who exerts influence, the intended purpose of the influence, the manner in which influence is exerted, and the outcome of the attempted influence. After many years of studying leadership, Maxwell (1993) defines leadership as having influence and the ability to obtain followers. Leithwood and Riehl (2003) found the essence of most definitions of leadership contains two key components: providing direction and exercising influence.

Leadership differs from management and authority (Bolman & Deal, 2008; Yukl, 2006). Not all leaders are managers and many managers are not leaders (Bolman & Deal, 2008; Yukl, 2006). Bennis and Nanus (2007) contend managers focus on execution while leaders focus on purpose. Kotter (1988) states management is primarily about the structural nuts and bolts of planning, organizing, and controlling, while leadership is more of a change-oriented process of visioning, building relationships, and networking. Maxwell (1993) states management is the process of assuring the program and objectives of the organization are implemented, and leadership has to do with casting a vision and motivating people. When dealing with people, Maxwell (1993) argues that people don't want to be managed, they want to be led.

Leadership involves different styles and can be developed in various ways. Maxwell (1993) argues that leadership is developed, not discovered. He states: "The truly 'born leader' will always emerge; but, to stay on top, natural leadership characteristics must be developed" (p.

9). With more than 25 years of researching leadership, Kouzes and Posner (2007) contend leadership can be learned and is a skill that “can be strengthened, honed, and enhanced, given the motivation and desire, along with practice and feedback, role models, and coaching” (p. 340).

When considering the complex concept of leadership, Thomas & Brainbridge (2001) state:

There is no perfect model for examining leadership. There are no exact criteria. It may be that leadership is so complex that, at best, we can only obtain clues, study a variety of styles, and partially understand it. We can feel it when it occurs; we know when it is not there. (p. 2)

Kouzes and Posner (2007) offer a different view on leadership stating:

It’s just pure myth that only a lucky few can ever understand the intricacies of leadership. Leadership is not a gene, and it’s not a secret code that can’t be deciphered by ordinary people. The truth is that leadership is an observable set of skills and abilities that are useful whether one is in the executive suite or on the front line, on Wall Street or Main Street, in any campus, community, or corporation. (p. 339)

Leadership is a function more than a role and may be performed by different people in various roles (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003). Leaders mobilize and work with others to achieve their shared goals. Those in leadership positions work with others to create a shared sense of purpose and direction instead of merely imposing goals on their followers. Leaders primarily work through and with other people and help to establish the conditions that enable others to be effective. Leaders are expected to persuade or inspire rather than coerce, to produce collaborative effort, and to pursue organizational goals (Bolman & Deal, 2008; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003).

Leadership is not about personality; it is about behavior (Kouzes & Posner, 2007). The foundation of leadership rests on character and interactions (Goens, 2009). Leadership is

complex, because its essence is in relationships (Bolman & Deal, 2008; Goens, 2009). A leader's followers be motivated or stymied by leadership's soft and intangible dimensions (Goens, 2009). Bolman and Deal (2008) emphasize that leadership is always situated in both relationships and contexts. The effects of leadership can be seen over the long haul through outcomes, coalitions, collaborations, and motivation (Goens, 2009). When considering the concept of leadership, Thomas & Brainbridge (2001) state:

The complexities of leadership are such that conclusions are dangerous. There is no overwhelming consensus on how leaders became leaders and how they influence the direction of society. There are, however, some things about leaders with which most students of the concept will agree. These "truths" may help us to better understand leadership. (p. 3)

Thomas and Brainbridge (2001) contend some of these agreed upon truths include: (a) leadership is situational, (b) there is not one single way to prepare for leadership, (c) leaders have a variety of styles, (d) a leader is someone who has followers, (e) a leader helps others attain the goals of the group, and (f) leadership has ethical implications.

Leithwood and Riehl (2003) found three broad categories of leadership that have been identified as important in most settings and organizations: Setting Directions, Developing People, and Developing the Organization. The researchers outlined more specific competencies that encompass each category. Setting Directions includes: (a) identifying and articulating a vision, (b) creating shared meanings, (c) creating high performance expectations, (d) fostering the acceptance of group goals, (e) monitoring organizational performance, (f) and communicating. Developing People includes: (a) offering intellectual stimulation, (b) providing individualized support, and (c) providing an appropriate model. Developing the Organization

includes: (a) strengthening culture, (b) modifying organizational structure, (c) building collaborative processes, and (d) managing the environment (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003).

Kouzes and Posner (2007) spent more than 25 years conducting research on personal-best leadership practices. The researchers found effective leaders engage in the following Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership: (a) Model the Way, (b) Inspire a Shared Vision, (c) Challenge the Process, (d) Enable Others to Act, and (e) Encourage the Heart.

After studying research on effective leadership, Yukl (2006) proposed the following as the 10 most important leadership functions: (a) help interpret the meaning of events, (b) create alignment on objectives and strategies, (c) build task commitment and optimism, (d) build mutual trust and cooperation, (e) strengthen collective identity, (f) organize and coordinate activities, (g) encourage and facilitate collective learning, (h) obtain necessary resources and support, (i) develop and empower people, and (j) promote social justice and morality.

School Leadership

Effective school leaders share similar leadership qualities with effective leaders in other areas of life (Bredeson et al., 2011; Goens, 2009; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003), but they also face unique challenges that are particular to the school setting (Bredeson, Klar, & Johansson, 2011; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003; Richard & Kruse, 2008; Thomas & Brainbridge, 2001). When considering school leadership, Thomas and Brainbridge (2001) state:

Educational leadership can be madness or it can make a contribution to improve our schools. It can be a frantic effort to fix everything or it can be concentration on a few important items. It can be a futile exercise of power or it can empower individuals to help themselves. In the face of dramatic social change, a troubled sea of governance conflict, and excessive demands being made on schools, it can be said that one who aspires to

school leadership must either be mad or a supreme egotist. (p. 1)

Superintendents' roles are often categorized by two major components – management of the district's operational aspects and leadership and performance of programs (Goens, 2009).

According to Richard and Kruse (2008) school boards desire a superintendent who is able to produce student achievement results for the district, who pays attention to people as individuals, who forms positive relationships with parents and community members, and who generally works cooperatively with others. Thomas and Brainbridge (2001) state effective school leadership includes listening effectively, validating the accuracy of received information, speaking frankly and clearly, displaying a positive attitude, staying up to date on current research, being self-motivated and inspiring colleagues, and taking risks and encouraging others to do the same.

Leithwood and Riehl (2003) analyzed the major findings from research on educational leadership and summarized their outcomes in the following five themes: (a) Leadership has significant effects on student learning, second only to the effects of the quality of curriculum and teachers' instruction; (b) Currently, administrators and teacher leaders provide most of the leadership in schools, but other potential sources of leadership exist; (c) A core set of leadership practices form the "basics" of successful leadership and are valuable in almost all educational contexts; (d) Successful school leaders respond productively to challenges and opportunities created by the accountability-oriented policy contest in which they work; (e) Successful school leaders respond productively to the opportunities and challenges of educating diverse groups of students. Concerning these findings Leithwood and Riehl (2003) state: "While mastery of these basics provides no guarantee that a leader's work will be successful in a particular school

context, lack of mastery likely guarantees failure. A successful leader needs to do more but cannot do less” (p. 5).

Bredeson et al. (2011) found effective school superintendent leadership is characterized by three dominant themes. First, superintendents must keep “the main thing the main thing.” These leaders understand that students are the focus of their professional work and ensure their systems and processes remain student-centered. Second, superintendents must have a strong focus on vision and mission. These leaders understood that change is a constant reality and worked to clarify, communicate, and protect a vision that is dedicated to the care, nurturing, and development of all students. Third, superintendents must establish trust and meaningful relationships with others, both inside and outside of their organizations. These leaders know that leadership and followership are inseparable elements in the daily practice of working with others.

School Leadership Standards and Evaluation

Professional standards for school leaders provide a solid foundation for determining effective leadership practices. The Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) and the Educational Leadership Constituent Council (ELCC) have established national standards that exist to support school leaders in promoting the success of all students. These research-based school leadership standards were collaboratively created by the educational community and reflect the benchmark towards which all school leaders should aspire (Wilmore, 2008). These standards also provide a framework for superintendent evaluation and assist the school district in improving student achievement and district operations. Appropriate standards and effective superintendent evaluation support the superintendent in the following areas: (a) developing good board/superintendent relationships, (b) promoting professional growth, (c) providing clarity of roles, (d) creating common understanding of leadership, and (e) providing a mechanism for

accountability which includes improvement in student achievement as determined by multiple assessments (Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2012). These leadership standards reflect new information learned about educational leadership and help guide the improvement of educational leadership preparation, licensure, evaluation, and professional development (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2008).

The Educational Leadership Policy Standards: ISLLC 2008 are the updated version of the 1996 Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) Standards for School Leaders, and were adopted by the National Policy Board for Educational Administration (NPBEA) on December 12, 2007. The updated standards retain the structure of the original ISLLC standards, but are written for new audiences and reinforce the idea that the leader's primary responsibility is to improve teaching and learning for all children (NPBEA, 2008). The six ISLLC Standards are: (a) facilitating the development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship of a vision of learning that is shared and supported by all stakeholders, (b) advocating, nurturing, and sustaining a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional growth, (c) ensuring management of the organization, operation, and resources for a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment, (d) collaborating with faculty and community members, responding to diverse community interests and needs, and mobilizing community resources, (e) acting with integrity, fairness, and in an ethical manner, (f) understanding, responding to, and influencing the political, social, economic, legal, and cultural context (NPBEA, 2008).

The Educational Leadership Constituent Council (ELCC) utilized the ISLLC Standards to develop the Standards for Advanced Programs in Educational Leadership. The Educational Leadership Program Standards: 2011 ELCC District Level were adopted by the National Policy

Board for Educational Administration (NPBEA) in November, 2011. The ELCC Standards added a seventh standard which addresses the preparation of future superintendents and principals (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2011). The seven ELCC Standards are: (a) facilitating the development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship of a school or district vision of learning that is supported by the school community, (b) promoting a positive school culture, providing an effective instructional program, applying best practices to student learning, and designing comprehensive professional growth plans for staff, (c) managing the organization, operations, and resources in a way that promotes a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment, (d) collaborating with families and other community members, responding to diverse community interests, and needs, and mobilizing community resources, (e) acting with integrity and fairness and in an ethical manner, (f) understanding, responding to, and influencing the larger political, social, economic, legal, and cultural context, and (g) requiring an internship that provides significant opportunities for candidates to synthesize and apply the knowledge and practice and develop the skills identified in the first six Standards through substantial, sustained, standards-based work in real settings, planned and guided cooperatively by the institution and school district personnel for graduate credit (NPBEA, 2011).

In 2007, the Missouri Commissioner of Education appointed a committee to begin revising the Missouri Performance Based Superintendent Evaluation (PBSE) model. Using the national ELCC and ISLLC Standards, the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education collaborated with other various stakeholders and developed the new Missouri Educator Evaluation System. The Missouri Educator Evaluation System for school superintendents has seven standards and sixteen quality indicators (DESE, 2012). The seven standards and their indicators are: (a) Vision, Mission, and Goals through developing,

articulating, implementing and stewardship of a vision, (b) Teaching and Learning through promoting a positive school culture, providing effective instructional programs, and ensuring comprehensive professional growth plans, (c) Management of Organizational Systems through managing the organizational structure, leading personnel, and managing resources, (d) Collaboration with Families and Stakeholders through collaborating with families and other community members, responding to community interests and needs, and mobilizing community resources, (e) Ethics and Integrity through personal and professional responsibility, (f) The Education System through understanding, responding and influencing the larger context, and (g) Professional Development through increasing knowledge and skills based on best practices (DESE, 2012).

National leadership standards reflect a professional consensus about what constitutes an effective school superintendent; these standards should be considered when defining effective school superintendent leadership practices. The following sections will outline what the literature shows concerning effective superintendent practices, contextual leadership, and challenges superintendents face. Many of the practices discussed in the literature align with the practices outlined in the professional standards. Several effective district-level leadership practices emerged from the literature: (a) establishing and promoting a school vision, (b) serving as instructional leaders, (c) communicating effectively, (d) building and sustaining relationships, (e) employing collaborative and shared leadership, (f) functioning as change agents, (g) displaying ethical and professional behavior, (h) navigating school politics, and (i) effectively managing school operations.

Vision

Successful school superintendents establish and promote a school vision (Bredeson et al., 2011; Forner et al., 2012; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003; National School Public Relations Association, 2005; Portis & Garcia, 2007; Waters & Marzano, 2006). Maxwell (1993) states all effective leaders have a vision of what they must accomplish. The vision is the energy behind every effort, the force that pushes through problems, and the contagious spirit that unifies followers (Maxwell, 1993). Successful leaders inspire a shared vision by envisioning exciting and ennobling possibilities and enlisting others in a common vision (Kouzes & Posner, 2007). When establishing a school's vision, Batagiannis (2007) reminds school leaders:

All schools profess a vision, but words are not enough. The vision must be heartfelt, not just framed and posted on the wall. The courageous leader exudes hope. Hope focuses the courageous leader on his vision and does not permit a wavering from that vision (p. 159).

Effective school superintendents develop and articulate a vision and clear direction for the district and ensure that the mission of each school in the district aligns with that vision (Bredeson et al., 2011; Portis & Garcia, 2007). During this process, successful school superintendents establish non-negotiable goals for achievement and instruction, develop expectations that drive reform in the district, convey their expectations for quality and high performance, and help others to see the challenging nature of the goals being pursued (Forner, Bierlein-Palmer, & Reeves 2012; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003; Waters & Marzano, 2006). When a superintendent promotes the district's vision and goals and inspires others to reach for ambitious goals, they positively impact student learning (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003; Waters & Marzano, 2006). According to Mike Kirst, professor of education at Stanford University, effective superintendents have a vision of what good instruction is and know how to execute programs that will improve

teaching and learning. He goes on to state that superintendent-run districts with supportive school boards and strong community consensus are more likely to get good results, due to the quality of the district leadership (Education Writers Association, 2003).

School superintendents support schools' visions by creating shared meanings and understanding among school personnel and community members. This shared meaning helps to enhance a superintendent's effectiveness in implementing the school's vision and mission (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003). Senge (2006) described building a shared vision as the "capacity to hold a shared picture of the future that we seek to create" (p. 9). When there is a shared vision instead of just having a vision statement, people will learn and excel, not because they are told to, but because they want to. It is counterproductive for leaders to try to dictate a vision. The practice of building a shared vision involves the skills of uncovering shared pictures of the future that foster genuine commitment rather than compliance (Senge, 2006).

Portis and Garcia (2007) found that successful superintendents had a clear, deliberate articulation of the vision and goals, as well as the desired culture for the district. Portis and Garcia (2007) went on to further state: "These superintendents worked purposefully to establish a district culture in which personnel have a relentless commitment to results, ownership, equity, and continuous learning" (p. 4). When school personnel share a common set of goals, a common perspective on what to do and how to accomplish it, and a common vocabulary that allows them to coordinate their behavior, then hierarchical authority is less important, and conflict is less likely (King & Blumer, 2000). Effective district level leaders help their schools to develop visions that embody the best thinking about the teaching and learning process (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003). John Deasy, the head of Prince George's County, Md., school system, encourages other district leaders to "use every single opportunity to communicate the unified vision and

expectation for student learning. Begin and close every meeting, media opportunity and speech with this vision and expectation” (Portis & Garcia, 2007, p. 4).

The National School Public Relations Association conducted a study to identify qualities that were essential to the success of school superintendents. The researchers interviewed 17 superintendents across the nation who had been Superintendent of the Year in their state or on a national level. According to the study, (NSPRA, 2006) the top skill named by the superintendents as being critical to their success was establishing and promoting a school vision. The superintendents went on to say that good communication skills were an integral part of successfully leading a district toward its vision (NSPRA, 2006).

Instructional Leadership

In today’s society of high stakes testing and accountability, school superintendents are expected to be more than just managers, and instead also serve as instructional leaders. While people skills, high moral character, and general leadership skills remain necessary attributes for superintendents, increasing accountability demands that focus on student achievement are requiring school leaders to be much more focused on instruction and its outcomes (Bredeson & Kose, 2007). Paul Houston, executive director of the American Association of School Administrators, describes the changing roles and expectations of superintendents by stating:

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

School superintendents are now expected to create the district and school conditions to improve the curricular, instructional, and assessment practices that will lead toward improved student learning (Rallis, Tedder, Lachman, & Elmore, 2006; Richard & Kose, 2008). To embrace this new role, superintendents must develop the capacity to improve teaching and learning practices that positively impact student performance and implement effective learning structures and processes (Cambom-McCabe et al., 2005).

One of the primary ways superintendents serve as instructional leaders is through the formation of a vision for the district (Kelleher & Van Der Bogert, 2006). Student success and achievement should be the school superintendent's top priority (Laub, 2010). Superintendents can indirectly influence student learning by focusing on practices that positively influence the behavior of principals and teachers (Hoyle et al., 2005; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003; Monk & Littleton, 2006). When superintendents focus on serving as instructional leaders, they need a new focus on building the intellectual capacities of the school by enhancing the teaching and learning process - which is in contrast with the traditional emphasis of managerial duties (Cambom-McCabe et al., 2005). One way superintendents can fulfill this role is to work with building administrators to improve classroom instruction by providing the resources for teams to meet and review performance data (Schmoker, 2006). Paul Hill, acting dean of the Daniel J. Evans School of Public Affairs at the University of Washington, states: "Classrooms are the way they are in large part because of what happens at the district level" (EWA, 2003, p. 2).

Bredeson and Kose (2007) found that superintendents are responding to increasing external demands for accountability through various curriculum and instruction priorities, budget increases to support these priorities, increased attention to data analysis, and additional assistants to support this work. However, when the researchers examined the superintendents' work in the

areas of curriculum development and instructional leadership, they found a mismatch between the realities of their daily work and reform policy mandates and initiatives. Bredeson and Kose (2007) concluded that superintendents are interested in curriculum and instruction and believe these are important tasks, but the daily realities of their work often prevent them from focusing on these areas.

School superintendents often devote much of their time to managerial issues, and there is little documentation on how work tasks and time devoted to other administrative jobs can be reallocated so that superintendents can focus more time and energy on instructional leadership (Bredeson & Kose, 2007). In a similar study, Jones and Howley (2009) found few superintendents devote the majority of their time to instructional leadership. Despite increasing accountability measures and current literature pushing superintendents toward instructional leadership, Jones and Howley reported that superintendents still devote the largest proportion of their time to management. Bredeson and Kose (2007) found superintendents reported budget and finance, communications, and personnel administration as their most important tasks. Since these managerial tasks will continue to be critical to successful leadership, it is likely that school boards and other educational stakeholders will need to reassess their current role expectations and requirements for superintendents so they can devote more time to instructional leadership (Bredeson & Kose, 2007).

A study by Farkas et al. (2001) found that 41% of school boards listed higher student achievement as their main goal. Additionally, more than half of the superintendents in that study listed raising student achievement as their greatest challenge (Farkas et al., 2001). Despite this challenge, research supports the idea that successful school superintendents serve as instructional leaders (Forner et al., 2012; Peterson & Barnett, 2005; Waters & Marzano, 2006).

Instructional leaders establish goals and expectations that drive district reform, support the vision through direct, personal conversations, provide support for struggling students and teachers, remove low performing teachers or principals, leverage their relationship with the building principal, evaluate and assess personnel and programs, make decisions based on data, and align finances with instructional priorities (EWA, 2003; Forner et al., 2012). District-level instructional leaders are highly visible in classrooms, report their observations to building principals, keep their focus on the district goal of student achievement, obtain board support for their decisions, and put a high premium on staff development that is aligned with their goals (EWA, 2003). Effective superintendents stay aware of any changes or obstacles that interfere in the learning process and have the fortitude to remove those obstacles (Laub, 2010). School superintendents who know they have the support of their school board are more likely to take risks aimed at bringing about reform and increasing student achievement (Glass, 2001). Glass believes there is a strong link between the leadership quality at the district level and student achievement.

Leithwood and Riehl (2003) found superintendents who were successful instructional leaders in school districts with highly diverse contexts focus their efforts on four tasks: (a) building powerful forms of teaching and learning, (b) creating strong communities in school, (c) expanding the proportion of students' social capital valued by the schools, and (d) nurturing the development of families' educational cultures.

Peterson and Barnett (2005) evaluated research findings from seven studies and concluded that superintendents in high-performing schools engaged in activities that could be indirectly linked to the improvement of student achievement. These activities included: (a) collaboratively developing goals with administrators/board, (b) evaluating instructional

effectiveness, (c) planning for instruction, (d) developing principals as instructional leaders, (e) selecting personnel, (f) facilitating staff development, (g) collaboratively developing a vision for instruction, and (h) evaluating and monitoring instructional progress (Peterson & Barnett (2005).

One way that superintendents can serve as instructional leaders is by developing the capacity of others (Camborn-McCabe et al., 2005; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003; Weast, 2008). “Investing in the capacity of your people makes lasting and positive change possible and produces excellent student results” (Weast, 2008, p. 14). A superintendent’s greatest leverage point for improving teaching and learning is the development of their building principals (Camborn-McCabe et al., 2005). Successful superintendents develop their principals to be more effective in their leadership roles (Phillips & Phillips, 2007). As new accountability measures require standards of professional performance for teachers and principals, successful superintendents stay current with best professional practices and help create conditions for professional growth (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003).

Portis and Garcia (2007) found the most critical ingredient in improving student achievement is upgrading instructional strategies. The goal of instructional leaders is to provide a school environment in which quality teaching and learning can flourish. One way school superintendents achieve this goal is demanding that school board members, other administrators, and themselves measure success only by the standard of how well their students are achieving (EWA, 2003). Leithwood and Riehl (2003) found after access to high-quality instruction and curriculum, students benefit the most from the positive effects of strong school leadership. District-level leadership positively impacts student achievement by promoting vision and goals, and by ensuring that resources and processes are in place to enable teachers to teach well (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003). As school districts are required to have school improvement plans

for accountability measures, successful superintendents focus on monitoring school performance and developing concrete plans for improvement (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003).

Peter Senge (2006) contends the art and practice of a learning organization is incorporating systems thinking. Senge (2006) states learning organizations are possible because deep down we are all learners and have the capacity to master certain basic disciplines. These disciplines include: (a) personal mastery, (b) mental models, (c) building shared vision, (d) team learning, and (e) systems thinking. Systems thinking is a way of looking at the interrelationships within the whole; it incorporates the first four disciplines into one body of theory and practice. Building a shared vision assists in fostering a commitment to the long term. Uncovering mental models focuses on the openness needed to reveal our shortcomings in our present ways of seeing the world. Team learning assists in developing the skills of groups of people to look for the larger picture. Personal mastery supports the personal motivation to continually learn how our actions affect the world around us (Senge, 2006). As leaders diagnose their organization's learning disabilities and incorporate the core disciplines of systems thinking, they can assist their organization in becoming places where people learn together and expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire (Senge, 2006).

One of the landmark studies in the area of district-level instructional leadership is Waters & Marzano's (2006) meta-analysis that examined 27 studies concerning the influence of school district leaders on student achievement. This study involved 2,817 school districts and the achievement scores of 3.4 million students resulting in what McREL researchers believe to be the largest ever quantitative study on superintendents (Waters & Marzano, 2006). This study found that district-level leadership matters. The researchers (Waters & Marzano, 2006) identified six district-level leadership responsibilities and 51 practices that have a statistically

significant relationship with average student academic achievement. These leadership responsibilities are: (a) collaborative goal-setting, (b) non-negotiable goals for achievement and instruction, (c) board alignment and support of district goals, (d) monitoring goals for achievement and instruction, (e) use of resources to support achievement and instructional goals, and (f) defined autonomy (Waters & Marzano, 2006).

Communication

Research supports the idea that effective communication skills are vital to successful leaders (Kouzes & Posner, 2007; Senge, 2006; Yukl, 2006), and that successful school superintendents communicate effectively (Goens, 2009; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003; McCullough, 2009; NSPRA, 2006). Kouzes and Posner (2007) remind leaders that language helps to build the frame around their followers' views of the world, and therefore leaders must be mindful of their choice of words. Successful leaders use words and phrases that best create the culture they want to produce (Kouzes & Posner, 2007). Communication is a key component for developing a learning organization and team learning (Senge, 2006). As leaders effectively engage stakeholders in dialogue and discussion, individuals can think together and team learning can occur (Senge, 2006). Leaders display effective communication skills when they expressively articulate their vision, convey high expectations to their followers, and express confidence in others (Yukl, 2006).

The need for good communication is a key component in superintendent leadership, because it is essential for high student achievement and every other aspect of the school system (McCullough, 2009; NSPRA, 2006; Waters & Marzano, 2006). Effective superintendent communication skills include interpersonal skills, good listening skills, building positive relationships, developing strategic communication plans, being genuine, leading by example, and

mobilizing quickly (McCullough, 2009; NSPRA, 2006). When communicating with stakeholders, a pro-active approach is essential, because it builds trust. Having a clear, concise message is a key to navigating complex issues (McCullough, 2009). Effective superintendents encourage communication with multiple stakeholders and frame issues in ways that will lead to productive discourse and decision making (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003). Successful superintendents focus on key aspects of the school's vision and articulate that vision clearly and convincingly (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003; Waters & Marzano, 2006). Successful superintendents communicate effectively during the change process (Portis & Garcia, 2007; Fullan, 2010). If superintendents do not communicate clearly, perceived agreement can occur. "When people act in good faith based on perceived agreement, they do not expect to be criticized. Superintendents and board members must be wary of perceived agreement. Terms should be clarified so that intentions and outcomes are not ambiguous" (Goens, 2009, p. 25).

The National School Public Relations Association (2006) conducted a landmark study to gather the perceptions of outstanding superintendents regarding the value of communications to increased student achievement and superintendent success. The researchers found that every superintendent in the study cited good communications as an integral ingredient in superintendent success (NSPRA, 2006). The superintendents went on to say that effective communication has a significant impact on the success of moving the district's vision forward, getting voter approval for bond referendum/levies, and responding to crisis situations. NSPRA (2006) concluded that effective superintendents effectively communicate during times of change such as No Child Left Behind and other accountability measures, curriculum changes, redrawing attendance boundaries, grade configurations, and closing of schools. The superintendents noted that communication plays a role in improving student achievement. They stressed the

importance of communicating student achievement goals, requirements, and expectations with staff, parents, and students; community engagement; and celebrating successes (NSPRA, 2006). Each of these successful superintendents reaffirmed the importance of effective communication skills to their professional success, the success of their students, and the success of their school districts (NSPRA, 2006).

Relationships

Successful school superintendents build and sustain meaningful relationships (Goens, 2009; Kelleher & Van Der Bogart, 2006; Philips & Philips 2007; NSPRA, 2006; Richard & Kuse, 2008). Leadership at its essence is in relationships (Bolman & Deal, 2008; Goens, 2009; Kouzes & Posner, 2007; Maxwell, 1993). The leader's relationships ultimately determine the success and effectiveness of policies, procedures, and objectives (Bolman & Deal, 2008; Goens, 2009). Influence is the heart of leadership, and relationships are the avenue through which leaders influence others. Effective leaders influence others to carry out requests, support proposals, and implement decisions (Yukl, 2006). The quality of their relationships figures prominently in how satisfied and how effective a leader is at their work (Bolman & Deal, 2008; Maxwell, 1993; Kouzes & Posner, 2007).

Yukl (2006) analyzed research conducted on leadership practices and found that the overall pattern of results suggests that effective leaders have a high concern for building and maintaining relationships. Some of the key relations-oriented behaviors include supporting, developing, and recognizing others. Effective leaders support others by showing consideration, acceptance, and concern for someone's needs and feelings. Effective leaders develop others through coaching, mentoring, and counseling. Effective leaders recognize others by giving

praise and showing appreciation to others for effective performance, significant achievements, and important contributions to the organization (Yukl, 2006).

Leaders build effective relationships through social skills that include awareness of self and others and the ability to handle emotions (Bolman & Deal, 2008). Successful leaders focus on developing people as their most appreciable asset (Bolman & Deal, 2008; Kouzes & Posner, 2007; Maxwell, 1993). Leaders who build positive relationships and are successful people-developers display three characteristics: (a) make the right assumptions about people, (b) ask the right questions about people, (c) and give the right assistance to people (Maxwell, 1993). Maxwell (1993) argues that people who are unable to build solid, lasting relationships will soon discover that they are unable to sustain long, effective leadership. Kouzes & Posner (2007) found a clear message in their research on leadership: leadership is a relationship. The researchers state leadership is a relationship between those who aspire to lead and those who choose to follow, and it is the quality of this relationship that matters most when engaged in accomplishing extraordinary feats (Kouzes & Posner, 2007).

Effective superintendents consistently focus on relationships and results (Philips & Philips, 2007; NSPRA, 2006; Portis & Garcia, 2007). Building and maintaining relationships are contributing factors to how some superintendents get vastly different results (NSPRA, 2006; Philips & Philips, 2007). One of the top three skills listed by recognized superintendents as important skills to the success of their jobs is developing and utilizing interpersonal skills (NSPRA, 2006). Developing interpersonal skills and emotional intelligence are vital, because relationships are a central element in the daily life of a leader (Bolman & Deal, 2008; Maxwell, 1993). Maxwell (1993) argues that people “buy into” the leader before they “buy into” their leadership; and, therefore, the first thing a leader must declare is not authority because of rights,

but authority because of relationships. Superintendents who win the respect and confidence of their constituents make use of their interpersonal skills, social attractiveness, knowledge base, clarity of beliefs, and charisma. Superintendents must be seen as authentic human beings to be credible and win support because who the superintendent is as a person matters (Kelleher & Van Der Bogart, 2006).

Effective superintendents work on building sustainable relationships with all stakeholders (Bredeson et al., 2011; Goens, 2009; Portis & Garcia, 2007). By establishing positive relationships with all stakeholders, the superintendent builds trust and credibility, fosters collaboration and motivation, and provides a platform from which to enact change initiatives (Bredeson et al., 2011; Goens, 2009; Portis & Garcia, 2007). Superintendents must build strong relationships with their school boards (Bredeson et al., 2011; Goens, 2009; Portis & Garcia, 2007), which is a critical component to the success of their work (Richard & Kruse, 2008). This relationship should be positive where board members and the superintendent work together making decisions, setting the vision and mission, and solving problems - all in the context of district improvement and student learning (Richard & Kruse, 2008). Effective superintendents realize their work is accomplished through the efforts of others, so they focus on developing their staff (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003) and leverage close working relationships with building principals (Forner et al., 2012). When starting a position in new district, a good entry plan gives the superintendent a platform for creating positive future relationships (King & Blumer, 2000).

Collaborative and Shared Leadership

There is no such thing as a perfect leader (Kouzes & Posner, 2007; Maxwell, 1993; Peterson & Barnett, 2005; Philips & Philips, 2007). Successful school superintendents acknowledge this and therefore promote collaboration and shared leadership in order to

effectively lead their school districts. As schools evolve as professional learning communities and emphasize the importance of shared goals and effort, effective superintendents promote cooperation and assist others to work together toward common goals (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003). Maxwell (1993) argues a leader is great not because of their power, but because of their ability to empower others. Successful leaders enable others to act through group collaboration and individual accountability, and by building solid trust and strong relationships (Kouzes & Posner, 2007). When leaders engage in participative leadership, it improves the decision quality, the decision acceptance, the satisfaction with the decision process, and the development of participant skills (Yukl, 2006). Kelleher & Van Der Bogert (2006) write, “Today’s effective superintendent practices a style of collaborative leadership that is both top-down – articulating core values, establishing expectations for accountability methods – and bottom-up – including all constituents meaningfully, developing leadership in others” (p. 17). However, Yukl (2006) contends there is much debate concerning whether leadership should be viewed as a specialized role or as a shared influence process.

Successful school superintendents employ collaborative and shared leadership (EWA, 2003; Kelleher & Van Der Bogert, 2006; Laub, 2010; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003; Richard & Kruse, 2008). Laub (2010) states one of the primary goals for superintendents should be to establish a positive culture and climate within the school district. School superintendents enhance the performance of their districts by providing opportunities for staff to participate in decision making about issues that affect them (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003). Contemporary superintendents need to create collective learning opportunities for principals at the district level and facilitate, support, and provide resources for collective learning at the building level. A superintendent’s greatest legacy is building a high-performing leadership team (Philips &

Philips, 2007). Maxwell (1993) states the growth and development of people is the highest calling of leadership. Kouzes and Posner (2007) contend a leader's greatest contribution is to the long-term development of people and institutions so they can adapt, change, grow, and prosper. Despite the need to focus on collaborative learning as a leadership strategy, superintendents are faced with multiple competing demands that limit the effectiveness of this process (Kowalski, Peterson, & Fusarelli, 2007).

When developing the school vision and expectations for student achievement, effective superintendents utilize collaborative goal setting (Waters & Marzano, 2006). Peterson and Barnett (2005) analyzed research findings from seven studies and found that superintendents in high-performing schools collaboratively developed goals and a vision for instruction with administrators and the school board. School superintendents must share leadership and be facilitators who can leverage high state and federal requirements into improving student achievement (Johnstone, Dikkers, & Luedeke, 2009). When facing today's challenges in public education, school superintendents must be able to employ flexible thinking, collaboration, and shared decision making (EWA, 2003). Effective school superintendents encourage collaboration through building a trusting environment and creating professional learning communities (Weast, 2008; DuFour, 2004). As school leaders build a professional learning community, they recognize they must work with all stakeholders to achieve their collective purpose of learning for all, and work to create structures to promote a collaborative culture (DuFour, 2004). As school districts promote collaboration and shared decision making, school leaders must be able to gather input, analyze information, and build consensus among all stakeholders (Barnett, 2004; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003). Laub (2010) argues that school superintendents that do not include

staff and subordinates in the decision-making and problem solving-process are foolish and should keep their resumes updated.

Effective superintendents garner community support (Barnett, 2004; King & Blumer, 2000; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003). Successful superintendents work with all stakeholders including parents, community members, and business and government liaisons as they attempt to foster shared meanings, garner resources and support, and establish positive relationships (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003). During this period of unprecedented change and heightened expectations for education, communities are looking for a school leader who can bring people together, build coalitions, celebrate successes, help people work on problems, and make decisions based on careful thought and research (King & Blumer, 2000). These leaders see their work as building strong school cultures (King & Blumer, 2000). When superintendents engage all stakeholders in collaborative processes, they help others shape the school in ways that can accomplish shared goals and address individual concerns (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003).

Change Agent

Superintendents who are successful school leaders effectively enact change within their school districts (Fullan, 2010; Kelleher & Van Der Bogart, 2006; Kotter, 2002; Laub, 2010; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003; Portis & Garcia, 2007; Reeves, 2009; Waters & Marzano, 2006). Leading change is one of the most important and difficult leadership responsibilities (Yukl, 2006). The measure of the effectiveness of the educational leadership superintendents provide is the educational change produced (Kelleher & Van Der Bogart, 2006). During the change process, effective school superintendents focus their districts on the goals with the potential to improve student achievement and accurately estimate the magnitude of change these goals imply for all stakeholders (Waters & Marzano, 2006). The stakeholders' own knowledge, experience,

values, and flexibility determine whether the change is perceived as a first-order change or a second-order change, and ultimately impact the implementation of the change process (Waters & Marzano, 2006). By applying theory to practice, school superintendents can refine their craft, understand their schools, and enhance their role as change agents (Israel and Kasper, 2004).

Effective change agents create a sense of urgency, create short-term wins, empower others, model the change, create and communicate a shared vision, develop strategic plans, and promote sustainable change (Fullan, 2010; Kotter, 2002; Maxwell, 1993; Reeves, 2009). School superintendents who successfully enact change recognize that sometimes you have to change people's experience before they can change their judgments (Portis & Garcia, 2007), and that behaviors often precede beliefs (Reeves, 2009; Fullan, 2010). School superintendents must realize change is a gradual, continual process, and it must be promoted, nurtured, and continually implemented (Laub, 2010). During successful change initiatives, superintendents provide incentives and structures for change, opportunities for individual learning, and means for monitoring progress (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003). A superintendent's ability to develop a healthy relationship with their school board is a critical factor in bringing about effective change in their district (Portis & Garcia, 2007). Effective superintendents build support for reform through direct, personal conversations (Forner et al., 2012). Superintendents should celebrate early successes because once people see they can be successful in the new process, they are more willing to get on board (Portis & Garcia, 2007; Fullan 2010). They also continually repackage the vision and direction so that it is relevant during the change process (Portis & Garcia, 2007; Yukl, 2006). Superintendents work with all stakeholders to collectively develop a definition of success and build relationships so the change effort can be sustained over time (Portis & Garcia, 2007; Fullan, 2010). Portis and Garcia (2007) noted in district-level change, the quality of

instruction is the key variable. Superintendents need to have clear expectations for learning and a curriculum with consistent, rigorous content.

When facing barriers to change, superintendents are motivated by deep commitments to equality, social justice, and the belief that all students can learn when given the proper support (Portis & Garcia, 2007). Portis and Garcia (2007) found two challenges superintendents face as change leaders are overcoming resistance to reform and modifying the district's culture. The researchers also found the most frequently cited obstacle to significant reform was governance. Fear to change is a major barrier to reform and therefore taking the fear out of change is also key (Portis & Garcia, 2007; Reeves, 2009; Fullan, 2010). It is essential for superintendents to use data to break down resistance and drive systemic change (Portis & Garcia, 2007; Fullan, 2010). During the change process, superintendents must consider the magnitude of change in district reform and its implications (Portis & Garcia, 2007). Failing to define change can thwart the change initiative before it ever gets started (Reeves, 2009; Portis & Garcia, 2007). Real reform requires a break from the past and significant leadership ability to gain consensus for the proposed changes and implement new knowledge and skills district wide (Portis & Garcia, 2007).

A superintendent must fully understand the school's culture before moving in a new direction. When a school leader listens carefully to what others tell them about the culture, they can avoid two costly mistakes: trying to fix things that are not broken and breaking things that seem to be working well (King & Blumer, 2000). When considering change, Portis and Garcia (2007) state:

Superintendents and reform leaders stated that the most critical factors in leading reform are an aptitude for and the skill to manage change. Understanding the complexity of the

change process is critical, as is the ability to develop effective strategies to engage district staff, the board, the union, and the community. If stakeholders don't understand the purpose of the reform, the impact of the change, and the time required to implement the change, reform efforts may waver or even fail. (p. 4)

Superintendents must balance the need for change with the need to retain the positive attributes associated with the existing school culture (King & Blumer, 2000). Change that is introduced through a shared vision and within the school's culture will be pervasive and lasting because all stakeholders will be committed through a shared understanding (King & Blumer, 2000).

Fullan (2010) suggests the following strategies will help school administrators during the change process: (a) relationships first, (b) honor the implementation dip, (c) beware of fat plans, (d) behavior before beliefs, (e) communication during implementation is paramount, (f) learn about implementation during implementation, (g) excitement prior to implementation is fragile, (h) take risks and learn, and (i) it is okay to be assertive.

Kotter and Cohen (2002) describe eight stages found repeatedly in successful change initiatives: (a) creating a sense of urgency, (b) pulling together a guiding team with the needed skills, credibility, connections, and authority to move things along, (c) creating an uplifting vision and strategy, (d) communicating the vision and strategy through a combination of words, deeds, and symbols, (e) removing obstacles, or empowering people to move ahead, (f) producing visible symbols of progress through short-term victories, (g) sticking with the process and refusing to quit when things get tough, and (h) nurturing and shaping a new culture to support the emerging, innovative ways.

Portis and Garcia (2007) found that superintendents who were successfully leading change in their districts utilized the following strategies: (a) articulating the vision, (b) setting

realistic expectations, (c) engaging the school board, (d) thinking systemically, (e) focusing on instruction, (f) using data, and (g) shifting the reality. Portis and Garcia (2007) reported that superintendents who were successfully leading change in their districts displayed the following characteristics: (a) passionate, relentless, and courageous, (b) understand the politics of leadership, (c) knowledgeable about the dynamics of systems, (d) receptive to learning from anyone who can contribute to the goals for student achievement, (e) develop strong networks, and (f) are relentless about their own education.

Ethical and Professional Behavior

Educational leaders operate under a microscope and need to be ethical and professional at all times. Successful school superintendents must display ethical behavior as they interact with all stakeholders and make decisions. This includes treating others with fairness, dignity, and respect (Kouzes & Posner, 2007; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003; Maxwell, 1993). The superintendent models this behavior and helps to create an atmosphere of mutual respect, trust, and cooperation (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003; Yukl, 2006). Leaders should be deeply reflective and profoundly explicit about core values and beliefs (Bolman & Deal, 2008; Kouzes & Posner, 2007). One of the top four skills listed by recognized superintendents as important to the success of their job was displaying high moral and ethical character (NSPRA, 2006).

Leadership has ethical and moral implications. Moral leadership starts with clarifying your values and finding a set of guiding principles and ideals (Kouzes & Posner, 2007). Kouzes and Posner (2007) state when leaders attend to moral values, they will always be directed toward higher purposes in their leadership and lead their followers to places they have never been before. School superintendents must realize even their best intentions may have adverse consequences on others, and therefore they must always consider the moral validity of their

actions (Thomas & Brainbridge, 2001). Successful superintendents show respect for their staff and concern for their individual feelings and needs (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003). Bolman and Deal (2008) state leaders should “serve a deeper, more powerful, and more enduring role if they are models and catalysts for such values as excellence, caring, justice, and faith” (p. 409).

One of the most important qualities of leadership is integrity (Kouzes & Posner, 2007; Maxwell, 1993; Yukl, 2006). Kouzes and Posner (2007) consistently found the top characteristic that people look for and admire in leaders is honesty. Maxwell (1993) argues that the most important ingredient of leadership is integrity. He writes that when leaders display integrity their words and deeds align. When leaders display integrity, they: (a) build trust, (b) increase their influence, (c) facilitate high standards, (d) build a solid reputation, (e) provide a model for others, and (f) increase their credibility (Maxwell, 1993). Goens (2009) states the foundation of leadership rests on character and interactions. Leadership is more about “being” than “doing,” because the “doing” doesn’t get done without credibility (Goens, 2009; Kouzes & Posner, 2007; Yukl, 2006). Kouzes and Posner (2007) contend a leader’s words and deeds must be consistent and that credibility is the foundation of leadership. The researchers found honesty, forward-looking, inspiration, and competence as the top four components affecting a leader’s credibility (Kouzes & Posner, 2007).

Yukl (2006) states that ethical leadership involves nurturing and empowering followers, and promoting social justice. Effective ethical leaders build mutual trust and respect among diverse followers and strive to find solutions to conflicts among stakeholders with competing interests (Yukl, 2006). Laub (2010) argues leadership is not a popularity contest; it is about doing what is right. In the face of adversity and unpopular public opinion, superintendents must remain focused on their goals. Leadership equates to bravery and courage; it is not for the timid

or faint of heart (Batagiannis, 2007; Laub, 2010). One of the core attributes of an effective leader is knowing what he or she stands for (King & Blumer, 2000; Kouzes & Posner, 2007), and continually clarifying and deepening their personal vision (Maxwell, 1993; Senge, 2006). The superintendent's words and actions must be consistent and reinforce the core values of the school system. Superintendent behavior that is consistent with core values establishes trust with staff members and positively influences the culture of the school system (King & Blumer, 2000; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003). Effective superintendents set examples for their staff to follow that are consistent with their schools' values and mission (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003). Leaders who are effective models earn the right and respect to lead through direct involvement and action. These leaders realize people follow first the person and then the plan (Kouzes & Posner, 2007). Effective leaders remember that humility is often the best way to resolve the conflicts and contradictions associated with leadership (Kouzes & Posner, 2007).

Successful school superintendents must display professional leadership behavior as they interact with all stakeholders and make decisions. This includes asking other leaders for advice (NSPRA, 2006; Laub, 2010); establishing trust with stakeholders (Kouzes & Posner, 2007; NSPRA, 2006; Yukl, 2006); being flexible and adapting to change (Bolman & Deal, 2008; EWA, 2003; Yukl, 2006); leading by example and setting the tone (Kouzes & Posner, 2007; Laub, 2010; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003; Maxwell, 1993; Senge, 2006); surrounding themselves with a team of bright, energetic, and optimistic subordinates and colleagues (Laub, 2010; Maxwell, 1993); having a positive attitude (Maxwell, 1993); displaying relentless effort and commitment (Kouzes & Posner, 2007; Yukl, 2006); taking care of themselves and controlling internal and external stressors (Laub, 2010; Yukl, 2006); developing a network of professional peers (Bolman & Deal, 2008; Laub, 2010); developing school cultures that exemplify shared

norms, values, beliefs, and attitudes that promote mutual caring and trust among all members (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003); and developing emotional and social intelligence (Yukl, 2006).

After reviewing the research on effective leadership, Yukl (2006) offers the following professional guidelines to leaders: (a) maintain self-awareness, (b) develop relevant skills, (c) remember that a strength can become a weakness, and (d) compensate for weaknesses.

Effective leaders encourage reflection and challenge their staff to examine assumptions about their work and rethink how it might be performed (Bolman & Deal, 2008; Kouzes & Posner, 2007; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003; Senge, 2006). Successful leaders are continuous learners as they search for opportunities to innovate, grow, and improve, and are willing to experiment and take risks (Kelleher & Van Der Bogert, 2006; Kouzes & Posner, 2007; Senge, 2006). Successful leaders acknowledge their organization learns only through individuals who learn, and therefore engage in the discipline of personal growth and mastery. These leaders continually clarify what is important to them, strive to see current reality more clearly, and model commitment to their own personal mastery (Kouzes & Posner, 2007; Maxwell, 1993; Senge, 2006). Maxwell (1993) argues all great leaders understand that their number one responsibility is for their own discipline and personal growth, because if they cannot lead themselves, they cannot lead others. Kouzes and Posner (2007) contend leadership development is self-development. Kelleher & Van Der Bogert (2006) state that personal growth occurs through reflection and deliberate practice of learning new behaviors and stress the importance of this for school superintendents. Kouzes and Posner (2007) write that leaders are learners. These leaders learn from both their successes and failures and make it possible for others to do the same.

Effective leaders create an atmosphere of hope and inspire their followers. Kouzes and Posner (2007) state the best-kept secret of successful leaders is love. These leaders stay in love with leading, with the people who do the work, with what their organizations produce, and with those who benefit from their organization's services. Successful leaders encourage others by recognizing contributions and celebrating shared values and victories (Kouzes & Posner, 2007; Maxwell, 1993).

The pace of change facing school districts today requires school leaders to be more adaptive, flexible, and reflective when making decisions. Making decisions is one of the most important functions performed by leaders (Yukl, 2006). Batagiannis (2007) states that superintendents must slow down, allow time for reflection, and insist that courage and reason prevail. Batagiannis (2007) further writes that school leaders must end their quest for the non-existent quick fixes and stop addressing complex issues simplistically, and, therefore, unsuccessfully.

Politics

Superintendents who are successful school leaders effectively manage politics (Ball, 2012; Bolman & Deal, 2008; Bredeson et al., 2011; EWA, 2003; Yukl, 2006). In today's environment, an emphasis is put on school superintendents to serve as instructional leaders and bring about the necessary changes to improve student achievement. This must often be accomplished in a highly complex, politically charged environment (Heifetz, 2006). If school superintendents are to survive and thrive in carrying out these tasks, they must understand and manage the politics of the school setting that accompanies their job. This includes the ability to view politics in a different light. When navigating the political scene, Bolman and Deal (2008) write:

A jaundiced view of politics constitutes a serious threat to individual and organizational effectiveness. Viewed through from the political frame, politics is the realistic process of making decisions and allocating resources in a context of scarcity and divergent interests.

This view puts politics at the heart of decision making. (p. 190)

Yukl (2006) states involving others in making decisions is often a necessary part of the political process for getting decisions approved and implemented in an organization. Hargreaves and Shirley (2009) warn that three distinct political paths can distract school superintendents as they strive to lead their districts. The first distraction is the Path of Autocracy which traps superintendents into employing too much top-down delivery. The second distraction is the Path of Technocracy where superintendents turn everything into a technical calculation and fall prey to misleading data, misinterpreting data, or misusing data. The last distraction is the Path of Effervescence which occurs when superintendents are distracted by celebrating short-term successes instead of evaluating long-term outcomes.

Effective superintendents use politics to bring about change, leverage their relationships with school board members, and have the political will and personal commitment to stay the course (Ball, 2012; EWA, 2003; Mountford, 2004). These leaders realize goals, structure, and policies emerge from an ongoing process of bargaining and negotiation among major interest groups. Political dynamics can be despicable and destructive but leaders can use politics as a vehicle for achieving noble purposes. Organizational change and effectiveness often depend on a leader's political skills. These skills include setting an agenda, mapping the political terrain, networking and building coalitions, and bargaining and negotiating (Bolman & Deal, 2008; Dubrin, 2012; Ferris et al., 2007).

When navigating the political scene, leaders are often faced with an ethical dilemma: adopting an open, collaborative strategy or choosing a tougher, more adversarial approach. When facing this dilemma, leaders should consider the importance of long-term relationships, the potential for collaboration, and their own values and ethical principles (Bolman & Deal, 2008; Dubrin, 2012). Bolman & Deal (2008) argue the principals of mutuality, generality, openness, and caring can serve as a guide for leaders as they deal with ethically slippery political issues.

School superintendents often use their power to influence the attitudes and behavior of others in a desired direction. In summarizing the research on the different forms of power used by leaders, Yukl (2006) found that effective leaders rely more on personal power than positional power. However, Yukl noted the research also suggests effective leaders use a mix of both types of power. Superintendents utilize positional power when their influence is derived from their position in the school district. Superintendents use personal power when the influence is obtained from their personal characteristics as a leader. The success of a leader depends greatly on the manner in which power is exercised and the level of their emotional intelligence. Effective leaders are likely to use their power in subtle ways that minimize threats to others' self-esteem and utilize coaching and compassion (Boyatzis, Smith, & Blaize, 2006; Gill, 2002; Yukl, 2006).

Bredeson et al. (2011) found that school superintendents who effectively manage the political climate employ the following strategies: (a) develop strong relationships with board members and other key stakeholders, (b) provide their school board with information required to develop realistic expectations and make informed decisions, (c) utilize board members to inform

the general public, and (d) use various media outlets to manage public perception and use bad headlines as a catalyst for reform.

Managing School Operations

Successful school superintendents effectively manage their time and the schools' operations (Kelleher & Van Der Bogert, 2006; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003; NSPRA, 2006). People in leadership positions face relentless and often conflicting demands on their time (Yukl, 2006). Effective superintendents pay attention to the organizational structure, because structure can enhance or hinder performance and the accomplishment of school goals. These leaders monitor and adjust how tasks are assigned and performed; the use of time and space; the acquisition and allocation of equipment, supplies, and other resources; and all the routine operating procedures of the school (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003). Superintendents lead their district by managing the finances, facilities, and personnel (Kelleher & Van Der Bogert, 2006). One of the top skills listed by recognized superintendents as important to the success of their job was strategic thinking and problem solving (NSPRA, 2006). Superintendents who effectively manage their districts assess how well the school district is performing according to multiple indicators and use that information to develop and review goals (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003). This includes strategic thinking and problem solving (Maxwell, 1993; NSPRA, 2006); the ability to delegate tasks (Laub, 2010); placing people in the right roles and relationships (Bolman & Deal, 2008); recognizing that people are their most important asset (Bolman & Deal, 2008; Maxwell, 1993); astute skills for gathering and interpreting information (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003; Maxwell, 1993); having the courage and conviction to replace ineffective faculty and staff (Laub, 2010); and practicing inquiring and reflection (Bolman & Deal, 2008; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003; Senge, 2006). Successful superintendents emphasize the use of systematic evidence,

ask critical and constructive questions, and encourage careful monitoring of both teaching and student progress (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003).

Mintzberg (1973) describes 10 roles that account for all of a manager's activities: (a) Leader Role, (b) Liaison Role, (c) Figurehead Role, (d) Monitor Role, (e) Disseminator Role, (f) Spokesperson Role, (g) Entrepreneur Role, (h) Disturbance Handler Role, (i) Resource Allocator Role, and (j) Negotiator Role. The first three roles are categorized as the Interpersonal Roles, the next three roles are categorized as the Information Processing Roles, and the last four roles are categorized as the Decision-Making Roles.

Yukl (2006) analyzed the descriptive research conducted on effective managerial work, summarizes four primary processes in managing, and offers guidelines for problem solving and using time wisely. The four primary processes that effective managers engage include: (a) exchanging information, (b) making decisions, (c) influencing, and (d) developing and maintaining relationships. The guidelines for using time wisely are: (a) understand the reasons for demands and constraints, (b) expand the range of choices, (c) determine what you want to accomplish, (d) analyze how you use your time (e) plan daily and weekly activities, (f) avoid unnecessary activities, (g) conquer procrastination, (h) take advantage or reactive activities, and (i) make time for reflective planning. The guideline for problem solving include: (a) identify important problems that can be solved, (b) look for connections among problems, (c) experiment with innovative solutions, and (d) take decisive action to deal with a crisis (Yukl, 2006).

Bolman and Deal (2008) state the first step in managerial wisdom is to recognize the key characteristics of organizations: (a) organizations are complex, (b) organizations are surprising, (c) organizations are deceptive, and (d) organizations are ambiguous. One of the most common faults of managers is seeing an incomplete or distorted picture as a result of overlooking or

misinterpreting important signals (Bolman & Deal, 2008). Effective managers have the ability to think about situations in more than one way (Bolman & Deal, 2008; Maxwell, 1993; Senge, 2006). These leaders analyze situations through different frames or lenses, including the structural, human resource, political, and symbolic frames. Successful managers hire the right people, keep and invest in their employees, empower their employees, and promote diversity (Bolman & Deal, 2008). Maxwell (1993) states leaders who are effective managers seldom are blind-sided, because they recognize and solve problems before they become emergencies.

Contextual Leadership

When examining effective superintendent leadership practices and the challenges they face, is it important to remember that context can affect these outcomes (Bredeson et al., 2011; Jones & Howley, 2009; Kelleher & Van Der Bogert, 2006; Leithwood, 2005; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003). Bredeson et al. (2011) studied the relationship between context and leadership, and believe their findings provide empirical evidence to support their emerging theory of context-responsive leadership. The researchers state:

We conceive context-responsive leadership as practical wisdom in action, which reveals a complex mix of knowledge, skills, and dispositions appropriately deployed by effective leaders as they engage in fluid conversations with dynamic situational variables. Context-responsive leadership is expressed through action, the way the leader behaves, not any one predisposed style consisting of de-contextualized qualities or leader actions. (2011, p.20)

Leadership is situational and varies with individuals and events. The situation usually helps to define the leader and sometimes the leader happens to be in the right place at the right time (Thomas & Brainbridge, 2001). There is a large body of descriptive research on the common

elements in the work of superintendents, but it is less known how superintendents' leadership practices may vary given the different contexts in which they work (Bredeson et al., 2011). Yukl (2006) contends that much of the research on leader effectiveness indicates that for a given situation some specific behaviors are more relevant than others. Bredeson et al. (2011) found that effective superintendents utilized context-responsive leadership, because leadership is embedded and influenced by context. Bredeson et al. (2011) further argue that leadership absent of context is meaningless. Laub (2010) contends leadership has changed rather dramatically as individuals recognize what leaders do is largely determined by the nature of those being led and the culture of the organization in which they work. Leithwood and Riehl (2003) state every school district is unique in some fashion, and successful superintendents address the particularities of the contexts appropriately.

Bredeson et al. (2011) found superintendents must uniquely fulfill their roles according to five contextual factors: (a) school district size, (b) organizational culture, (c) community characteristics and geographic location, (d) financial situation, and (e) political climate. The most frequently described differences in context relate to the size of the school district and community (Bredeson et al., 2011; Jones & Howley, 2009). Superintendents in smaller districts perform a variety of operational duties, interact directly with school community members, and develop personal relationships and trust with all community members. In contrast, superintendents in larger school districts perform strategic roles, interact indirectly with school community members, and work through principals and leadership teams to establish trust (Bredeson et al., 2011).

Leithwood (2005) contends a basic skill set of leadership practices is necessary but not sufficient for successful leadership. Successful superintendents must be able to respond

effectively to their unique school contexts and deliver responses to their context-specific challenges (Leithwood, 2005). As different contexts pose different challenges, successful superintendents match the appropriate response to a particular challenge (Forner et al., 2012). Within multiple contexts, a superintendent's leadership is expressed through interactions and relationships with others. School leaders must recognize that contextual factors influence their capacity to motivate and engage others in collaborative efforts to achieve district goals. While superintendents need to be responsive to contextual factors, they also have the capacity to shape various contexts of their daily work. Context-responsive leaders are contextually literate, and are sensitive to and aware of critical elements of context, purpose, and actions. Superintendents who are context responsive leaders see beyond the micro-contextual issues to the larger, more complete picture. These leaders hold long-term perspectives and are willing to patiently develop the relationships and trust necessary for dealing with contentious issues. Most importantly, these leaders demonstrate an ability to know when to push back and shape their contextual environment by promoting the district's successes, educating stakeholders about the needs of the district, and educating themselves about the expectations and needs of their communities (Bredeson et al., 2011).

Challenges Faced

The role of the school superintendent is becoming increasingly more difficult and complex (Bredeson et al., 2011; Byrd, Drews, & Johnson, 2006; Glass, Bjork, & Brunner, 2000; Johnstone, Dikkers & Luedeke, 2009; Lamkin, 2006; Thomas & Brainbridge, 2001). School superintendents face a wide range of challenges and must be knowledgeable and adept on how to respond to these challenges. Thomas and Brainbridge (2001) claim district level educational leadership is more difficult now than it has ever been and those who aspire to this role will be

faced with: decreasing financial support and increasing political support for alternatives to public education, increasing demand for accountability for improving academic quality, increasing expectations to better educate children of a more pluralistic and troubled society, and increasing conflict in the governance of education as conflicting opinions are expressed. Glass et al. (2000), in their comprehensive study of the state of the superintendency, found evidence to support the popular assumption that the job of the superintendent has become increasingly difficult; and often compensation is not sufficient for the level of responsibility and accountability associated with the position. The researchers also found fewer administrators are attracted to the role of the superintendent and many candidates now wait until the end of their career to pursue a superintendent position. However, Kowalski et al. (2011) found in their 2010 decennial study on the American school superintendent that most superintendents were satisfied with their jobs and that they would follow the same career path if they had to do it over again.

Lamkin (2006) identified five areas that present challenges to superintendents: (a) school law, (b) finance, (c) personnel, (d) government mandates, and (e) district or board policies. Fuller et al. (2003) found three obstacles to success that superintendents identified were politics, conflicts with the board of education, and difficulty in narrowing the achievement gap.

School superintendents are facing increasing pressure and accountability from government mandates (Glass et al., 2000; Kowalski et al., 2011; Lamkin, 2006; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003). In this era of increasing accountability, raising student performance is viewed by most public school superintendents as one of their most daunting tasks (Byrd et al., 2006). The stress of numerous accountability measures may be taking its toll on superintendents' job turnover (Johnstone et al., 2009). Farkas, Foley, and Duffet (2001) found that more than half of the superintendents in their study listed increasing student achievement as the most formidable

task that they face. Schechter (2011) found that superintendents emphasized a lack of time to devote to instructional leadership due to the amount of time they spend solving day-to-day problems. Time is one of superintendents' most valuable resources, and can often be quickly exhausted by competing interests or too many insignificant demands from various stakeholders (Glass, et al., 2000; Harvey, 2003). Another challenge many superintendents face is how to promote leadership at all levels that advances the instructional agenda in their schools (Neuman & Pelchat, 2001). Johnstone et al. (2009) found superintendents felt pressure from the school board when they were not making changes quickly enough to satisfy federal requirement. These superintendents also described community members' angry responses when their school did not make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), and the challenge of addressing diverse student populations to improve test scores.

Politics and navigating the political scene is one of the greatest challenges school superintendents face (Byrd et al., 2006; Hoyle, 2007; Kelleher & Van Der Bogert, 2006; Johnstone et al., 2009). A similar challenge school superintendents face is their relationship with the school board (Byrd et al., 2006; Kowalski et al., 2011; Lamkin, 2006) and the extent to which the board micromanages or interferes with the superintendent's administrative responsibilities (Byrd et al., 2006; Harvey, 2003). Byrd et al. (2006) found the relationship between the superintendent and the school board president is statistically significant in impacting superintendent tenure. Often, conflict with the school board is cited as a common reason for superintendents to leave a school district (Rausch, 2001). Farkas et al. (2001) found 65% of superintendents surveyed speculated that many school boards just wanted a leader the board could control, and more than 80% of the superintendents felt frustrated with politics and the bureaucracy of the job. More than two-thirds of superintendents stated that their board gets

involved in issues not within the scope of its responsibility (Harvey, 2003). Byrd et al. (2006) found increasing politics and the level of board involvement in managing the district to be statistically significant in impacting superintendent tenure.

Regardless of school district size, superintendents often cite financial issues as one of the most challenging problems they face (Bredeson & Kose, 2007; Bredeson, Kose, & Johansson, 2005; Glass et al., 2000; Kowalski et al., 2011; Lamkin 2006). Superintendents face fiscal challenges created by state and local politics limiting revenues, shifting demographics, and increasing costs of services for students with identified disabilities. Superintendents' efforts to obtain sufficient financial resources are often a never-ending struggle (Glass, et al., 2000). Despite facing the common challenge of financial issues, the school district size, governance structures, complexity, and fiscal authority are all contextual factors that influence the ways in which superintendents respond to fiscal challenges (Bredeson et al., 2011). Johnstone et al. (2009) found superintendents struggled with making hard decisions with limited funds.

When facing these challenges, Batagiannis (2007) encourages superintendents to avoid searching for immediate solutions through magic bullets and quick fixes. Instead, superintendents need to use courage combined with wisdom, passion, and hope to resist the urge to give in to instantaneous perfection (Batagiannis, 2007; Hybels, 2008). Batagiannis (2007) contends the answer is courageous leadership that is reflective and focuses on transformational and sustainable change, including the perspective of an adaptive change agent instead of a technocrat. As school leaders face difficult situations, Heifetz (2006) warns superintends to avoid these common mistakes: (a) misdiagnosing problems, (b) underestimating the need to think politically, (c) avoiding or mismanaging conflict, (d) thinking they are supposed to have all the answers, and (e) growing unnecessarily defensive and isolationist.

Context sometimes shapes the challenges faced by school superintendents. Difficulty to recruit and retain qualified teachers, transportation costs, lack of other central office staff or expertise, technology, and close-knit relationships among community members are all contextual factors that can present unique challenges for some school superintendents (Lamkin, 2006).

Summary

Effective leadership is necessary if organizations desire to be successful in meeting their goals. Leadership is universally accepted as being important, and has been the topic of numerous studies. While leadership can sometimes be difficult to define, certain leadership practices have emerged as being effective. Most leadership practices are effective in any profession; however, certain effective leadership practices for superintendents are unique to the school setting. Today's superintendents are facing an increasingly complex environment and must navigate their way through their numerous mandates and accountability measures. In order to successfully lead their districts, superintendents must utilize effective leadership practices.

A comprehensive review of the literature was conducted to determine the leadership practices that current research supports as effective for school superintendents. The literature concerning leadership practices was gathered, evaluated, and analyzed for effective district-level leadership practices. The leadership practices were tabulated, and nine practices emerged from the literature as most frequently cited as effective leadership practices for school superintendents. The literature supports that effective school superintendents focus on these nine leadership practices: (a) establishing and promoting a school vision, (b) serving as instructional leaders, (c) communicating effectively, (d) building and sustaining relationships, (e) employing collaborative and shared leadership, (f) functioning as change agents, (g) displaying ethical and professional behavior, (h) navigating school politics, and (i) effectively managing school operations. The

literature also confirms that school superintendents who desire to be effective in leading their school districts employ contextual leadership and face numerous challenges. Understanding the challenges they face can assist superintendents in developing appropriate responses and therefore become more effective leaders. Chapter 3 will include the methodology of the study. Chapter 4 will present the analysis of the data, and Chapter 5 will include the conclusions and recommendations of the study.

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study is designed to provide rich narrative data pertaining to “how” successful school superintendents carry out effective, research-based leadership practices. The researcher purposefully selected practicing school superintendents who met specific criteria as the participants for this study. The study employed criterion sampling to establish specific criteria for selecting quality participants. To determine the school superintendents’ perspectives concerning how they carry out effective, research-based leadership practices, in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with each of the participants. The researcher developed the interview guide based on the nine effective leadership practices that emerged from the review of literature. Descriptive data was collected from the interviews and the researcher used constant comparative analysis to interpret the data. This chapter includes a description of the participants and how they were selected, details pertaining to the research setting and research design, steps taken in creating the instrument and conducting the interviews, and a description of how the data was analyzed.

Participants

The participants for this study are practicing school superintendents from school districts in Southwest Missouri who were purposefully selected by the researcher using criterion sampling. The main idea of qualitative research is to learn about the problem from the participants and to focus the research on obtaining that information (Creswell, 2007). Practicing school superintendents are the subjects for this study, because it is believed they will be able to offer first-hand knowledge concerning effective district-level leadership practices and insight on how they carry out these practices to help their school districts achieve their goals. Kowalski et

al. (2011) found superintendents reported the most important source for informing elements of their practice were peer superintendents, especially those in comparable school districts.

Interviews will be conducted with each of the practicing school superintendents. The researcher aligns with the approach taken by Kelleher & Van Der Bogert (2006) when they stated: “From our research and reflection, we realized that we wanted to present the involved voices of practitioners rather than the distant discourse of observers” (p. 11). “Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding the meaning people have constructed; that is, how they make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world” (Merriam, 1998, p.6).

The geographic location from which to select the participants was limited due to the qualitative nature of the study and the logistics of conducting interviews. In qualitative studies, some form of convenience sampling is usually employed based on time or location of participants (Merriam, 1998). However, this study also incorporated criterion sampling to assure quality participants were selected (Creswell, 2007). The number of participants for this study was determined by the number of school superintendents who met all the criteria established by the researcher. After analyzing the pool of potential school superintendents, the list of participants resulted in six school superintendents who met all the specific criteria. Based on the number of quality participants from the specific geographic location who met all of the established criteria, it was determined by the researcher to be a satisfactory sample size.

Selection/Sampling

For this qualitative study a purposeful sampling strategy was utilized. Purposeful sampling strategy is when the researcher selects individuals or sites to study, because they can purposefully provide valuable insight to the research questions and purpose of the study. The researcher wants to discover and understand, and therefore must select a sample that will provide

the most insight (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 1998). The researcher used criterion sampling to purposefully identify successful, practicing school superintendents to participate in this study. Merriam (1998) states, “The criteria you establish for purposeful sampling directly reflect the purpose of the study and guide in the identification of information-rich cases” (p. 61). Criterion sampling is useful for quality assurance (Creswell, 2007).

The researcher established two preliminary criteria the potential participants must meet to be initially considered for the study. The first preliminary criterion for selecting potential participants was focusing the study to leaders who were serving as superintendents for a school district located in a certain geographic region in Missouri. Participants for this study worked at school districts located in Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) supervisory region C. This area is the Southwest Region of Missouri.

The second preliminary criterion for selecting potential participants was nominations by leaders in professional educational organizations based on the superintendent’s reputation as an effective district-level leader. Identifying participants for a study by getting referrals from key people who are considered knowledgeable by others is a common form of sampling in qualitative inquiry (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 1998). The leaders in the professional organizations included the following: the DESE Region C Area Supervisor, the Missouri Association of School Administrators (MASA) Executive Director, the current president of MASA, a retired Missouri school superintendent and Missouri Leadership for Excellence, Achievement, and Development (MoLEAD) consultant, and the DESE Assistant Commissioner for the Office of Quality Schools. To be initially considered for the study, the superintendents needed to be nominated by at least two of the five leaders in the professional organizations as an effective district-level leader.

The researcher established three additional criteria to assist in the selection of successful school superintendents as participants for this study. In addition to meeting the two preliminary criteria, the participants for this study met at least two of the following three additional criteria. The first additional criterion for selecting successful school superintendents was special recognition received by the school superintendent. This special recognition involves receiving at least one of the following individual awards from MASA: the Robert L. Pearce Award, the Superintendent of the Year Award, or the New Superintendent Award. These awards are based on nominations from their peers and acknowledge the superintendent's leadership abilities.

The second additional criterion for selecting successful school superintendents was being nominated by the leaders in professional organizations at least three times. Separate nominations by at least three of the leaders ensure more than half of the leaders recognized that superintendent as an effective leader. The aforementioned leaders are knowledgeable concerning successful school superintendents in Southwest Missouri, and their nominations assist in selecting quality participants.

The third additional criterion for selecting successful school superintendents was leading the district the superintendent served at during the 2010-2011, 2011-2012, and 2012-2013 school years to receive at least 90% of their Annual Performance Report (APR) points. Yukl (2006) states there is no simple answer to the question of how to evaluate leadership effectiveness; however, the most commonly used measure to determine a leader's effectiveness is the extent to which the leader's organizational unit performs its task successfully and attains its goals (Yukl, 2006). The APR is feedback from DESE pertaining to each school district's progress towards meeting their goals. The report provides feedback concerning the following five categories: (a) academic achievement, (b) subgroup achievement, (c) college and career readiness, (d)

attendance, and (e) graduation rate. One of the goals of a school district is to ensure learning is taking place and students are achieving at high levels. APR data is one way school districts are held accountable for student learning; therefore, it will be used to assist in determining if the school district is meeting its organization goals and as a criterion for selecting effective school superintendents.

To select the successful school superintendents for this study, a list of potential candidates from Southwest Missouri was first generated by recommendations from each of the five identified leaders in professional organizations. The researcher contacted each of these leaders by email and asked them to nominate five to ten superintendents from DESE supervisory region C that they consider to be effective, district-level leaders. These recommendations were then compared to previous Robert L. Pearce Award recipients, Superintendent of the Year Award recipients, and New Superintendent of the Year Award recipients. The researcher took those results and analyzed each of the superintendents' school districts' APR results for the 2010-2011, 2011-2012, and 2012–2013 school years to determine if they received at least 90% of the total points possible. Lastly, the researcher compiled a list of school superintendents who met the two preliminary criteria and who also met at least two of the three additional criteria. After this process, six superintendents met all the established criteria and were selected to be the participants in this study.

Research Setting

The research setting for this study is school districts located in Southwest Missouri. Due to the qualitative nature of this study and the logistics of conducting interviews, the research setting was confined to those school districts located in DESE supervisory region C. This area is the Southwest Region of Missouri. Most qualitative research involves fieldwork which requires

the researcher to physically go to the participants in their setting (Merriam, 1998). The researcher made an attempt to meet the participants for this study in a location convenient for them (Seidman, 2006); therefore, the interviews were conducted in a location of the superintendent's choosing. These locations ranged from the superintendent's office to a local restaurant.

Theoretical Underpinnings

Previous research on effective school leadership practices (Bredeson et al., 2011; Bredeson & Kose, 2007; Forner et al., 2012; Goens, 2009; Laub, 2010; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003; NSPRA, 2005; Peterson & Barnett, 2005; Portis & Garcia, 2007; Waters & Marzano, 2006) and research on the school superintendency (Glass et al., 2000; Kowalski et al., 2011) supported the theoretical underpinnings of this study. The theoretical underpinnings of this study are further supported by Yukl's (2006) and Bolman & Deal's (2008) work studying leadership in organizations, Senge's (2006) work on learning organizations, Maxwell's (1993) work studying effective leadership, and Kouzes & Posner's (2007) more than 25 years of researching effective leadership practices.

The impetus behind this study is the need to explore "how" successful school superintendents carry out the following nine leadership practices that are identified by the literature as integral to successful school superintendent leadership: (a) establishing and promoting a school vision, (b) serving as instructional leaders, (c) communicating effectively, (d) building and sustaining relationships, (e) employing collaborative and shared leadership, (f) functioning as change agents, (g) displaying ethical and professional behavior, (h) navigating school politics, and (i) effectively managing school operations. These nine leadership practices

form the basis of the interview guide and serve as the structure for exploring “how” successful superintendents operate as effective leaders.

Research Design

The research design is a basic qualitative study utilizing constant comparative analysis. The main objectives of this study were to determine how successful school superintendents carry out effective, research-based leadership practices, and to discover if there are additional leadership practices these superintendents utilize to be effective school leaders. Interviews with practicing, successful school superintendents in Southwest Missouri were conducted to answer the research questions.

Basic qualitative studies are the most common form of qualitative research conducted in education and simply seek to discover and understand a phenomenon, a process, or the perspectives of the people involved (Merriam, 1998). Some examples of basic qualitative studies in education include Wilson’s (2010) study of school superintendents’ leadership practices and Johnson-Huff’s (2006) study of first year elementary principals. Creswell (2007) defines qualitative research as the following:

Qualitative research begins with assumptions, a worldview, the possible use of a theoretical lens, and the study of research problems inquiring into the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. To study this problem, qualitative researchers use an emerging qualitative approach to inquiry, the collection of data in a natural setting sensitive to the people and places under study, and data analysis that is inductive and establishes patterns or themes. The final written report or presentation includes the voices of participants, the reflexivity of the researcher, and a complex description and interpretation of the problem, and it extends the literature or

signals a call for action. (p. 37)

Researchers utilize qualitative methodology when they need a complex, detailed understanding of an issue and when that detail is best established by talking directly with people (Creswell, 2007). This researcher chose to conduct a qualitative study, because he wanted to empower the purposefully selected school superintendents to share their experiences concerning how they carry out their leadership practices.

Most qualitative research includes these common components: (a) natural setting, (b) researcher as key instrument, (c) multiple sources of data, (d) inductive data analysis, (e) participants' meanings, (f) emergent design, (g) theoretical lens, (h) interpretive inquiry, and (i) holistic account (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 1998). This study attempted to incorporate the following key characteristics of a "good" qualitative study as defined by Creswell (2007): (a) The researcher employs rigorous data collection procedures, (b) The researcher frames the study within the assumptions and characteristics of the qualitative approach to research, (c) The researcher uses one of the main approaches to qualitative inquiry, (d) The researcher begins with a single focus, (e) The study includes a detailed method, a rigorous approach to data collection, data analysis, and report writing, (f) The researcher analyzes the data using multiple levels of abstraction, (g) The researcher writes persuasively so the reader experiences "being there," (h) The study reflects the history, culture, and personal experiences of the researcher, and (i) The qualitative research is conducted in an ethical manner.

Yukl (2006) classifies the theories and research conducted on effective leadership characteristics into the following five approaches: (a) the trait approach, (b) the behavior approach, (c) the power-influence approach, (d) the situational approach, and (e) the integrative

approach. This study utilized the behavior approach and focused on identifying effective leadership behaviors and practices.

To determine the school superintendent's perspectives concerning how they carry out effective, research-based leadership practices, in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with each of the participants. Interviewing is one of the most common forms of gathering data in qualitative studies in education, and in numerous studies it is the only source of data (Merriam, 1998). The researcher used the following steps outlined by Creswell (2007) for conducting interviews: (a) Identify interviewees based on a purposeful sampling procedure, (b) Determine what type of interview is practical and will net the most useful information to answer the research questions, (c) Use adequate recording procedures when conducting one-on-one interviews, (d) Design and use an interview protocol, (e) Refine the interview questions and procedures through pilot testing, (f) Determine the place for conducting the interview, (g) After arriving at the interview site, obtain consent from the interviewee to participate in the study, and (h) During the interview, stay to the questions, complete the interview within the time specified, be respectful and courteous, and offer few questions and advice.

The researcher developed an interview guide based on the following nine effective leadership practices that were gathered from the review of literature: (a) establishing and promoting a school vision, (b) serving as instructional leaders, (c) communicating effectively, (d) building and sustaining relationships, (e) employing collaborative and shared leadership, (f) functioning as change agents, (g) displaying ethical and professional behavior, (h) navigating school politics, and (i) effectively managing school operations. Qualitative research that incorporates in-depth interviewing recognizes and embraces the role of the human interviewer as a valuable instrument in the study (Creswell, 2007; Seidman, 2006). In-depth interviews were

conducted with each of the participants using the interview guide. The most common form of interviewing is the person-to-person encounter where the main purpose is to obtain a particular kind of information (Merriam, 1998). The best way a researcher can investigate an educational organization or process is through the experience of individuals in the organization (Seidman, 2006). The researcher utilized a semi-structured interview process where the wording and order of some the questions are predetermined and open-ended questions are utilized (Merriam, 1998). Seidman (2006) states: “At the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience” (p. 9).

Listening is the most important skill in interviewing (Seidman, 2006). The researcher made an attempt to listen to what the participants were saying, listen to the participant’s inner voice, and listen while remaining aware of the process. To facilitate active listening, the researcher recorded the interviews and took limited notes. The researcher followed up on what participants said, asked questions when information was not understood, asked to hear more about a subject, and explored topics without probing. The researcher attempted to develop rapport with the participants and strove to listen more and talk less by asking questions that were open ended and not leading (Seidman, 2006).

Six purposefully selected school superintendents who met all the criteria for selection were contacted for participation in this study. The researcher contacted each potential participant by email to request their participation in this study. The email contained a letter (Appendix A) explaining the purpose of the study, the selection of participants, and the structure of the interview process. An informed consent form (Appendix B) and an interview guide (Appendix C) containing the questions to be asked during the interview were also provided to each potential participant. The informed consent form included the following major parts as outlined by

Seidman (2006) that are necessary for in-depth interviewing: (a) an invitation to participate in what, to what end, how, how long, and for whom?, (b) risks, (c) rights, (d) possible benefits, (e) confidentiality of records, (f) dissemination, and (g) contact information and copies of the form. Confidentiality was maintained throughout the study. Each participant was given a fictitious name and no identifying characteristics were acknowledged.

Interviews were conducted in the month of July and lasted about one hour in length. The interviews were audio recorded and the responses were transcribed and analyzed. Audio recording allows the researcher to transcribe the interview and to ensure accuracy of the data (Seidman, 2006). Data collected from the interviews were used to answer the research questions. The researcher used constant comparative analysis to interpret the data and describe the emerging trends.

Assuring Trustworthiness

This study attempted to produce valid and reliable results obtained in an ethical manner. The validity and reliability of a study must be addressed as the researcher pays careful attention to the study's design, interactions with participants, the data collection and analysis process, and the way the findings are presented (Creswell, 2007; Heppner & Heppner, 2004; Merriam, 1998). Merriam (1998) writes, "Being able to trust research results is especially important to professionals in applied fields, such as education, in which practitioners intervene in people's lives" (p. 198). Ensuring validity and reliability in a qualitative study involves conducting the research in an ethical manner (Creswell, 2007; Heppner & Heppner, 2004; Merriam, 1998). The actual ethical practice in a qualitative study is determined by the researcher's own values and ethics (Merriam, 1998). While conducting this study, the researcher maintained and utilized his personal high level of integrity and character.

Internal validity addresses the issue of how the research findings match with reality and if the researchers are measuring what they think they are measuring (Merriam, 1998). The internal validity of this study was addressed through triangulation, member checks, peer examinations, and clarifying the researcher's biases (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 1998). Triangulation in this study involves using multiple sources of data from interviews to confirm the emerging findings and comparing those emerging findings with the relevant literature. Member checks were incorporated as the researcher shared the data and initial interpretations with the participating school superintendents to determine if the results were plausible. The researcher used peer examinations by asking colleagues to comment and offer insight on the emerging findings of the study. The researcher attempted to reveal any biases by clarifying initial assumptions at the beginning of this study. The researcher believed school leadership to be a worthy topic of study. He assumed the purposefully selected school superintendents would be able to offer valuable insight concerning how they employ leadership practices that are defined as effective in current literature. The researcher believed the findings from this study would benefit current and future school superintendents and the institutions that prepare them.

External validity for a study is concerned with the extent to which the findings of the study can be applied or generalized to other situations (Merriam, 1998). Seidman (2006) writes, "The job of an in-depth interviewer is to go to such depth in the interviews that surface considerations of representativeness and generalizability are replaced by a compelling evocation of an individual's experience" (p. 51). To assist with the issue of generalizability in qualitative research, this study employed the strategies of using rich, thick description and typicality. Providing enough description in this study and describing how typical the participants are allows

the readers to determine how closely their experiences match with this study, and, therefore, if the findings are applicable to them (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 1998).

Reliability for a study is the extent to which the research findings can be replicated in another study (Merriam, 1998). Merriam (1998) argues a better concept for qualitative research is not whether the findings will be found again, but instead whether the results are consistent with the data being collected. The reliability of this study was enhanced by the investigator's position, triangulation, and an audit trail (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 1998). Concerning the investigator's position, the study is based on the assumption and theory that certain leadership practices are more effective than others, and the purposefully selected school superintendents were able to offer valuable insight concerning how they carry out those leadership practices. The researcher has completed eleven years in public education with three of those years being in building-level administration. He was intrigued by the complex and noble concept of school leadership, and believed in giving school superintendents a voice to share their experiences with leadership. The researcher was committed to being a lifelong learner, and this qualitative study is part of this journey. In addition to utilizing multiple sources for data collection, triangulation for this study included using multiple methods and levels of data analysis. The researcher created an audit trail by describing in detail how the data was collected, how categories were derived, and how decisions were made throughout the study (Merriam, 1998).

Instrumentation

The main instrument for this study was the interview guide used during interviews with the selected school superintendents. According to Merriam (1998) questions are at the heart of interviewing, and to collect meaningful data the researcher must ask relevant questions. In order to ask relevant questions pertaining to school superintendent leadership, one must have a

thorough understand of what constitutes effective, district-level leadership practices. The researcher created the interview guide based on the following effective leadership practices that emerged from the review of literature: (a) establishing and promoting a school vision, (b) serving as instructional leaders, (c) communicating effectively, (d) building and sustaining relationships, (e) employing collaborative and shared leadership, (f) functioning as change agents, (g) displaying ethical and professional behavior, (h) navigating school politics, and (i) effectively managing school operations. These nine research-based leadership practices served as the conceptual framework from which the researcher developed the instrument used in this study.

Two main open-ended questions with nine subset questions were developed to be used during the superintendent interviews. The first part of the instrument was intended to gather demographic data pertaining to each of the participants. The first question contained nine subsections that were developed around each of the nine effective leadership practices that emerged from the literature. These questions were designed to give current practitioners a voice to describe “how” they carry out each of these practices. Question two was designed to determine if these successful school superintendents utilized any additional leadership practices in order to be effective, district-level leaders. The instrument was used as a protocol when interviewing the selected school superintendents. It served as a guide to ensure useful data was obtained from the interviews and the research questions were answered. This instrument was designed to provide rich, narrative data that was later analyzed, coded, and matched with the research questions.

A pilot interview was conducted by the researcher using the interview guide. Seidman (2006) writes, “The best advice I ever received as a researcher was to do a pilot of my proposed study” (p. 38). Merriam (1998) states, “Pilot interviews are crucial for trying out your questions”

(p. 75). The pilot interview was conducted with a practicing Missouri school superintendent. A pilot group consisting of aspiring and practicing school superintendents was utilized to gather input on the interview guide. The pilot group and pilot interview provided advice concerning the interview guide and narrative data from the sample interview.

The advice and narrative data collected was analyzed by the researcher to determine the quality of measurement of the instrument. After the pilot interview, the researcher paused, reflected on his experience, discussed it with colleagues, and made any necessary revisions to his research approach based on what he had learned from the pilot experience (Seidman, 2006). The advice given was used to evaluate the wording of the questions and the ease of answering them. The narrative data was compared to the current literature and research questions to determine if the necessary data was being gathered. According to Merriam (1998), scrutinizing a verbatim transcript of a pilot interview is an effective way to determine the effectiveness of your interview guide.

Data Analysis

In a qualitative study, the process of data collection and analysis should be simultaneous, and is both recursive and dynamic. Qualitative data analysis is highly intuitive and becomes more intensive as the study progresses and once all the data has been collected. Data analysis is the process of making meaning of the data, and involves consolidating, reducing, and interpreting the participants' insights. This can be a complex process that includes transferring between concrete data and abstract concepts, between inductive and deductive reasoning, and between description and interpretation. The data is first organized and prepared for analysis, then developed into themes through coding, and lastly presented in tables or discussion. The real

learning for the researcher comes from doing the analysis (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 1998; Seidman, 2006). Concerning qualitative data analysis, Merriam (1998) writes:

At the outset of a qualitative study, the investigator knows what the problem is and has selected a sample to collect data in order address the problem. But the researcher does not know what will be discovered, what or whom to concentrate on, or what the final analysis will be like. The final product is shaped by the data that are collected and the analysis that accompanies the entire process. Without ongoing analysis, the data can be unfocused, repetitious, and overwhelming in the sheer volume of material that needs to be processed. Data that have been analyzed while being collected are both parsimonious and illuminating. (p. 162)

Descriptive data was collected for this study from interviews, and the researcher used constant comparative analysis to interpret the data. The data was analyzed for emerging themes, coded, and categorized in order to make sense of the essential meanings.

The constant comparative method is a common form of analysis in qualitative research (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 1998) and was utilized by the researcher in this study. The constant comparative method is appropriate for this study, because its basic strategy is compatible with the inductive, concept-building orientation of qualitative research (Merriam, 1998). This study incorporated the similar steps outlined by Merriam (1998) and Seidman (2006) for conducting constant comparative analysis. The researcher starts with a particular incident or one segment of data from an interview, document, or field notes and compares it with another incident in the same set of data or in a different set of data. These comparisons are constantly made and lead to tentative categories. The researcher looks for similarities and differences as they continually

make comparisons within and between the sets of data. The overall goal of this analysis is to seek out patterns in the data which are then arranged in relationship to each other.

Constant comparative analysis involves three levels of analysis. The first level involves the most basic way to present a study's findings, which is through a descriptive account. This requires decisions about what to include or leave out, and is important to all forms of qualitative research; but few studies limit themselves to this level of analysis. The second level moves beyond basic description and seeks to construct categories or themes that capture reoccurring patterns in the vast amount of descriptive data. The researcher uses coding to help develop these categories. Creating categories is an intuitive process, but is also systematic based on the study's purpose. Categories and subcategories are commonly created during the constant comparative method as the researcher seeks to compare one unit of information with the next while looking for patterns in the data. Cross analysis is especially important as it goes beyond categories and towards the development of a theory. The third level of analysis involves making inferences, developing models, or generating theory. During this level, the researcher knows the category does not tell the whole story and that there is more to be understood about the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 1998). This study utilized the first two levels of data analysis as described by Creswell (2007) and Merriam (1998).

This study followed The Step-by-Step Process as defined by Merriam (1998) for constructing categories during qualitative data analysis. The researcher reads the first transcript and writes down notes, comments, and observations. This process is similar to having a conversation with the data as the researcher asks questions of it and makes comments to it. After completing this process, the researcher goes back over his notes and tries to group together similar comments or notes. Next, the researcher moves on to the next transcript and follows the

same steps used while reading the first transcript. While doing this, the researcher keeps in mind the list of groupings developed from the first transcript. The researcher develops a separate list of notes, comments, and observations for the second transcript and then compares those to the ones developed from the first transcript. These two lists are then merged into one master list from both sets of data. The researcher uses this master list as an initial classification system for capturing the emerging patterns in the data. This process was followed as the researcher analyzed each of the transcripts from the interviews.

The researcher used coding to develop a system for organizing and managing the collected data. Coding is a process where the researcher assigns a short description to various aspects of the data so that specific parts of the data can be easily retrieved. According to Merriam (1998) coding involves two levels – identifying information about the data and interpretive insights relating to analysis. The researcher uses identifying notations for each interview and set of data as it is collected so the data can be easily accessed during the analysis and presentation of findings. The researcher keeps track of his thoughts, speculations, and hunches during this process, because it is rudimentary analysis and will need to be built upon as the researcher moves between the emerging analysis and the raw data of the interviews (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 1998).

Narrative data from the interviews was collected utilizing an audio recording app on the iPad and was transcribed verbatim. According to Merriam (1998), verbatim transcription of recorded interviews provides the best database for analysis. A quality check was conducted by the researcher to ensure the data was accurately recorded and transcribed verbatim. The narrative data was analyzed utilizing constant comparative analysis, and findings were presented to the readers. Seidman (2006) writes:

The researcher's task is to present the experience of the people he or she interviews in compelling enough detail and in sufficient depth that those who read the study can connect to that experience, learn how it is constituted, and deepen their understanding of the issues it reflects. (p. 51)

The interview statements were compared against the literature and recommendations were made for current and future practitioners and the educational institutions that prepare them.

Summary

The main objectives of this study were to determine how successful school superintendents in Southwest Missouri carry out effective, research-based leadership practices and to discover if there are additional leadership practices these superintendents utilize to be effective school leaders. The participants from this study were purposefully selected from DESE supervisory region C using criterion sampling. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with each of the participants to determine the school superintendents' perspectives concerning how they carry out effective, research-based leadership practices. The interview guide was developed by the researcher based on the nine effective leadership practices that emerged from the review of literature. Descriptive data was collected from the interviews and interpreted using constant comparative analysis. Chapter 4 will present the analysis of the data, and Chapter 5 will include the conclusions and recommendations of the study.

CHAPTER FOUR

ANALYSIS OF THE DATA

The purpose of this study was to determine “how” successful school superintendents carry out the following effective, research-based leadership practices: (a) establishing and promoting a school vision, (b) serving as instructional leaders, (c) communicating effectively, (d) building and sustaining relationships, (e) employing collaborative and shared leadership, (f) functioning as change agents, (g) displaying ethical and professional behavior, (h) navigating school politics, and (i) effectively managing school operations. The second purpose of this study was to determine if there are any additional leadership practices that successful superintendents utilize in order to be effective, district-level leaders.

This chapter presents the results from the in-depth, semi-structured interviews with the school superintendents. The researcher followed the strategies outlined in the previous chapter to select the participants, to ensure trustworthiness, and to analyze and interpret the descriptive data. Themes were identified in each of the leadership practices. This chapter includes a description of the participants and the findings related to each research question.

Participants

Interviews were conducted with six successful school superintendents who met all the criteria outlined in the previous chapter. All of the superintendents were Caucasian males with their highest degree of education obtained ranging from a Specialist Degree in Educational Administration to Doctorate Degrees in Educational Administration. The superintendents led rural school districts in Southwest Missouri with enrollment numbers ranging from roughly 3,300 students to 7,600 students. These school leaders’ years of experience as a superintendent ranged from four years to 20 years. The number of other central office administrators and

directors these superintendents worked with ranged from four to 10, and the number of their building level administrators ranged from 12 to 45. For the intentions of this study, and to preserve confidentiality, the six superintendents were identified as S1, S2, S3, S4, S5, and S6.

Table 1 shows which of the additional criterion each of the six superintendents met.

Table 1

Additional Criterion met by Superintendents

	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	S6
Additional Criterion One:						
Robert L. Pearce Award	X	X				X
Superintendent of the Year Award		X				
New Superintendent Award			X	X		
Additional Criteria Two:						
DESE Region C Area Supervisor	X	X		X		
MASA Executive Director	X	X			X	X
Current MASA President	X			X		X
Retired MO Superintendent and MO Lead Consultant	X	X	X	X	X	X
DESE Asst. Commissioner- Office of Quality Schools	X	X	X	X	X	X
Additional Criteria Three:						
At least 90% of APR points earned during 3 years	X		X	X	X	X

Superintendent one.

Superintendent One (S1) leads a school district of approximately 6,000 students. He works with 10 other central office administrators or directors and 21 building level administrators. Superintendent One earned his doctorate degree and has 34 total years in education, with 14 of those years serving as a school superintendent.

Superintendent two.

Superintendent Two (S2) leads a school district of approximately 7,600 students. He works with 10 other central office administrators or directors and 45 building level

administrators. Superintendent Two earned his doctorate degree and has 18 total years in education, with 10 of those years serving as a school superintendent.

Superintendent three.

Superintendent Three (S3) leads a school district of approximately 4,700 students. He works with seven other central office administrators or directors and 18 building level administrators. Superintendent Three earned his specialist degree and has 18 total years in education, with four of those years serving as a school superintendent.

Superintendent four.

Superintendent Four (S4) leads a school district of approximately 4,400 students. He works with five other central office administrators or directors and 21 building level administrators. Superintendent Four earned his doctorate degree and has 28 total years in education, with 11 of those years serving as a school superintendent.

Superintendent five.

Superintendent Five (S5) leads a school district of approximately 3,300 students. He works with 4 other central office administrators or directors and 12 building level administrators. Superintendent Five earned his doctorate degree and has 22 total years in education, with nine of those years serving as a school superintendent.

Superintendent six.

Superintendent Six (S6) leads a school district of approximately 4,800 students. He works with five other central office administrators or directors and 15 building level administrators. Superintendent Five earned his doctorate degree and has 31 total years in education, with 20 of those years serving as a school superintendent.

Assuring Trustworthiness

This study incorporated the key characteristics of a “good” qualitative study outlined by Creswell (2007) in the previous chapter. Additionally, several validation strategies are listed by Creswell (2007) to ensure trustworthiness in qualitative research. These strategies include: (a) prolonged engagement and persistent observation in the field, (b) triangulation, (c) peer reviews or debriefing, (d) clarifying researcher bias, (e) member checking, (f) rich, thick description, and (g) external audits. The following five strategies have been utilized in this study:

(a) triangulation, (b) peer reviews, (c) clarifying researcher bias, (d) member checking, and (e) using rich, thick description.

Triangulation of the data has been achieved by comparing data from different participants; engaging in member-checking and peer reviews of the data and emerging themes; and by comparing the data and emerging themes to current research as cited in the study’s review of literature. These strategies have been incorporated to provide corroborating evidence from different sources to support the data and emerging themes (Creswell, 2007).

Peer reviews of the emerging themes and supporting data have been completed by three of the researcher’s colleagues. Two of the colleagues have a specialist degree in school superintendency, and the other colleague has a doctorate degree in educational leadership. One of the colleagues is a practicing school superintendent; two of the colleagues are aspiring school superintendents; and all three colleagues have experience and knowledge pertaining to school leadership. The researcher provided the colleagues with the emerging themes and the data from the participants used to support each theme. The colleagues were asked to analyze the data and themes to determine if the results were plausible, and given the opportunity to offer their insight and recommendations. All three colleagues gave suggestions pertaining to the data and

confirmed the emerging themes were reasonable based upon the supporting data. These steps provided an external check of the research process (Creswell, 2007).

Clarifying researcher bias was accomplished as the researcher commented on past experiences and revealed any biases by clarifying initial assumptions at the beginning of this study. The researcher has experience as a building-level administrator, but does not have any experience as a district-level administrator; therefore, the data was analyzed and interpreted through his past experience as a building-level administrator. The initial assumptions of the researcher included believing school leadership to be a worthy topic of study; assuming the purposefully selected school superintendents would be able to offer valuable insight concerning how they employ leadership practices that are defined as effective in current literature; and believing the findings from this study would benefit current and future school superintendents and the institutions that prepare them. This process is included so the reader understands the researcher's position and any biases or assumptions that impact the research (Merriam, 1998).

Member checking occurred as the researcher asked each participant of this study to examine the transcript of their interview and make any necessary suggestions due to inaccuracies or misinterpretations. Each participant was provided with the emerging themes and asked to determine if the results appeared reasonable based upon the data. Feedback received from the participants was used to confirm the emerging findings of the study, and according to Creswell (2007), is a valuable technique for establishing credibility.

Rich, thick description was included in this study as the researcher described in detail how the study was structured, how the participants were selected, and how the data was collected and analyzed. This process allows readers to make decisions about transferability (Creswell,

2007). Qualitative research focuses on process, meaning, and understanding, and therefore produces a product that is richly descriptive (Merriam, 1998).

Data Analysis

According to Creswell (2007), data analysis in qualitative studies consists of preparing and organizing the data for analysis; reducing the data into themes by coding and condensing the codes; and lastly, presenting the data in figures, tables, or discussion. This study followed the steps outlined by Creswell (2007), and the strategies in the previous chapter suggested by Merriam (1998) and Seidman (2006) for conducting constant comparative analysis.

First, the data gathered from the interviews was transcribed and organized for analysis. Then, the researcher carefully read the first transcript, wrote down notes and observations, and went back over those notes and grouped together any similar notes or comments. The researcher followed these same steps for each of the transcripts. The researcher did this while keeping in mind and constantly comparing the groupings from previous transcripts, and developing codes to organize and manage the data. Next, the researcher compiled a list of the notes and codes from each transcript, categorized and compared the codes for similarities, and summarized the codes into emerging themes. The resulting emerging themes are presented according to each of the research questions. This study utilized the first two levels of data analysis as described by Creswell (2007) and Merriam (1998) in the previous chapter. The researcher used the first level of data analysis by making decisions about what to include or leave out and presenting a descriptive account of the data. The researcher utilized the second level of data analysis through coding the data, comparing the data for patterns, and constructing themes that capture the reoccurring patterns in the data.

During the analysis of data and throughout the entire study, great care was taken by the researcher to ensure the confidentiality of the participants. Recordings of the interviews and transcriptions of the data were kept secure by the researcher. Only the participants, the transcription company, and the researcher had access to the raw data. During the analysis and presentation of the data, each participant was designated as Superintendent One, Two, Three, Four, Five, or Six to ensure confidentiality. When using quotes from the participants, careful attention was given to ensure no identifying characteristics were included.

Research Question One

Research question one asked: “How” do successful superintendents carry out effective, research-based leadership practices? The researcher asked open-ended questions (Appendix C) based on each of the following nine leadership practices identified from the literature as necessary for successful school superintendent leadership: (a) establishing and promoting a school vision, (b) serving as instructional leaders, (c) communicating effectively, (d) building and sustaining relationships, (e) employing collaborative and shared leadership, (f) functioning as change agents, (g) displaying ethical and professional behavior, (h) navigating school politics, and (i) effectively managing school operations. Findings from research question one are reported according to each of the nine leadership practices. Themes emerged pertaining to “how” the superintendents carried out each leadership practice. Each theme was established by a minimum of four out of the six participants using a particular strategy to address how they displayed that leadership practice.

Establishing and promoting a school vision.

According to the participants in this study, establishing and promoting a school vision is important for successful district-level school leadership. When discussing this leadership

practice, one participant discussed how strategically planning their school’s vision was, in his opinion, the number one reason for the success they have experienced as a district (S1). Other participants spoke of the importance of the superintendent articulating the vision (S4), honoring and assessing the pre-existing culture when establishing a vision (S5, S6), and putting in the time necessary to effectively establish and promote a school’s vision (S6). When developing a school’s vision Superintendent Six stated:

In the superintendency you have time to think, see the big picture. You're moving the titanic, and you're not going to turn it around on a dime. Think long term, think visionary, be strategic, and incorporate collaboration and listening skills. Then, you can get where you need to go. (S6)

The themes identified for establishing and promoting a school vision are supported in detail below using quotes and other pertinent information gathered from the study. Four themes were identified for establishing and promoting a school vision: (a) assess current reality and define beliefs, (b) incorporate collaboration, (c) utilize strategic planning, and (d) align actions with the vision. Table 2 shows which superintendents provided qualitative data for each theme pertaining to establishing and promoting a school vision.

Table 2

The Superintendents Supporting each Theme for Establishing and Promoting a School Vision

Identified themes	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	S6
Assess current reality and define beliefs		X	X	X	X	X
Incorporate collaboration	X	X		X		X
Utilize strategic planning	X		X	X		X
Align actions with the vision	X	X	X	X	X	X

Assess current reality and define beliefs.

Five out of the six participants provided descriptive data to support the theme of assessing current reality and defining beliefs. When discussing this topic, Superintendent Two stated:

I'm going to use an adage from my grandma. When I first got the job, she sent me a handwritten note, and it had a quote in it that her mom had passed on to her. It simply stated, 'A wise man takes in the lay of the land, before he puts his hand to the plow.' In essence, what she meant by that was you go in and find out what's going on, before you start casting a vision. Find out what's going on and try to define your current reality, as in that particular case, your school. I still follow that. You come in, learn about the community, learn about the district, learn about the needs, spend some time talking to people, and building relationships. Once you have your feet underneath you, you can have a good sense of what needs to be done, and start casting a vision on what's to be next. I think sometimes leaders think they have to come in right away and start casting a vision. I don't think you can do that. You can be broad and general, ('we want to raise academic standards, we want to build a community, etc. '), but you need to know your community well, before you make some more specific vision commitments. (S2)

Superintendent Three emphasized the importance of first defining current reality, but also defining the beliefs and values of the school:

First, we had to assess our current reality. Where we were in terms of academic performance; where we were in terms of community perception; and how we viewed ourselves as a school. Then, we had to figure out how that aligned with our current reality, and the feedback that we were getting from the community and from our staff.

We can talk about vision as an organization, but in essence, we're talking about what we want our students to be able to do, when they leave here. We really try to build on that and have some buy-in from our staff and community groups, as we create a vision for our school. (S3)

Superintendents Four, Five, and Six all spoke of the value in defining what is important to the school district and why it is important. When discussing the essence of a school's vision, Superintendent Four stated:

It's a branding and marketing message that we're really talking about. It's important for the school board members, administrators, community members, and all of your employees to know what you're about. Who are we as a school district? And that's what we try to define, clarify, and communicate. (S4)

Another superintendent built on this idea, saying, "We talk about what is non-negotiable. What are things that we just won't give up? Our biggest one is that we are in the kid business" (S5). Superintendent Six also spoke of the importance of keeping at the forefront of everyone's mind this is who we are, and this is why we are doing what we are doing. He also stressed the value of a superintendent's beliefs matching with the district's beliefs, saying, "You've got to make sure that the district fits what you believe, to a certain extent" (S6). He continued to discuss the importance of superintendents defining their own beliefs and seeing if they match the existing beliefs of the school district:

There's some key principles that I've got to stand firm on, but there's a lot of things I think we fight about, in communities and as leaders, that we don't need to. Assimilate into that culture, understand what it is, and lead with your set of values and principles.

I think that assimilation process is really important - to understand where you're going and why, and then if you can fit in and be successful there. (S6)

Incorporate collaboration.

Four out of the six participants provided descriptive data to support the theme of incorporating collaboration. When discussing how to establish a school's vision, one of the superintendent's first responses was: "through open dialogue, collaboration, and teamwork" (S1). He continued by saying, "Get lots of people involved...the more, the better. Most of our achievements have come from these action plans that were developed by members of the community" (S1). He went on to discuss how this collaboration creates buy-in for the school vision:

Then, when we try to pass bond issues, they're passing it. Bond issues for the most part that are for things they've desired through this process. They dream it, and we give them a structured environment. Then, we come back and ask for a bond issue to pay for some of those action plans. It works very well. (S1)

Another superintendent spoke of the importance of "building bridges between the community and the school" (S2). He emphasized how true collaboration and developing a vision can only take place after relationships and trust are established:

Before I did any vision casting at all, I had a 100 day plan. It very specifically laid out who I was going to talk to; what organizations I was going to talk to; how I was going to get my name out there; how I was going to meet people, start building trust, and connect with people in the community; and how I was going to start building relationships with the school board, the staff, parents, and students. And once you've built those relationships, people will listen to you. People aren't going to listen to you, unless they

know you. If you want to cast a vision and cast it successfully, build relationships. People need to believe in the person that's speaking, and the only way they can do that is if they believe they have a relationship with the person. They have to believe in the leader, and they have to know that you've taken the time to learn about the community. (S2)

Superintendent Four discussed how an important component of collaboratively developing a vision is involving the school board. He went on to say how longevity between the superintendent and school board builds trust and enhances this collaboration: “Things become expected and school boards are part of that. When you get that institutional knowledge of this is how we operate in our school district, collaboration increases. The only way to provide that is through longevity” (S4).

Another superintendent stressed the importance of collaboration during this process by stating:

I think to create and promote the vision; it has to have buy-in. It has to be a process, and it has to be inclusive of all of your people. It's the whole PLC model of bringing your community, school board, faculty, staff, students, and parents together to create that vision for the district. (S6)

He also emphasized how leaders need to be humble to collaboratively develop a vision, saying, “I think we have to be really careful about not letting our egos get too big as leaders. We are part of the organization, and the organization is bigger than we are” (S6). Superintendent One stressed the collaborative process, but also the importance of accountability measures when he said, “Working with others to develop a vision and then putting the accountability pieces in place, that will make them goal achievers instead of goal setters” (S1).

Utilize strategic planning.

Four out of the six participants provided descriptive data to support the theme of utilizing strategic planning. Superintendent One talked about how he believes the main factor contributing to the success of their district is their implementation of strategic planning. He states, “For our successes, strategic planning has probably been the number one reason for it. Our Comprehensive School Improvement Plan (CSIP) is not one that collects dust. It’s a working, living document that we hold ourselves accountable for” (S1). He went on to describe the process:

We get together with about 35 people every year, and this year was a year that we overhauled the CSIP by strategic planning. The next 5 years are planned out in regards to our mission, our objectives, our action statements, and our strategies. This 35-member team is well represented - we have people from the business community, people from the clergy, parents, teachers, administrators, and students who all got together. They developed our mission, objectives, and eventually the seven strategies. Over 100 people in the community will sign up to work on action teams, and these action teams will be more specific with the different strategies. We'll come up with about 65 action plans that will come from these seven strategies. This will involve the community at large and anybody who wants to volunteer and sign up. We train the action team leaders, and they have 10 meetings with these planning teams. We get real specific as to what we want to accomplish. (S1)

Superintendent Three stressed the importance of strategically developing a vision and creating systems thinkers:

We felt like we weren't an organization of systems thinkers, so we had to create that. So, we started at the building-level and worked upward. It was almost grass-roots at the building level, creating visions. I know that's backwards from what's traditionally the norm, but we felt like we really increased the capacity of our employees and district leaders by going about it that way. (S3)

He went on to discuss this process is how their strategic plan becomes a living, breathing document that is posted at the front of every building: “This is what we do. If it's not on there, we don't do it. If we want to add something to it, something comes off. This is what we're measuring. These are the action steps” (S3).

The participants acknowledged how the vision must be strategically developed but also strategically promoted. Superintendents Four and Six discussed how part of this process is ensuring everyone understands the vision and being intentional about communicating it. “It has to stay current, it has to stay real. Do people understand what it is? It's important to clearly understand it and articulate it. It has to be lead from the top” (S4). Another superintendent emphasized monitoring as a key component of the strategic planning process:

Monitoring may be the biggest key, because ‘what gets measured gets done.’ We measure our progress or lack thereof on an annual basis. We have had great success with follow through. The plan never collects dust, because they're held accountable. Accountability is a big part of it. We find out that goal setting is easy; it's goal achieving that's hard. So, we hold ourselves accountable to be goal achieving. (S1)

Align actions with the vision.

All six participants provided descriptive data to support the theme of aligning actions with the vision. Superintendent Four emphasized the importance of this strategy, saying, “We're

continually bringing back in the message of our mission and vision statement to many, many discussions throughout the year” (S4). Superintendent Five echoed the value of aligning each decision with your vision, stating: “We are in the kid business and every decision that we make, we say, ‘Okay, how does this affect kids’” (S5)? Another superintendent emphasized this when developing a vision and strategic plan: “We must have an alignment of actions to our goal, or we must re-establish the goal” (S3). Superintendent One stressed the importance of a superintendent aligning their actions with the school’s vision when he stated:

Superintendents who have a well-developed vision of the future and spend their efforts in accordance with that vision, become the visionary goal achievers they must become in order to be successful leaders. Go so far as having goals that are clearly written down and shared with all stakeholders. (S1)

Another superintendent emphasized the value of aligning the superintendent’s actions and the school’s vision with the needs of the community:

Take time to get to know your community first. Spend more time listening than talking, and get a sense of what the community's wants, wishes, and desires are for the kids in the community. Then, cast a vision that is aligned with where the community is currently at, but also aligned with where they want to go next. (S2)

He continued to emphasize the value of using conversations to ensure all stakeholders’ actions are aligned with the vision:

Having those conversations – for articulating your vision, it's critical to be having those one-on-one small group conversations in hallways and in teacher work rooms with the staff. Just getting a sense of who they are, and knowing a little bit about them. But more

importantly, helping them understand the direction of the district, and why we do what we do. (S2)

Superintendent Six stated how there must be a match between the school's vision and decisions that are being made:

From your vision and mission statement, you have specific goals, and then your CSIP, and then your building level goals. It really funnels them all the way through to make sure that the decisions we're making fit that; because if it doesn't, you're going to get off track. (S6)

Serving as instructional leaders.

According to the participants in this study, serving as instructional leaders is important for successful district-level school leadership. Superintendent One started discussing this topic by stressing the importance of instructional leadership:

What we spend our time on is a message to the principals of what must be important. We spend time on what's important and that drives their focus. How they use their time is a key to instructional leadership. Making sure playgrounds are managed properly, facilities are clean, and budgets are paid is all important stuff; however, instructional leadership trumps it all, because if we don't have good instructional leadership, we might as well be a daycare or a holding facility. But if you want to learn and you want to learn what is specifically designed for you to learn, it takes instructional leadership. (S1)

When discussing instructional leadership another participant stated:

I think the instructional leadership role of a superintendent today is tenfold more important than it was 10 years ago. I think it's absolutely essential to survive as a superintendent. The expectations are high when you're talking about kids graduating

with a diploma that means something. Ultimately, I think our role is above and beyond just standardized testing. Are we preparing kids to go to that next level whether it is college or career? Ultimately, what I want is for every kid to be able to graduate, do whatever it is that they want to do, and earn a decent wage so they can support a family. (S2)

Superintendent Four echoed this importance, stating, “Instructional leadership is now the key component. It’s a given that you can handle all the management, but can you handle the instructional leadership piece” (S4)? He went on to say, “The instructional capacity piece is one of those things that you always have to be growing in. Just because I have a curriculum director, doesn’t mean I don’t have to be able to understand curriculum issues” (S4).

The themes identified for serving as instructional leaders are supported in detail below using quotes and other pertinent information gathered from the study. Three themes were identified for serving as instructional leaders: (a) lead through others, (b) be a model, and (c) utilize accountability measures. Table 3 shows which superintendents provided qualitative data for each theme pertaining to instructional leadership.

Table 3

The Superintendents Supporting each Theme for Serving as Instructional Leaders

Identified themes	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	S6
Lead through others	X	X	X			X
Be a model	X	X		X	X	X
Utilize accountability measures	X	X	X		X	X

Lead through others.

Four of the six participants provided descriptive data to support the theme of leading through others. Superintendent Four stated he attempted to provide leadership in such an

important area “through the development of others (principals, instructional specialists, etc.) and actively having them receive ongoing training and support” (S1). When discussing developing the capacity of their building principals and ensuring they are being instructional leaders in their own buildings, one participant described that process as vital to a superintendent serving as an instructional leader and stated, “that’s where it happens” (S2). Superintendent Three described how he leads through others by stating:

We get a lot of talk about being instructional leaders, and I think it's important. In my mind though, my true job is to be a system leader, and to empower the true instructional leaders. Let me explain what I mean by that. There are some superintendents that are in the classrooms on a daily basis. When I was at a smaller school district, I was, because I was in charge of the instructional subsystem. Whereas now, the larger the district, the more systems you have. If I'm coming from here all the way through the subsystems and dabbling in your subsystem and walking through classrooms on a frequent basis, then how am I possibly leading the overall system of the district - the academic operations, the curricular operations, all the building operations, as well as building leadership? (S3)

He summarized his statement by saying, “In my opinion, for me to be an instructional leader, I need to lead and manage by empowering the assistant superintendent of academic services” (S3).

Another participant discussed the process of serving as an instructional leader through their assistant superintendent, curriculum director, principals, assistant principals, and department heads by saying, “As a superintendent really you're teaching them almost, because they are your direct link back to the buildings” (S6). He continued by stating, “If I can do a good job with our administrative team helping them be better leaders, helping them understand better instructional practices, I indirectly help kids. I see that more as my role” (S6). Again, he

stressed the importance of developing his building administrators' instructional leadership capacity: "It's just vital that I and my two assistants train, teach, model, and help them" (S6). When discussing how this participant tries to develop the capacity of others, he stated: "If I leave, and the people underneath me are not prepared to move into other positions and they are not better, then I've failed them" (S6).

Be a model.

Five of the six participants provided descriptive data to support the theme of being a model. When discussing being an Instructional Leader, Superintendent One said, "You're trying to role model that characteristic," and continued by stating the superintendent should be "setting the tone" as the leader in this area (S1). Other participants echoed this importance, stating, "You've got to model it from the top" (S4), "Modeling is huge" (S5), and "You have to be knowledgeable about technology and current instruction and take every opportunity to lead in that" (S6). These superintendents went on to describe how they model instructional leadership for their administrative teams. Superintendent Six stated:

The other thing I think is key is modeling through your administrative team. We'll do book studies, or we may do an interactive classroom setting with our administrative team. Maybe we do a specific learning strategy, or maybe we do some type of technology, or flipped classroom, or maybe we do cooperative learning. We try to incorporate some things like that for myself and our assistants so that we can model a little bit, and also let people know that we do understand and speak the language. (S6)

He continued to address how he keeps the district focus on student learning, saying, "We're always going to talk about instruction - we're going to talk about how we perform, we're going to talk about some key points in the areas of how kids learn, and just keeping that at the forefront"

(S6). Superintendent Four discussed how their district has a focus on using technology, so he is constantly modeling that for others. He went to describe how he models instructional leadership for his administrative team:

I'll use collaborative structures during my meetings, not to just be a sit and get, but it's an interactive process. I'll develop my administrative meetings not to just be management sessions. I try to funnel those housekeeping things through email. We've even flipped our administrative meetings a few times. (S4)

Another participant stressed the importance of modeling instructional leadership in every situation, whether sending an email or leading a staff meeting. He emphasized the value of talking about instruction:

One thing that we've done for the last 4 or 5 years is a book study, and it's all about instruction. We as an administrative team, building principles, and the central office administrators, we all do a book study. We take a chapter, someone presents on it, and we have dialogue, and so we'll always be talking about instruction. (S5)

He also mentioned the value of using technology as an instructional leader to "tweet out things that are educational" (S5).

Several participants discussed how part of being a model for instructional leadership is being visible in classrooms. Superintendent Six stated, "I think getting into classrooms is also big - talking to principals and getting into the buildings" (S6). Another participant noted how visiting classrooms shows others that instruction and what happens in the classroom is important. He stated, "I am out in the classroom on a formal basis...it keeps me acquainted with what is going on" (S1). Another superintendent stressed the value in his visibility: "People need to see

me out of the foxhole and in the trenches listening to teachers and being around kids. That's where I get my energy from anyways, and that's the part of my job I enjoy the most" (S2).

Utilize accountability measures.

Five of the six participants provided descriptive data to support the theme of utilizing accountability measures. When discussing their role as an Instructional Leader, Superintendent One highlighted the importance of accountability, saying, "Periodic reviews of the district and building level results drives better instructional leadership, because what gets measured, gets done" (S1). Another participant stressed the importance of accountability and monitoring progress, stating, "We established some indicators of what success looks like, and then tracked that success and celebrated those successes along the way" (S2). Superintendent Three described how he asks questions to those in charge of subsystems to increase accountability:

How are you managing that subsystem? How are you leading it? What are your opportunities for improvement? What are your action steps? What are your fidelity measures/performance measures? What's your current dashboard to guide your individual behaviors?' To me, that's how I remain an instructional leader, and empower you in the subsystems to lead, but also have that accountability to ensure that we are always continuously improving - not micromanaging, but continuously improving. (S3)

He went on to emphasize the importance of offering support along with accountability when talking with another leader about areas of improvement:

'As the leader of that subsystem, how are we going to address that?' You come up with a plan, then our job is to support and listen to you as you monitor the plan. If you experience failure along the way, it's not 50 lashes. It's going back and saying, 'Okay, what was the opportunity for improvement? What were the action steps? Did we do what

we said we were going to do?’ In education, we're scared to death of failure. Well, failure's not okay if we allow failure to perpetuate through the entire school year, and say, 'Well that didn't work last year. We lost a whole year of students there.' Failure's okay if we have a plan set in place with formative measures to catch it, tweak it, so we learn from it. (S3)

Superintendents Five and Six emphasized using accountability measures by communicating expectations, having conversations, and looking at data. Superintendent Five explained how he holds others accountable: “Having high expectations, communicating those expectations, and holding them accountable through the evaluation process” (S5). He emphasized having ongoing dialogue with building principals by asking them, “Show us the data, what’s going on in your building” (S5)? When talking with his building principals, Superintendent Six described how he is “asking questions about what’s going on instructionally and then monitoring data to track progress” (S6).

Communicating effectively.

According to the participants in this study, communicating effectively is important for successful district-level school leadership. Superintendent One started discussing this topic by stressing the importance of effective communication for a school superintendent:

Communicating effectively is the number one leadership characteristic needed by superintendents. That’s not to suggest that other characteristics are less important, but excellence communication skills are a prerequisite for others to emerge. For example, how can a superintendent demonstrate being a visionary goal-achiever without effectively communicating the vision and goals? How can one be a champion team-builder without effectively communicating with the team? Or, how can one be a progressive change-

agent without effectively communicating the process needed to bring about those changes? Without communication, understanding is impossible, conflicts are probable, and educational process is limited. (S1)

Superintendent Six emphasized this importance stating, “Communication is absolutely vital to everything that we do” (S6). Another participant supported this idea saying, “A major component of the work we do is communication with a lot of different constituencies” (S2). He went on to discuss how effective district-level communication has its challenges in today’s social media era:

That communication piece, it has become an art. Sometimes we nail it and sometimes we don't. It's certainly a challenge. With the potential to upset somebody in our business now, and the blogs and the Facebook pages that get created and reach an audience - that’s hard to overcome. (S2)

The themes identified for communicating effectively are supported in detail below using quotes and other pertinent information gathered from the study. Four themes were identified for communicating effectively: (a) utilize interpersonal skills, (b) be proactive, (c) uses a variety of measures, and (d) deploy a communications director. Table 4 shows which superintendents provided qualitative data for each theme pertaining to effective communication.

Table 4

The Superintendents Supporting each Theme for Communicating Effectively

Identified themes	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	S6
Utilize interpersonal skills	X	X	X	X	X	X
Be proactive	X	X	X		X	X
Use a variety of methods	X	X		X		X
Deploy a communications director			X	X	X	X

Utilize interpersonal skills.

All six participants provided descriptive data to support the theme of utilizing interpersonal skills. When discussing their role as an effective communicator, Superintendent Two highlighted the importance of interpersonal skills, saying:

Those personal interactions are really important - I think more so than mass communication; although, mass communication is important as well. But I think at the end of the day it's about those intimate relationships you create with people. They need to know who you are. As John Maxwell says, 'you got to touch a heart before you ask for a hand.' When you're trying to cast a vision and trying to get things to move, people got to know that you're trying to get things to move for the right reasons. They got to believe in the leader, and they've got to believe in the vision. Having that personal connection with me, it is very important. (S2)

When discussing the different ways of communicating, Superintendent Four said, "Nothing beats face-to-face communication and being articulate and conversational with people" (S4).

Superintendent Two also stated, "Personally, I prefer face-to-face communication and small group conversations." Superintendent One added that despite the growth in technology and social media, "Face-to-face and one-on-one is still an important method of communicating with others" (S1). Superintendent Five also stressed the importance of interpersonal communication saying, "I think as a superintendent you've got to be able to talk to all kinds of people" (S5). He continued stating:

I love talking face-to-face with people and using face-to-face communication. I even have times when I've got an issue with a parent on the phone, and I'll say: 'Hey, I want to come and see where you are at on this issue.' And I'll drive out to their house and just

visit with them about what's going on. I think they appreciate that rather than just having a phone conversation. I like face-to-face communication more than anything. (S5)

Three participants specifically emphasized the importance of listening as an interpersonal communication skill, saying as a superintendent you must "listen, listen, listen" (S4), and "You've got to be a good listener and a genuine listener, really caring about what people have to say" (S5). Superintendent One stressed the importance of listening, saying, "Communication is not just one way. It's two ways – listening is important" (S1). He continued by stating, "You've got to listen your way to solutions as much as you talk your way to recommendations" (S1).

Two superintendents highlighted the role that visibility plays in supporting interpersonal communication. One participant stated superintendents must "get out of the office often, even wearing tennis shoes if necessary, in order to just get out among the people who are being served" (S1). He continued by saying, "Simply put, visibility is a part of communication and being visible reinforces the public's understanding of the superintendent's role" (S1). Another participant echoed the importance of visibility, saying, "I think taking the time to get into buildings periodically and putting it on your schedule is really important" (S6).

Be proactive.

Five of the six participants provided descriptive data to support the theme of being proactive. When discussing effective district-level communication, Superintendent Three emphasized the importance of being proactive saying, "you must make communication intentional and proactive, or else it's accidental and reactive, which essentially gets you in trouble" (S3). He went on to explain part of being proactive in communication is having a clear purpose regarding what, why, and how you are communicating with others by asking questions: "What is our purpose? What are we sending out? Is it purely informational? Are we trying to

educate? Are we trying to get feedback? How are we getting that out? What tool are we using? How are we going to measure it? (S4). He further stated:

I think we also need to dig into why we're communicating this, and then the thing that I think we miss a lot of the time is performance - fidelity. Did we do what we said we were going to do - the fidelity measures? Then, performance measures - did it work? It doesn't matter if we sent it out; if people didn't hear it or process it, and act upon it, it wasn't effective. (S3)

Another participant explained why it is important to be proactive in communication:

If you don't have good communication, people don't understand what you're trying to do. When they don't understand, they usually develop conflicts. You don't want conflicts; so you start at the beginning and you communicate so people do understand and avoid conflicts. (S1)

He continued to build upon why it is so important for a superintendent's communication to be proactive, saying:

If trust and support (both built on a foundation of effective communication) are not present, then the job becomes one of putting out fires. Firefighters are paid to be reactive; superintendents are paid to be proactive, and will likely not be retained by the school board if they consistently operate in the reaction zone. (S1)

Several participants discussed some of the challenges that arise when communication is not proactive. Superintendent One and Three both talked about how if a superintendent is not being systematic and communicating proactively, voids in communication get filled in by others (S3) and "if you don't provide the issue, somebody else will" (S1). Superintendent Two said, "Controlling the headline is really sometimes a challenge, but we try to get out ahead of things.

We try to be very proactive in that sense” (S2). He continued to emphasize the importance of being proactive and how small issues can quickly turn into bigger issues through social media: “It’s the little stuff. Sometimes it’s death by a 1,000 cuts. There’s always something out there” (S2).

Superintendent Four discussed how part of being proactive in your communication includes highlighting the positive things happening: “at least once a week we’re sending out a news release to our local media about something positive going on in our schools” (S4). Another participant also emphasized the importance of positive, proactive public relations, saying:

Good PR begins in the classroom. Parents often judge the school district based on what they hear from their children, the teachers, and what they hear from other parents.

Children are the school district’s main investors. If they go home happy, parents are happy. (S1)

Superintendent Six discussed how he strives to communicate proactively by having a consistent message:

Having a consistent message and theme in your vision statement or whatever you're trying to accomplish is really important. Making sure that you're giving that same message to all the people all the time about where we're headed, what we're doing, where we're going, and just keeping things out in the forefront. (S6)

Use a variety of methods.

Four of the six participants provided descriptive data to support the theme of using a variety of methods to communicate effectively. Superintendent Two starting discussing this topic by highlighting how the various ways superintendents communicate has changed over the past several years:

When I started in the superintendency 10 years ago, Facebook was not a factor. I used email as a primary means of communication and some print media out in the community, but it was limited press releases. But now we live in a 24/7 news cycle and your constituency base is very different. The chances that something will probably pop up today and be 'CNN worthy' are greater. (S2)

Another participant also echoed this idea, saying, "It's amazing how in the past 4 years or so how the expectations for communication have changed" (S3). He continued by saying:

The technology immigrants are now phasing out. We're now not only getting technology natives (as students), but our parents are also technology natives. They have high expectations of communication (immediate communication), but we have to make sure that we are getting appropriate communication and trying to meet that need for immediacy. (S3)

Superintendent Six supported the idea of the changing need for immediate communication, saying, "I think that electronic media's really important in today's world, because everything's so instantaneous. We're in that microwave world" (S6).

When describing the ways superintendents communicate, one participant emphasized using both traditional and modern methods of communication:

There are some old ways and there are some new ways and we can't give up on either one of them. Nothing is ever going to beat face-to-face communication and being articulate and conversational with people. Superintendents better be able to walk into a room and have a conversation. If you can't do that, if you are a total introvert, you are not going to make it as a superintendent. You have to be able to present material. You have to be

able to be articulate to a group, have some kind of energy to what you are saying, and be passionate about it. But then, how do you get the message out beyond your staff? (S4)

He continued by mentioning how he incorporates email, weekly digital newsletters, Twitter, and Facebook into the various ways that he communicates with stakeholders (S4). Superintendent Six highlighted the various methods of communication he uses, saying, “We use all the modern tools: email, Twitter, and Facebook” (S6). He continued by discussing another method of communication he utilizes:

We put out a lot of information through the administrative team. I believe strongly in the chain of command; not in a bureaucratic sense, but just making sure appropriate people have the appropriate information and that it funnels back through. (S6)

Another participant described the variety of methods of communication he uses ranging from Twitter, Facebook, and blog posts to face-to-face and small group conversations (S2). He explained one of the ways he intentionally communicates with small groups:

The other thing we started doing is I have a superintendent’s breakfast once a month and we have representation from every building and department. We have custodians and bus drivers to teachers and sometimes principals that come and have breakfast. We spend time together and talk about some of the things that are going on in the district. We go around the room and share what's going well in their building so everybody can hear what's going on system wide. The only thing I ask for people that participate in that activity is to go back and share with a few folks. They get the opportunity to share about some of the great things that are happening in other parts of the district which they may not even have been aware of before. (S2)

Superintendent One stressed the importance of having a formal communication program, saying,

“For superintendents, developing a communication program is not only a foundation for leadership, it is a critical responsibility based on the legal and moral obligation to listen to the public and to keep them informed” (S1). He then continued by listing many of the various methods of effective district-level communication: district website, community newsletter, news media relationships, community and business events, opinion surveys, speaker’s bureau, program brochures, welcome kit, citizen advisory committees, staff newsletters, board meeting highlights, staff handbooks, new employee orientations, administration study committees, superintendent’s cabinet, staff recognition/awards, staff surveys, and student advisory councils (S1).

Deploy a communications director.

Four of the six participants provided descriptive data to support the theme of deploying a communications director. When discussing effective district-level communication,

Superintendent Three stressed the importance of deploying a communications director, saying:

What’s been a game changer in probably the last, I would say, 5 years mainly, has been districts that have brought in media communications specialists. They are key to helping districts get the word out, the message out, have common messages, and they do that in very good ways. School people are not trained to do that. Some of us can do it, but to have somebody that was trained to do that, it can really help move your district to the next level. (S4)

Superintendent Five and Superintendent Six both emphasized ways their communications director helps with effective district-level communication, saying, “Our communications director puts out our digital newsletter and works closely with the media” (S5) and “We’re fortunate to have a communications director who puts out weekly, monthly, and other timely information”

(S6). Another participant discussed how every school district has a communications department but how there is value in having one person who can specifically focus on that responsibility:

We really felt the need to have a communications department. We have a one-person department (a communications director), but in my mind, every school district, no matter how large or small, has a communication department. It may be formalized or not formalized, but there is a communication process, or lack thereof. Typically, if you don't have somebody focused on that area, then you either have to be very, very gifted, or very, very organized for effective communication to take place. (S3)

Building and sustaining relationships.

According to the participants in this study, building and sustaining relationships is important for successful district-level school leadership. Superintendent Six started discussing this topic by saying, “Our success boils down to relationships at every level” (S6). He went on to discuss how building and sustaining relationships is the most important superintendent leadership practice, because it’s “the foundation upon which everything else you do gets built upon” (S6). He continued by saying: “In order for vision, collaboration, and all that to take place, there has to be trust in a leader. And I don’t think you get trust without building relationships” (S6). Another participant also emphasized the importance of building relationships and how that impacts a superintendent’s success:

I think if you were to ask any superintendent who lost their job, if they're honest, they probably would tell you that their relationships weren't as solid as they should have been - they didn't build their relationships in the right way. That will eat your lunch quicker than anything. (S2)

He went on to say, “Superintendents must practice relationship building, because it’s such a critical component” (S2).

Superintendent One described relationships as “the vehicle by which you achieve all your goals” (S1). When first discussing the importance of building and sustaining relationships, Superintendent Two explained how superintendents can develop their own “personal brand” of who they are and how they treat others. He described this personal brand as their legacy, who they are as a person, and what others say about them. He went on to say, “I think that’s a really important part – you build relationships. Really what you’re doing is building a personal brand and how you respond and react to various situations – that’s really important” (S2).

Superintendent Three discussed the value of building effective relationships, stating:

In my opinion, folks need to know me. I think there's something to be said for professional capital and personal capital. Personal capital is a lot more influential than professional capital. The foundation of personal capital is relationships; people respect the person more than the position. (S3)

He continued by saying:

In my opinion, personal capital causes people to grant you a wonderful thing called grace. If you have that personal capital, what I share with everyone is: ‘I’m going to make mistakes, no doubt. I can just make you absolutely one promise: If I make a mistake, it won’t be for lack of effort or trying to do the right thing for our kids.’ Now, that’s pretty good to say, but if you build that personal capital and they see you doing it, they’re going to believe it. (S3)

The themes identified for building and sustaining relationships are supported in detail below using quotes and other pertinent information gathered from the study. Three themes were

identified for building and sustaining relationships: (a) care about others, (b) build trust, and (c) utilize effective communication. Table 5 shows which superintendents provided qualitative data for each theme pertaining to building and sustaining relationships.

Table 5

The Superintendents Supporting each Theme for Building and Sustaining Relationships

Identified themes	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	S6
Care about others	X	X	X	X	X	X
Build trust	X	X	X	X	X	X
Utilize effective communication	X		X	X	X	

Care about others.

All six participants provided descriptive data to support the theme of caring about others. When discussing building and sustaining healthy relationships, Superintendent Six highlighted the importance of caring about others saying:

As the superintendent you have an important position, and people want to know that they mean something to you. This includes treating people like you want to be treated, saying hello, being cordial, saying thank you, being respectful, and understanding that you're just a part of the cog; you just have a different position. I think if you do that, then you can build meaningful relationships. (S6)

Superintendent Three emphasized the importance of caring for others, “because the old adage of ‘People don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care’ is true” (S3).

Another participant described this process as: “People need to know who you are; they need to know your heart” (S2).

Superintendent Five said, “It’s not hard to build relationships if you want to build relationships. You just have to genuinely talk to people and care about them” (S5). He

continued by stating, “Just be friendly and be genuine” (S5). He also further explained how he cares for others: “You have to show empathy and be empathetic. You have to be able to put yourself in other people’s shoes” (S5).

Another participant warned that superintendents can talk all day about building relationships, but until they show others they care about them, it doesn’t mean anything. He further stated:

Most relationships, not all, but most relationships happen when you help somebody. All of a sudden, when you help somebody, that turns into a relationship, because then they know that you really value them. Honestly, it’s not even when you help someone because that’s the norm. It’s when you help someone when it’s not norm. (S4)

This participant said he strives to let others know he cares about them at school but also away from school. He went on to emphasize how putting your words into action and helping others, influences the relationship you have with them:

We can talk about things all day long, but until you put into action what you say in a way that someone appreciates, it doesn’t matter: You help their child, you arrange for tutoring, you show some flexibility in your discipline policy; you name it. That’s when relationships are made, or that’s when they can be broken. (S4)

Superintendent One stressed the importance of caring for others, because “it’s a people business. You can only mandate so much, but once you get their heart behind an idea, it will spread much better than mandating” (S1). He emphasized the importance of showing people you care about them, but cautioned that “building relationships doesn’t mean you become friends with everyone” (S1).

Build trust.

All six participants provided descriptive data to support the theme of building trust.

When discussing building relationships with all stakeholders, Superintendent One emphasized the importance of building trust, saying:

A superintendent should get involved and be visible a great deal. Actively listening to others is a good beginning. Spending time with others in their area of interest is important. Having high expectations for yourself and others; then sharing those sincerely with other stakeholders, shows respect and builds the much needed trust: the foundation of any good relationship. (S1)

He further described how he builds trust:

I spend time with other people, listening to what their desires are. They're a part of the team, they've got something to say, and they should be heard and considered sincerely.

You have to be listening to understand where they're coming from. (S1)

He continued by saying, "If you treat others like you're on a mission together, that creates a sense of teamwork, commonality, and trust" (S1). Another participant discussed how he believes consistency and stability help establish trust in a leader and in their relationships:

I think being the same person every day and when people come to you with a problem, not jumping down their throat one day and the next day telling them it will be okay, is important. The same problem handled differently on two different days doesn't build trust. If you want open, honest relationships and you want good, effective communication, two important things that it takes to make good things happen for kids, then stability is critical for establishing that trust. (S2)

Superintendent Three emphasized the importance of creating a positive first impression with people, because they want to know if they can trust you. He continued by saying, “people want to know who you are and what you’re likely going to stand for” (S3).

Another participant highlighted the value of building trust when building and sustaining relationships, saying, “You must be genuine and honest with them. They don’t want a bunch of smoke and mirrors; they just want to be able to trust you” (S4). When asked how he builds meaningful relationships with all stakeholders, Superintendent Five responded with: “No question – it’s honesty. I think when people see that you’re genuine, you care about them, and you’re honest with them, they’re going to trust you” (S5). Superintendent Six described how he builds relationships with others: “We deal with one interaction at a time. Maxwell talks about it- he says leadership is influence, which really boils down to relationships, and then ultimately trust” (S6). He continued by saying:

I’ll refer to the old adage, ‘The way you live each day, is the way you live your life.’ If you take care of one thing at a time, with one person at time, treat them respectfully, treat them right, be honest with them, then over time, I think you build that trust. To me, that’s the key with building relationships. (S6)

Utilize effective communication.

Four of the six participants provided descriptive data to support the theme of utilizing effective communication. When discussing building relationships with all stakeholders, Superintendent One emphasized the importance of communicating effectively and listening to others, saying: “I think putting in the time that’s necessary to build a relationship requires listening time. Listen to the degree where they feel like they’re really being heard and that something may be done because of it” (S1). He continued to describe how he uses the

relationships he has developed with “key communicators” to be ambassadors for him and to facilitate other discussions on his behalf (S1). Another participant echoed this idea of having a list of “key communicators” with whom he strategically developed relationships. As he developed these relationships, he emphasized the need to communicate effectively with them, and how he needs to be engaged in that communication (S3).

Superintendent Five stressed the importance of conversing and listening to others as he develops relationships, stating:

It’s ongoing, genuine conversation, and it’s got to be two-way conversation. It can’t be, here’s all this stuff, and then I’m not willing to listen to you. First, it’s got to be a symmetrical, two-way conversation, and you’ve got to really care about what people have to say. (S5)

Superintendent Four and Superintendent Five both described how timely communication maintains relationships; therefore, it is important to return phone calls as soon as they can (S4, S5). Concerning effective communication and maintaining relationships, Superintendent Four said:

You call them; you don’t have to give them an answer, but you at least need to acknowledge that you got their phone call, you got their concern, and you’re working on it. Get their feedback and say ‘I’m working on it.’ Then say, ‘It may be tomorrow before I call you back, because I need to get some information.’ But you’ve got to call them; you’ve got to acknowledge them. That’s huge. (S4)

Employing collaborative and shared leadership.

According to the participants in this study, employing collaborative and shared leadership

is important for successful district-level school leadership. Superintendent Two starting discussing this topic by saying:

It is something I encourage, something I truly believe in. I like it when I don't have to always be the one to make a decision on how we get from point A to point B. The community buys into it and my staff buys into it. I'd rather come from a grass roots level than a top down level. (S2)

Superintendent Five explained why schools must be collaborative by saying, “We are in a collaborative world today” (S5). Another participant emphasized the importance of collaboration stating:

It's the nature of the way business is done today. If you can't collaborate effectively and you can't teach kids how to collaborate effectively, you're not doing your school team or your district team any good. Also, you're not doing justice to these kids, because they're going to go out in the work world and that's standard operating procedure. That's how you live, that's how you make it. (S2)

Superintendent One stressed the importance of collaboration and its positive impact on school climate and culture, saying:

Collaboration is a major contributor to good school climate and culture, because when you collaborate, you use it as people of good will getting together and sharing thoughts and ideas on behalf of the kids. Any time you're ever working towards the good of the committee, usually that gets past the point of just talk. It usually gets into the heart and soul of a good educator, and that's where attitudes are adjusted. (S1)

Another participant also emphasized the importance of collaboration and its impact on the overall school's morale and climate, saying:

When people feel like they're involved in the decision and they own part of the decision, they're a lot more likely to be an advocate for the decision. If I'm the one that has to be the voice for the decision, and it's somewhat controversial, it usually doesn't work as well. They're a lot more likely to come to the defense of the decision when they've had a piece in helping to create it. (S2)

The themes identified for employing collaborative and shared leadership are supported in detail below using quotes and other pertinent information gathered from the study. Three themes were identified for employing collaborative and shared leadership: (a) make it an embraced attitude, (b) create formal structures, and (c) use a balanced approach. Table 6 shows which superintendents provided qualitative data for each theme pertaining to employing collaborative and shared leadership.

Table 6

The Superintendents Supporting each Theme for Employing Collaborative and Shared Leadership

Identified themes	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	S6
Make it an embraced attitude	X	X	X	X	X	X
Create formal structures	X	X	X			X
Use a balanced approach	X	X		X	X	X

Make it an embraced attitude.

All six participants provided descriptive data to support the theme of making it an embraced attitude. When discussing employing collaborative and shared leadership, Superintendent One started describing this process by saying, “Collaboration needs to be an attitude, and once that attitude is embraced, it can be formalized” (S1). Superintendent Two described how some educators like to collaborate and others don't, but it's important to “make it

the way we do business here,” and the leaders sets the tone in making that happen (S2). Another participant stressed the importance of the leader setting the tone and making collaboration an embraced attitude, saying, “If you don’t model collaboration from the top, then it’s not going to be effective in your school district; that’s just the way it is in our world today” (S5).

Superintendent One emphasized the importance of making collaboration and shared decision making “the way we do business in this school district” by hiring people with a collaborative mindset:

When we hire, and in our hiring practices for the past several years, we hire people that have hearts of a servant. We specifically look for certain criteria, certain attitudes, and we've been hiring those types of people aggressively for the last several years. By doing this, we feel like it's really started to have a major impact on our school climate. People that are open to collaboration and have good intentions concerning the purpose of what an education is all about are important. (S1)

Superintendent Four described how superintendents must create a collaborative culture in the schools and establish the reputation of “we are a collaborative school” (S4). Another participant described this attitude as rallying around a culture of collaboration and making it a “part of how we do business and we all know that. Now it’s an expectation and everyone knows that” (S3).

Superintendent Six outlined how he makes collaboration and shared decision making an embraced attitude, stating:

It goes back to what you do every day. If we're going to make simple office decisions, I usually sit down with my assistant superintendents, because I want to know what they think. If it's an administrative team issue, we're going to talk through it as team. We model that. With your teacher advisory groups, you do a lot of listening; you talk it

through with them, and you get their input. I think it's just a daily process. When you do that, though, you've got to make sure that you do employ that shared decision making in the final decision. (S6)

Create formal structures.

Four of the six participants provided descriptive data to support the theme of creating formal structures. Superintendent One started describing this process by emphasizing the importance of creating structures for collaboration to occur: “Once the attitude of collaboration is embraced, then you need to slip in formal programs” (S1). He went on to describe this process by saying:

We have implemented a formal process of collaboration by putting time to do so in everyone’s contract. We also involve hundreds of people in our CSIP process that we review biannually and work on daily. Activities with PTA, chamber activities, involvement with clubs and civic organizations all foster collaboration and shared decision making. Working closely with the school board is crucial also. (S1)

Some of the other formal programs this participant incorporates for collaboration and shared decision making include: Academic Huddle, Professional Committee, and Early Out Fridays (S1).

Another participant stressed the value of putting structures in place for collaboration to occur, and noted how his district has had success using the Professional Learning Communities (PLC) model (S6). Superintendent Two described how their district developed a lot of teaming at the building level and at the district-level by “bringing in parents, community members, and others when it’s appropriate and when we can” (S2). He went on to state how teams are an

important structure for collaboration and shared decision making to occur, and “putting together highly effective teams is really important” (S2).

Superintendent Three detailed how his district takes a systems approach for creating structure in their collaboration and shared decision making, as well as the value of this process:

In my opinion, when you focus on systems thinking, you go from courageous leadership to collaborative leadership. By that I mean, if you don't have systems thinking, we don't create goals, action steps, strengths, opportunities for improvement, fidelity and performance measures. If we don't have that as part of what we do, we have courageous leadership. We have a superintendent leading by his heart, his gut, and thinking he is doing the right thing. We have assistant superintendents doing that. We have curriculum directors doing that. We have principals and assistant principals doing that. They are out there on their own. Then, if you're the leader of the subsystem and I'm hearing what you want, I may or may not want to collaborate, because I really don't know what the goal is or what our action steps are; I really don't know what the process is for my feedback. Am I going to make someone mad if I disagree? Am I going to be seen as a suck-up if I jump on board with this, because I really love it, and all my peers have their arms crossed? If we create this culture of systems thinking where we have those items that I referenced, then if I disagree with something, I'm not running the risk of making them mad because he's a courageous leader and really thinks this is right. I'm part of a continuously improving organization that has a systems approach. When we adopt this structure, if you disagree with me, and you're a principal in this organization, that's perfectly fine, because that's what we want; a continuously improving organization where we rally around this structure. That's how we get collaboration. (S3)

Use a balanced approach.

Five of the six participants provided descriptive data to support the theme of using a balanced approach. When discussing collaborative leadership, Superintendent Six described the need for a incorporating a balanced approach during collaboration:

I do believe strongly in collaborative leadership. Directive, non-directive, and then collaborative in the middle. I don't think there's any question that collaborative piece has to be 70% or 80% of what you do. But there's that 10% or 20% of the time when I need to take a more direct approach: 'We tried, but here's what we need to do, why we need to do it, and if we follow that direction, I'll be appreciative.' Then, there's times when someone will come to me, and I need to say: 'Well, you know what? I'm not going to respond to that today. I want you to take it away and think through it, and I want you to come back and tell me.' Sometimes that non-directive approach is important because you can learn from it. (S6)

He went on to say: "I think we're guilty, as leaders, we want to be problem solvers who want to solve every problem. Sometimes we need to let other people solve the problem" (S6). When describing the collaborative and shared decision making process in his district, another participant stated:

It's been mighty successful. The buck stops with me on many things, but whenever possible, I try to have the buck stop with something that was a participatory style of leadership. There's times when I have to just make a decision, so it's participatory up to a point. (S1)

Superintendent Two cautioned about needing a balance in the amount of collaboration a superintendent employs, saying, “it just takes time to build that kind of culture” and stated how he is “trying to coach and grow people to help them understand the collaborative process” (S2). Superintendent Four described why he believes there must be a balanced approach when incorporating collaborative and shared leadership:

We are a collaborative school district and people would know that. But I’ll tell you my pendulum has swung. When I first became a superintendent, I wanted to try to achieve complete buy-in for any major decision. We’d just almost kill ourselves trying to get to that point. I’d have the administrative team meetings. I’d go out to buildings and try to reinforce any of these big changes. Then, I started realizing that if you are a collaborative school, it slows down the change process dramatically. What you have to come to is a balance point that you have to decide: ‘What percentage of staff do I need to have on board in order to move forward with a decision?’ When I started, I wanted 90% of my staff to be saying, ‘That’s a great thing, we’re going to do that. I am going to work myself an extra 10 hours a week so that I can get that done.’ But to get to that point it took a lot of time, and I’m not as willing anymore to take that much time. (S4)

He continued by saying there are times when people want a direct answer from their leader: “They want some advice from a person who has a few years under their belt and that they trust. If they already had the answer, they wouldn’t be coming to you” (S4). Another participant echoed the need for balance, saying,

The collaboration has got to be genuine. You can't put a committee together and just say, ‘I want to get your input on this and you have to make a decision.’ And then you go and make your own decision later. But there are still those times when the buck stops with

me, and I've got to make a decision. But I never make a decision without gathering data. My data comes from my other two assistants or other people that are experts. (S5)

He continued by saying:

It's got to be a genuine effort to gather as much information as you can and make an educated decision based upon what the group thinks. If it's not genuine, it will not last. I tell people, 'I feel like I need to know a little bit about just about everything; but I don't have to be an expert in everything, because I've got other people around me that are those experts.' If I don't tap into the knowledge of the people around me, then I would never be effective. (S5)

Functioning as change agents.

According to the participants in this study, functioning as change agents is important for successful district-level school leadership. When discussing the change process, Superintendent One noted, "with a good attitude I found out that change is inevitable, but the pain is optional" (S1). He went on to describe being an effective change agent is "one of the most important leadership characteristics for a superintendent to possess, but it comes with risks that you got to be willing to take. Sometimes the payoff for change comes after the pain" (S1). He continued to emphasize the importance of this leadership characteristic by stating: "Being a progressive change agent is an important characteristic superintendents must have and become; especially when trying to move a district from mediocrity to excellence" (S1).

Concerning the change process, another participant stated: "I think the more trust you have, that personal capital, the more you're going to have a culture that's open to change" (S4).

When describing implementing change, Superintendent Five stated:

People will complain for a short period of time. Eventually, it's all about comfort. They feel comfortable with the way they have always done it. I tell people that all the time. They're going to complain about it for a couple of days, and then they're going to go on as part of their daily routine, and it's over. (S5)

Superintendent Four noted:

I think we're in a culture of change and teachers are much more accustomed to it and accepting of it than what they were 10 years ago. We're in this huge multi-decade mode of changing from 20th century education to whatever we think 21st century is, and we're trying to get there even though we don't know exactly what it's like. (S4)

The themes identified for functioning as change agents are supported in detail below using quotes and other pertinent information gathered from the study. Two themes were identified for functioning as change agents: (a) communicate the reason for change and use data, and (b) develop a strategy and plan. Table 7 shows which superintendents provided qualitative data for each theme pertaining to functioning as change agents.

Table 7

The Superintendents Supporting each Theme for Functioning as Change Agents

Identified themes	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	S6
Communicate the reason for change and use data	X	X	X		X	X
Develop a strategy and plan	X	X	X	X		X

Communicate the reason for change and use data.

Five of the six participants provided descriptive data to support the theme of communicating the reason for change and using data. When discussing the need to communicate the reason for the change, Superintendent Two stated, “It starts with creating that sense of

urgency and people need to know why they need to change before they're willing to change”

(S2). He continued by stressing the importance of data during this process:

I've always used data as a part of igniting that fire. I think sometimes people forget why they do what they do. And one of the things I think teachers really want to know is if they're making a difference for kids. I think good educators, when they know there's a problem, they want to fix it. (S2)

He continued by saying:

I think even beyond the data, it's the specific stories of our kids and families and some of the challenges that they have had. Success stories as well as stories that aren't so glamorous to tell. Telling those stories is a great way to create urgency, but to also build momentum and sustain momentum long term. I utilize both. (S2)

He went on to describe how data can be powerful because it helps to engage the mind, and stories are important because they engage the heart: “You got to touch the heart. Touch the heart before you ask for a hand. I lead with a story and finish it off with the data” (S2). Another participant described “communicating the need for change, raising everyone’s level of concern and excitement, and courageous follow through” as some of the key components for implementing effective change (S1). He continued by saying:

It has to be data-driven whenever possible. You need hard data, because there's plenty of anecdotal information and opinions, and those are nice and important in the right setting. But there's nothing like hard evidence that drives change. It must be data driven and set the stage for the reason for the change. Sometimes it's hard to change things, so at least give them a reason why. (S1)

Superintendent Three emphasized the importance of being transparent during the change process and encouraging others “if they don’t understand why we are doing something, to ask” (S3).

When considering implementing change, he further stated: “If we don't demonstrate the need for it and the merit for it, and we can't answer the why, we don't do it. We've got enough going on” (S3). Another participant stressed the importance of using data to support the reason for the change, because “we’re always evolving and trying to do things better” (S5). He further cautioned to avoid appeasement during this time just to make things easier in the short term (S5). Superintendent Six described the importance of showing the need for change “whether that is data driven or culturally driven” (S6).

Develop a strategy and plan.

Five of the six participants provided descriptive data to support the theme of developing a strategy and plan. When discussing how to effectively implement change, Superintendent Six stated, “Like eating an elephant: one bite at a time; slowly, strategically, and collaboratively” (S6). Before developing a plan for implementing change, this participant stressed the importance of acknowledging “you are going into a culture and a place that is bigger than you are” and deciding if your values match up with theirs (S6). He further stated:

I've gone in and tried to hit the key stakeholders: all the administrative teams, all the staff, all the board members, and community groups. I think if you do that, you start listening and collaborating; then you can figure out what is important for the culture of the school and the needs of the community. There may be some ethical things that I'm going to take a firm stand on, but there's so many things that we will fight about sometimes that to me they're not worth fighting about. (S6)

Superintendent Six emphasized the value of understanding the context of the change process and realizing “people like slow, systemic, and planned change” (S6). In order to effectively function as a change agent, Superintendent Six develops a strategy and plan, but also provided a caution with a quote he heard: “Culture eats strategy every time for breakfast.” He continued saying, “Again, you can have the greatest strategy in the world, but if you don’t build the culture and know what you’re dealing with, your strategy is not going anywhere” (S6).

When discussing how he develops his strategy for implementing change, Superintendent One stated, “Aligning the change with your vision is huge” (S1). He further described some advice he received a long time ago as a new superintendent when considering change initiatives: “Know what not to do” (S6). He continued by saying, “Learning to say ‘no’ is important. Otherwise it's sideways energy that is a waste of resources and time and could instead be spent on achieving academic excellence for your students” (S6).

Another participant noted that when developing a plan and strategy for implementing change, he includes collaboration and shared decision making as part of this process (S2).

Superintendent Four further emphasized the importance of this strategy stating:

I think the key piece for us is to have a plan and to sell it over a period of time. If you’ve communicated that two years from now we’re going to standard-based grading K through 12, then you must provide professional development and a plan of action in order to get there. (S4)

Superintendent Three described some of the key components he considers when developing a strategy or plan for implementing change:

I think everyone has to have a clear understanding of the reality: non-judgmental, here's where we are; this is what the data tells us. I think we need to have opportunity to

collaborate, regarding how are we going to address this? Then, roll out options: Here's what the data tells us. Here's our current reality. We've gone out and found best practices and here are our options. (S3)

Displaying ethical and professional behavior.

According to the participants in this study, displaying ethical and professional behavior is important for successful district-level school leadership. Superintendent Two started discussing this topic by saying, “If you don’t behave ethically, then you’re sunk, you’re done” (S2). Another participant’s first response to the importance of displaying ethical and professional behavior was: “To me it’s everything” (S5)! Superintendent Four echoed the importance of this leadership practice saying, “If we are speaking of non-negotiables, then this is the number one non-negotiable” (S4). He further explained:

I think it comes in to play with the hard decisions. Are you going to allow your football coach to use vulgarity out on the field and then turn around and discipline their athletes when they say a bad word? Are you going to allow someone to act like a fool on Facebook when they're at home on the weekends? (S4)

The themes identified for displaying ethical and professional behavior are supported in detail below using quotes and other pertinent information gathered from the study. Three themes were identified for displaying ethical and professional behavior: (a) follow your moral compass, (b) treat others well, and (c) engage in personal growth. Table 8 shows which superintendents provided qualitative data for each theme pertaining to displaying ethical and professional behavior.

Table 8

The Superintendents Supporting each Theme for Displaying Ethical and Professional Behavior

Identified themes	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	S6
Follow your moral compass	X	X	X	X	X	X
Treat others well	X	X			X	X
Engage in personal growth	X	X	X			X

Follow your moral compass.

All six participants provided descriptive data to support the theme of following your moral compass. When discussing how he displays ethical behavior, Superintendent Five started describing this process by saying, “You have to have a set of values and beliefs that guides everything you do” (S5). He continued by stating, “I’m going to make decisions based upon, in my heart and in my gut, what I think is the right thing” (S5). Another participant expanded on this idea saying, “It sounds pretty simple, but doing the right thing. I think it just comes down to that; having a moral compass and doing the right thing” (S3). He continued to emphasize the importance of following your moral compass:

Some of the best coaches I played for and worked with didn’t have any team rules.

Instead, they said: ‘Do the right thing.’ When you sit down in that chair at the end of the day, you know if you did the right thing or you didn’t do the right thing. (S3)

Superintendent Two built upon the importance of following your moral compass, saying, “The number one thing is, wake up every day and live a moral life. The ethic side is very important” (S2). Another participant emphasized the value he places on following his moral compass:

“Everyone has different ethics. Everyone has different values and morals. But I know what mine are, and I’m just not going to compromise them” (S4). He further explained:

I am not willing to allow bad people to have probably the second or third largest influence on a child that exists. The number one influence on them is their parents, number two is their peer group, and number three being their school. I'm just not going to allow it to happen. And ethics is not just a question of what you do at school; it's what you do away from school, what you do on Facebook, and what you do when you're talking to your neighbor across the road. It's all those things rolled into one. (S4)

Superintendent Six described following his moral compass as: “Again, it comes back to the core of what we talked about: just being a good person. It goes back to every little interaction: being consistent, fair, reasonable, and honest” (S6). He continued by saying:

Understanding that you're just a part of the inner cog in the wheel, you just have a different position. It's important to be the same person regardless of where you are: in closed session, in your office with the door shut, or out in public. (S6)

He further emphasized this point stating, “I'm a firm believer in what you reap is what you sow. If you do the right things, then sometimes it doesn't seem that way, but in the end, you're going to be fine” (S6).

Superintendent One listed part of his personal practices for ethical and professional behavior and “doing the right thing” as: displaying honesty and integrity, being a team player, demonstrating a strong work ethic, having high personal expectations and regard, projecting optimism, and practicing interpersonal intelligence. He further described how part of his moral compass is “keeping the wellbeing of students the fundamental value of all decision making and actions” (S1). Another participant echoed this idea, saying, “Keep the main thing, the main thing – and that's student achievement” (S3).

Treat others well.

Four of the six participants provided descriptive data to support the theme of treating others well. When discussing how he displays ethical behavior, Superintendent One said ethical leaders must “treat other people the way they want to be treated” (S1). Another participant echoed this idea saying, “Treat people the way you want to be treated, be respectful, and be humble” (S6). He continued by including:

I think it's absolutely vital that you never talk poorly about people. I believe that personally, anyway. I just think you reap what you sow, and you have to be really careful. That doesn't mean that you don't have to sit down and talk about key issues, especially with discipline or if someone's not performing. I just make it a habit, even at home, I rarely, if ever, talk about things like that. I just don't think you should. (S6)

He further added, “You have to model this ethical behavior. People watch what you do far more than what you say” (S6). When discussing ethical leadership and how he treats other people, Superintendent Two stated, “It all goes back to relationships. You can't build relationships if people don't trust you” (S2).

Another participant described ethical leadership and treating others well as, “being genuine with people and truly caring about them” (S5). He added, “All I care about is doing what's good for people” (S5). He further explained this process:

As long as I'm genuine and truly believe in my heart I'm doing the right thing, then that's all that matters. And again, it's got to be genuine. You can't act like an ethical leader and not be. It's got to really happen and be there. (S5)

Engage in personal growth.

Four of the six participants provided descriptive data to support the theme of engaging

in personal growth. When discussing how he displays professional behavior, Superintendent One noted the importance of relying on a network of peers and colleagues “that you can become intellectually intimate with” and being able to “brainstorm, collaborate, and talk openly with them” (S1). He further listed several ways he engages in personal growth: attend national conferences, read professional articles and books, continue graduate school, have a good mentor, use meditation and prayer, and have a close ally you can bounce ideas off of (S1). When listing the strategy of reading professional literature, he stated, “I think you can’t lead if you don’t read, and one must be a reader” (S1).

Another participant emphasized the value of having a close peer network, people who “sit in my seat,” to rely on, because “we all learn from each other” (S2). He described how he engages in reflection and personal growth through: quiet time every morning and spending time with his leadership team. He described this time with his leadership team:

I can share with them things I’m struggling with. I feel comfortable doing that. Just having them help me process through things is good for me as well. I meet with them on a regular basis, and we support one another in that way. (S2)

Superintendent Three described having a network of peers to talk to as “essential” and as a way to engage in personal growth (S3). He further explained:

Really, the higher you go on the chain of command, the more bosses you really have. We deal with so many different things, and although I don't have to act as fast as a building principal on some things, the repercussions are so further-reaching in this day of technology and social media. It's just so nice to be able to pick up the phone and talk to someone who has good advice to offer. (S3)

Another participant described the importance of professional behavior as the superintendent setting the tone and modeling this behavior. One way he engages in personal growth is having a network of professional colleagues he can rely on, saying, “Networking is absolutely huge in today's world. There's always someone who knows more about it than you do, and I think we need to understand that. You can always learn something from everybody that you deal with” (S6).

Navigating school politics.

According to the participants in this study, navigating school politics is important for successful district-level school leadership. Superintendent Six started discussing navigating school politics by saying:

A lot of times people want to cast that negatively, which it can be, but every relationship, or every role we're in, there are “politics,” for lack of a better term. There are the things that you have to know, the interactions, who's related to whom, what's the history and culture, what's important to this community. I think it goes back to listening, it goes back to being collaborative, it goes back to learning about and understanding culture, specifically identifying those constituencies. (S6)

He went on to discuss the importance of using common sense, picking your battles, having a little acumen, being satiable, having good dialogue, and being able to disagree without being disagreeable (S6). Another participant described this process as, “Keeping my senses wide open: reading, hearing, and listening to the political landscape effecting your world of responsibility and areas of influence” (S1). When explaining how he has increased his political awareness, Superintendent Two stated:

I'll sum it up in one statement. It's taken me awhile to figure out where I get myself in the most trouble. Politics and what's right most of the time line up pretty closely. But, sometimes you'll find yourself in the position of superintendent where the politics don't line up. What's politically right doesn't necessarily line up with what's the right thing to do for kids. When that happens, when that balance shifts and political correctness versus what's best for kids is at stake, that's when I get myself in the most trouble, because I put both feet into what's not politically correct but what's right for kids. And that's when the controversy begins. (S2)

The theme identified for displaying navigating school politics is supported in detail below using quotes and other pertinent information gathered from the study. One theme was identified for navigating school politics: (a) build strong relationships. Table 9 shows which superintendents provided qualitative data for the theme pertaining to navigating school politics.

Table 9

The Superintendents Supporting the Theme for Navigating School Politics

Identified themes	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	S6
Build strong relationships	X	X	X	X	X	X

Build strong relationships.

All six participants provided descriptive data to support the theme of building strong relationships. When discussing how he navigates school politics, Superintendent Two stressed the importance of building quality relationships with all stakeholders, because “as a superintendent you deal with controversial issues” (S2). He described how he had to deal with a difficult situation involving a local businessman who lost a bid with the school:

It had to do with a local businessmen who had done business with the school for years but lost the business. The smear campaign started immediately, and it was directed at me. But, because I had such good quality relationships out in the community with a lot of key individuals in the community, I don't want to say I was like Teflon, but what was being said about me didn't line up with what people knew about me. (S2)

He continued by saying, “Because you’re going to be dealing with political issues every day, those relationships are what’s going to determine whether or not you’re successful or whether you fail in the job” (S2). Superintendent One supported the strategy of building relationships with various stake holders to manage politics by working closely the school board, community groups, teacher associations, political leaders, and the local media (S1).

Superintendent Four and Superintendent Five both noted the importance of longevity in their current position, low school board turnover, and positive relationships with school board members as vital factors contributing to the limited local politics they have to face (S4, S5).

When describing a potentially difficult political issue he was facing, Superintendent Five stated: “I had built a relationship with all of them, so they all knew me. They knew me on a first name basis, and it went great” (S5). He continued to emphasize the important of this concept saying, “Building relationships, being honest, and being transparent are huge” (S5). When discussing how he handles local politics with his school board, Superintendent Four stated, “They will call me, because we’ve earned that relationship” (S4).

Superintendent Three emphasized the value of relying on established relationships when navigating school politics, stating, “personal capital causes people to grant you a personal thing called grace” (S3). He also stressed the importance of communicating during this process saying, “For the school board, I want to keep them informed. That goes across the board. If you

keep people informed and establish transparency, that goes a long way” (S3). Superintendent Six builds crucial relationships that help manage school politics by getting involved in local key organizations (S6). He further stated the value communication plays in maintaining relationships during this time by “getting involved and giving that constant and clear message on behalf of the school, the board, and the community about your school. I think it's really, really important” (S3). He summarized the importance of this: “It’s about trust, respect, and relationships. If you treat them right, do the right thing, and try to be honest, you will build a strong foundation to manage politics” (S6).

Effectively managing school operations.

According to the participants in this study, effectively managing school operations is important for successful district-level school leadership. Superintendent Three started discussing how he effectively manages school operations by saying, “Manage is an ugly word these days. I disagree. I think management is essential – management and leadership” (S3). Another participant stated the same idea, saying, “If you can’t be a great manager, then you can’t lead. If you can’t take care of management issues, then you will never get to the leadership component” (S4). Superintendent Six echoed the importance of both management and leadership, stating, “The really good superintendents are good at both, you have to be” (S6).

The theme identified for effectively managing school operations is supported in detail below using quotes and other pertinent information gathered from the study. One theme was identified for effectively managing school operations: (a) manage through others. Table 10 shows which superintendents provided qualitative data for the theme pertaining to effectively managing school operations.

Table 10

The Superintendents Supporting the Theme for Effectively Managing School Operations

Identified themes	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	S6
Manage through others	X	X	X	X	X	X

Manage through others.

All six participants provided descriptive data to support the theme of managing through others. When discussing how he effectively manages school operations, Superintendent Five simply stated, “It’s real simple. Hire good people, no more. If they’re not the right person, you find the right person. I don’t micromanage” (S5). He continued by saying, “We hire good administrators and then stay out of their way. That doesn’t mean they don’t call and ask for advice or something, but for the most part we just let them work” (S5). Superintendent Four also noted the importance of hiring good people and not micromanaging (S4). He further stated when he leads through others he wants to be informed of potential issues: “I don’t like surprises; so when there’s going to be a problem, you need to communicate with me. If somebody’s going to try to go over your head, I’d rather hear from you” (S4). Superintendent Five also supported this idea as he emphasized the importance of following the chain of command: “They have to go through the chain of command and the school board supports that” (S5).

Another participant described how he manages the school operations through others, stating:

I use some degree of ‘management by wondering around.’ It’s important to know your organization and work closely with your department and division leaders, especially your cabinet members and principals. You must also stay well-grounded with the school board’s expectations and communicate those expectations broadly, and where

appropriate, deeply. It's also very important when trying to move your school district from good to great to hire good people and fire those not providing the services needed.

(S1)

He further stated, "Get close to your principals. When your principals are feeling good about their efforts and their achievements, things go well" (S1). When describing hiring the right people he stated: "Encourage your supervisors not to mess around with mediocre employees. We're not perfect. Sometimes we make a mistake for one reason or another, but don't make two mistakes and keep them. Let them go; get somebody else" (S1). This superintendent also emphasized managing through others by saying, "I don't micromanage" (S1). He expanded on how he does this:

I always tell people what I want done and let them decide how to do it. They'll surprise you with their ingenuity, and often you could not tell them as well as what they come up with themselves. Tell them what to do, what to accomplish, and let how it's done be at their discretion. You give them support and remove the obstacles out of their way so they can dream big and go big, if that's their desire. (S1)

He continued by stating:

If you're wise with whom you're delegating each type of assignment to, it will surprise you how they accomplish it - as long as you're clear with what you want to accomplish. Staying out of the way is half the battle. Give them a little direction, a few suggestions, some accountability, and a lot of encouragement and support along the way, and they'll exceed your expectations more often than not. (S1)

This superintendent also described the challenge of micromanaging verses delegating tasks:

It's gotten easier as it became more successful. When you give the responsibility to others and hold yourself accountable for their successes, the results start to become obvious. When you start seeing the end product becoming better more often, then it becomes easier, because you know it works. At first, I suspect I had an attitude of, 'If you want the job done right, you got to do it yourself.' I think we all start out with some of that; but the good ones lose it quicker than the others. I found out that's just not true. It could be true on small isolated events, but you're after more than small isolated events of success. So, you have to delegate your work to the right people and then encourage them to follow through. (S1)

He summarized the value of this process, saying:

They get excited about their leadership efforts when they know they'll be appreciated. The results will speak for themselves and be worth celebrating. You get a lot more work out of people that way. It's not work to them, in all fairness, it's a rewarding experience that you'd be denying them and denying the kids from their talents if you try to hog all the how-to steps. We have to get out of the business of telling how to do it. Teach them the right way and then turn them loose (S1).

Superintendent Three described how he leads through others, stating, "I need to lead and manage by empowering others through the systems approach. I'm able to empower, but I don't micromanage" (S3). He described how he manages through the systems approach:

We have ongoing systems checks monthly through each of our systems to see how we're performing. Then, we have ongoing systems review that is really more for each semester. Is this a time we need to tweak or make a change? Then, we also implemented a dashboard. A dashboard is something that is fluid. You have two or three dashboard

indicators that you're tracking. They are your leadership behaviors that you're implementing to impact your system, your ongoing system check. This process really lends focus and drives your individual behaviors. It does two-fold: first, it allows you as the system leader to monitor your own behavior. Second, the person that your subsystem falls under, they're not micromanaging you. (S3)

Another participant explained how he effectively manages the school operations, saying, "I just let people do their work. We've got good, ethical people" (S2). He continued by stating, "Just hire good people and let them do their work. If they don't do a good job managing it, it will show up without my involvement. Then that's a conversation and that's when I usually get involved" (S2).

Superintendent Six discussed how he strives to not be a micromanager and instead develops a good team and trusts them to do their work (S6). He describes the importance of providing balance, stating, "I talk with our team about the fences: 'You know where the fence is at, and we're going to let you roam within those fences'" (S6). He further stated, "You just try to manage, balance, give people responsibility, and let them run with it unless there's an issue, and then you deal with it" (S6). He continued by saying, "Get out the way and let them do their job. Specifically define what that job is and what your expectations are" (S6). He also added, "Let people grow and learn at different stages. That's rewarding too, because you see your people grow" (S6).

Research Question Two

Research question two asked: Are there additional leadership practices that successful superintendents utilize in order to be successful district-level leaders? The researcher asked an open-ended question (see Appendix C) allowing each participant the opportunity to expand upon

any of their previous responses and to offer any additional insights concerning the leadership practices they use to ensure they are employing effective superintendent leadership. Findings from research question two are reported according to each of the six superintendents. No themes emerged pertaining to additional leadership practices that these participants utilize in order to be successful district-level leaders. However, additional insight related to school superintendent leadership was gathered from each of the participants. All participants expanded upon some of their responses to Research Question One regarding the nine effective, district-level leadership practices identified by the researcher from the literature. All participants offered additional comments regarding experiences from their school superintendent leadership.

Superintendent one.

When discussing additional important leadership practices, Superintendent One mentioned the value of making sure your finances are in order. He stated one of the key components to healthy financial management is having a good checks and balance system. Another key component to healthy financial management is ensuring you are focusing your money on what matters most, and that is student achievement (S1). This participant again acknowledged the importance of communication and mentioned strategic planning as the number one reason for the success they have experienced as a district. He added to this, saying:

Superintendents who have a well-developed vision of the future and spend their efforts in accordance with that vision, become the visionary goal achievers they must become in order to be successful leaders. Go so far as having goals that are clearly written down and shared with all stakeholders. (S1)

He noted the importance of having a “breadth of experiences” and that “superintendents don’t have to be an expert in any one thing, but need to be good in a lot of things” (S1). This

participant emphasized the need for a new superintendent to have a good entry plan and during those first couple of years to make a “good, strong impression that you’re putting this community first and that you’re a problem solver” (S1). He also suggested for building level administrators to not be in a hurry to move up the ladder to a district-level position, but instead to “get their belly full” where they are at and to make sure they “left it all on the field” before pursuing a different position. Lastly, concerning the position of school superintendent he stated: “It’s a good profession. I wouldn’t do anything different” (S1).

Superintendent two.

When discussing additional important leadership practices, Superintendent Two started by saying, “I’ve covered a lot on the relationship piece,” and again emphasized the importance of living a moral life, practicing relationship building, and finding a mentor and meeting with them regularly (S2). He also noted the value of being flexible and developing a strong work ethic. Lastly, he added, “Finding balance between your work life and personal life is really important” (S2). He expanded on this saying, “sit down with your spouse and establish some parameters around what your work schedule is going to look like” (S2).

Superintendent three.

When discussing additional important leadership practices, Superintendent Three stated he believed he had already discussed most of the leadership practices he uses to be an effective school superintendent. He additionally commented on the increasing challenge he faces as lawmakers become more involved in creating new policies for public education and the value of surrounding your staff with good people (S3). This participant offered advice to those new to the profession of school superintendent by emphasizing the importance of listening, being humble, engaging in professional learning, developing a strong peer network, and “working in

organizations that have leaders that are folks you want to learn from, folks you want to become more like, that helped me tremendously” (S3).

Superintendent four.

When discussing additional important leadership practices, Superintendent Four again commented on the importance of incorporating balance and relying on relationships while managing the school district:

Sometimes I'm a control freak. I really have to fight that all the time, because I want to have my thumb on lots of things. At the same time I know that if I try to do that, then it's not going to be the most efficient and effective way that it can be done. I cannot be in all things. I have to trust my people and sometimes that's a real struggle. You never want to cut a principal's legs out from under them, but at the same time you are the leader of the district and ultimately responsible. Your years of expertise and relationships come into play with that, so knowing when to assert and not to assert is huge. (S4)

This participant mentioned how he supports his staff saying, “When things are bad, you better be there and be the leader. When things are good, let everybody else take the credit for it” (S4).

Superintendent Four again stated he believed one of the most important leadership practices is displaying ethical leadership:

If you don't have ethics, you have nothing, zero. You won't get anything done. You won't be able to improve your school district if people question you, because you're not a good person. It overshadows everything. You can be the best educator in the world, but if they think you're not ethical, they don't care what you have to say. (S4)

This participant again emphasized the importance of finding a mentor to engage in personal growth. He went on to describe the high workload of a superintendent and the large amount of

time and energy it takes to be successful in the job. He followed this up by saying, “I love my job, and I love the people I work with” (S4). Lastly, he stated:

Everybody has one of their favorite leadership sources. Mine will always be ‘The Prince’ by Machiavelli written in the 16th Century. Machiavelli said there’s two ways to lead. Number one, you can lead through fear; or number two, you can lead through love. Both can be effective; but when the country next door attacks, if you’ve led through fear, if you basically say, ‘You go out there and fight that army, or I’m going to cut your head off’ they’ll run to another country and try to find a new king. If you’ve led through love and the other country attacks from next door, those people will go out there and say, ‘Nobody is touching our kingdom.’ They’ll fight the battle. That’s very simplistic of what Machiavelli says, but that’s the gist of it. If you serve others, develop relationships, utilize great ethics, have good communication skills, develop vision and planning, and you put all those things together, people will love you because of it; and because they can trust you and you’re always consistent in what you do and say. They’ll fight battles all day long for you, and they’ll sing your praises. It all just comes back to that. (S4)

Superintendent five.

When discussing additional important leadership practices, Superintendent Five started by stating:

This is my practice. I love people. I love kids. I love talking to people. When I’m asked to speak at a function, I’m there. I do those things, but the best basketball officials are the ones when the game’s over, no one knows you were there; I kind of take on that same philosophy as a superintendent. I like being low key; show up just like I’m anybody else. Be friendly, be genuine, and all those things. (S5)

This participant used the analogy of a good coach, saying, “When the game goes well, they're praising their players, they're praising their assistant coaches, or praising others. When things go bad, they take responsibility. That's how I do it. That's what good leaders do” (S5). He also added, “Now that doesn't mean you don't go behind closed doors just like those coaches do and address things as needed” (S5). He further explained how he supports others:

I tell our board ‘I will protect you. You are not going to be the one who take the heat in this community, I will.’ That's pretty open, and I do the same thing with my principals too. They're not going to get thrown into the dust. I'll take the responsibility for it; I'll take the heat for it. If something really good happens, then I'll tell them: ‘Hey, you need to thank the board for that, thank the principal, or whoever.’ That's just being a good coach and a good leader. (S5)

He again emphasized the importance of ethics and having courage, displaying empathy, listening, and caring for others (S5). He added, “It's a good job, but it is demanding and you're never going to get away from it” (S5). Lastly, he emphasized the importance of personally staying physically, emotionally, and financially healthy, making good decisions, and taking time for your family (S5).

Superintendent six.

When discussing additional important leadership practices, Superintendent Six first stated:

I think we've talked about it all. I would say you have to be adaptable. I think within a school you have to be collaborative, we've talked about that. Thirty years ago, in the industrial model, it was top down; people didn't think about it. It's not that way anymore. It's again that balance: people want someone that's decisive, that's strong, and that can

make decisions; but they also want someone that they can respect, that they can have a relationship with, they can trust, and that will include them in large decisions in the organization. (S6)

He added, “I think it's a tougher job than it used to be in a lot of ways, and I think technology plays a big part in that” (S6). He further stated how parts of the job will never change, because you are always going to be dealing with people. He went on to discuss a book he had read and how it mentioned from its research the number one characteristic people admire in a leader is honesty. He built on this concept saying:

Even if the news is bad, people want someone they can trust, that's going to be honest, and someone that's ethical. That's really important to people. They may not agree with us, but they know we're making the best decision we can make; we're going to be fair about it, open about it, and honest about it. I don't think that's ever going to change, regardless of the tools, and all the technology, and everything else. (S6)

This participant again stressed the importance of relationships and their impact on school superintendent leadership saying, “I would say relationships are the big foundation, because they build trust that allows you to do all the operational stuff” (S6). Lastly, he offered the following advice to new superintendents: never abandon your principles, don't get too caught up in your opinions, be strategic and visionary, and rely on a network of trusted colleagues (S6).

Summary

The main objectives of this study were to determine how successful school superintendents in Southwest Missouri carry out effective, research based leadership practices, and to discover if there are additional leadership practices these superintendents utilize to be effective school leaders. Chapter 4 presented the analysis of the data. It also included a

description of the six participating superintendents. The results of the study were generated from analyzing the descriptive data from the interviews with each of the purposely selected participants. The data was analyzed by the researcher and presented according to each research question. Each theme identified in the study was supported in detail using quotes and other pertinent information gathered from the participants. The participants provided valuable insight concerning how they carry out each of the nine research-based leadership practices, as well as other pertinent information about their superintendent leadership. The descriptive data resulting from the interviews was used to answer the two research questions for this study. Chapter 5 will include the conclusions and recommendations of the study.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Increasing local, state, and federal demands for high academic achievement levels for all students have changed the landscape of school accountability and have brought a renewed emphasis on the importance of educational leadership (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003). As the chief executive officer and the person ultimately held accountable for the success of the school district, school superintendents must have an understanding of what constitutes effective leadership and be able to implement that leadership in their daily practices. While facing increasing public scrutiny, school district leaders must respond to a variety of demands, efficiently allocate and manage resources and personnel, promote student achievement, ensure federal guidelines and standards are being met, and develop relationships with various stakeholders.

The problem addressed in this study is school superintendents may not be successful in leading their school districts and responding appropriately to the challenges they face if they do not effectively utilize research-based leadership practices. The purpose of this study was to determine how successful school superintendents carry out effective, research-based leadership practices, and to discover if there are additional leadership practices these superintendents utilize to be effective school leaders. The theoretical framework for this study is the following nine leadership practices gleaned from the comprehensive review of literature pertaining to effective school superintendent leadership: (a) establishing and promoting a school vision, (b) serving as instructional leaders, (c) communicating effectively, (d) building and sustaining relationships, (e) employing collaborative and shared leadership, (f) functioning as change agents, (g) displaying ethical and professional behavior, (h) navigating school politics, and (i) effectively managing

school operations. These nine leadership practices form the basis of the interview guide and serve as the structure for exploring “how” successful superintendents are effective leaders.

The following research questions guided the overall direction of the study:

- 1.) “How” do successful superintendents carry out effective, research-based leadership practices?
- 2.) Are there additional leadership practices that successful superintendents utilize in order to be effective, district-level leaders?

This study explored how superintendents in the Southwest Region of Missouri who were identified as successful school leaders carry out the nine research-based leadership practices. The study incorporated qualitative methodology using in-depth, semi-structured interviews to gather the perceptions of the purposefully selected participants. Descriptive data was collected from the interviews and analyzed using constant comparative analysis. Themes emerged as the data was analyzed to determine the results of the research.

The main results of the research include the 24 themes that emerged from the descriptive data pertaining to each of the nine research-based leadership practices, and that no other themes emerged pertaining to additional leadership practices that successful superintendents utilize as effective leaders. The following four themes emerged pertaining to establishing and promoting a school vision: (a) assess current reality and define beliefs, (b) incorporate collaboration, (c) utilize strategic planning, and (d) align actions with the vision. The following three themes emerged surrounding serving as instructional leaders: (a) lead through others, (b) be a model, and (c) utilize accountability measures. The following four themes emerged pertaining to communicating effectively: (a) utilize interpersonal skills, (b) be proactive, (c) use a variety of methods, and (d) deploy a communications director. The

following three themes emerged surrounding building and sustaining relationships: (a) care about others, (b) build trust, and (c) utilize effective communication. The following three themes emerged pertaining to employing collaborative and shared leadership: (a) make it an embraced attitude, (b) create formal structures, and (c) use a balanced approach. The following two themes emerged surrounding functioning as change agents: (a) communicate the reason for change and use data, and (b) develop a strategy and plan. The following three themes emerged pertaining to displaying ethical and professional behavior: (a) follow your moral compass, (b) treat others well, and (c) engage in personal growth. The following theme emerged surrounding navigating school politics: (a) build strong relationships. The following theme emerged pertaining to effectively managing school operations: (a) manage through others.

Conclusions

The two research questions guiding this study were fully addressed through the collection and analysis of the descriptive data. First, the data revealed how successful school superintendents employ the nine effective, research-based leadership practices identified by the researcher from the literature. Second, the data identified no additional leadership practices that successful school superintendents utilize in order to be effective district-level leaders. The results of this study were interpreted while considering the overall set of results, the relevant literature, the theoretical framework, and the limitations of the study.

The overall findings from this study support the notion that effective leaders employ a certain set of leadership practices that are valuable in most educational settings (Bredeson et al., 2011; Kouzes & Posner, 2007; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003). All the participants in this study utilized the nine effective district-level leadership practices identified in the literature (S1; S2; S3; S4; S5; S6). Furthermore, the data identified common strategies concerning how the

participants carried out each of the leadership practices. The strategies are the themes that emerged during the analysis of the data. During this study, the themes emerging pertaining to effective school leadership were also interpreted through the review of applicable literature and the theoretical framework of the study. Conclusions were reached by comparing what the relevant literature says with the descriptive data gained from the superintendent interviews. The researcher determined if a minimum of four out of the six participants provided descriptive data for each theme, and it is supported by previous related research, then it is reasonable to conclude that is a strategy for “how” successful school superintendents carry out that leadership practice. The conclusions pertaining to each theme are presented in this section and reported according to each of the nine leadership practices.

Establishing and promoting a school vision.

Previous research (Bredeson et al., 2011; Forner et al., 2012; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003; NSPRA, 2005; Portis & Garcia, 2007; Waters & Marzano, 2006) and research findings from this study (S1; S2; S3; S4; S5; S6) indicate successful school superintendents establish and promote a school vision. When superintendents promote the district’s vision and goals and inspire others to reach for ambitious goals, they positively impact student learning (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003; Waters & Marzano, 2006). Successful school superintendents establish and articulate a school’s vision that focuses on student learning (S1; S3; S5).

Assess current reality and define beliefs.

When establishing and promoting a school vision, successful school superintendents incorporate the strategy of assessing current reality and defining beliefs. Five out of the six participants in this study incorporate this strategy, and all five of these superintendents stressed the importance of this strategy as one of the first things a superintendent should do when starting

to establish and promote a school vision (S2; S3; S4; S5; S6). During this process, successful superintendents have a clear, deliberate articulation of the vision and goals and the desired culture for the district (Portis & Garcia, 2007). Effective superintendents must define what is important to the school district and why it is important (S4; S5; S6), and obtain an accurate picture of the current situation before casting a school's vision for the future (S2; S3).

Incorporate collaboration.

Successful school superintendents utilize the strategy of incorporating collaboration when establishing and promoting a school vision. Four out of the six participants in this study incorporate this strategy (S1; S2; S4; S6). Successful leaders inspire a shared vision by envisioning exciting and ennobling possibilities, collaborating with stakeholders, and enlisting others in a common vision (Kouzes & Posner, 2007). Effective district level leaders develop actions plans through open dialogue, collaboration, and teamwork with members of the community (S1) and the school board (S4), foster healthy relationships and trust to enable a collaboratively developed vision (S2), and include all stakeholders during this process to enhance buy-in for the vision (S6).

Utilize strategic planning.

When establishing and promoting a school vision, successful school superintendents include the strategy of utilizing strategic planning. Four of the six participants in this study incorporate this strategy (S1; S3; S4; S6), and one superintendent listed strategic planning as the number one factor contributing to the success of their district (S1). During this process, successful school superintendents establish non-negotiable goals for achievement and instruction, develop expectations that drive reform in the district, convey their expectations for quality and high performance, and help others to see the challenging nature of the goals being

pursued (Forner et al., 2012; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003; Waters & Marzano, 2006). Effective district-level leaders strategically develop and promote the vision (S4; S6), and include systems thinking (S3) and accountability measures during this process (S1).

Align actions with the vision.

Successful school superintends utilize the strategy of aligning actions with the vision when establishing and promoting a school vision. All of the participants in this study incorporate this strategy (S1; S2; S3; S4; S5; S6). Effective school superintendents develop and articulate a vision and clear direction for the district and ensure that the actions of each school in the district align with that vision (Bredeson et al., 2011; Portis & Garcia, 2007). Effective district level leaders revisit the vision as decisions are made throughout the year (S4; S5; S6) and align their actions and vision with the needs of the community (S2).

Serving as instructional leaders.

Previous research (Bredeson & Kose, 2007; Cambom-McCabe et al., 2005; Forner et al., 2012; Laub, 2010; Peterson & Barnett, 2005; Rallis et al., 2006; Richard & Kose, 2008; Waters & Marzano, 2006) and research findings from this study (S1; S2; S3; S4; S5; S6) emphasize the importance of instructional leadership for school superintendents and indicate successful school superintendents serve as instructional leaders. Effective school superintendents must continue to display people skills, high moral character, and general leadership skills; however, increasing accountability demands that focus on student achievement are requiring superintendents to be much more focused on providing instructional leadership (Bredeson & Kose, 2007; Rallis et al., 2006; Richard & Kose, 2008). Effectively providing instructional leadership is now one of the key components of successful school superintendent leadership (S1; S2; S4).

Lead through others.

When serving as an instructional leader, successful school superintendents utilize the strategy of leading through others. Four of the six participants in this study utilize this strategy (S1; S2; S3; S6). Superintendents can indirectly influence student learning by focusing on practices that positively influence the behavior of principals and teachers (Hoyle et al., 2005; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003; Monk & Littleton, 2006). A superintendents' greatest leverage point for improving teaching and learning is the development of their building principals (Camborn-McCabe et al., 2005). Effective district-level leaders serve as instructional leaders by developing and empowering other administrators and instructional coaches (S1; S2; S3; S4) and providing them with ongoing support and training (S1; S6).

Be a model.

Successful school superintendents incorporate the strategy of being a model when serving as an instructional leader. Five of the six participants in this study incorporate this strategy (S1; S2; S4; S5; S6). Superintendents model instructional leadership by being highly visible in classrooms (EWA, 2003), staying current with best professional practices, and helping create conditions for professional growth in others (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003). Effective district-level leaders set the tone by modeling instructional leadership to their administrative teams (S1; S4; S5; S6), remaining knowledgeable about current technology and instruction (S5; S6), and visiting classrooms (S1; S2; S6).

Utilize accountability measures.

When serving as an instructional leader, successful school superintendents include the strategy of utilizing accountability measures. Five of the six participants in this study include this strategy (S1; S2; S3; S5; S6). Successful school superintendents evaluate and monitor

instructional progress (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003; Peterson & Barnett, 2005) and encourage school board members, other administrators, and themselves to measure success only by the standard of how well their students are achieving (EWA, 2003). Effective district-level leaders track performance data and incorporate periodic reviews of district and building results (S1; S3; S6), establish indicators for success (S2), communicate high expectations for academic performance (S5), and ask building administrators questions pertaining to instruction and performance data (S3; S5; S6).

Communicating effectively.

Previous research (Goens, 2009; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003; McCullough, 2009; NSPRA, 2006) and results from this study (S1; S2; S3; S4; S5; S6) indicate successful school superintendents communicate effectively. Successful school superintendents in previous research cited good communications as an integral ingredient in superintendent success (NSPRA, 2006). Effective communication with a variety of stakeholders is vital for the success of school superintendents (S2; S6). The need for good communication is a key component in superintendent leadership, because it is essential for high student achievement and every other aspect of the school system (McCullough, 2009; NSPRA, 2006; Waters & Marzano, 2006). Effective communication is one of the most important leadership characteristics needed by superintendents, and is often a prerequisite for other leadership practices to emerge (S1).

Utilize interpersonal skills.

Successful school superintendents incorporate the strategy of utilizing interpersonal skills when communicating effectively. All six participants in this study incorporate this strategy (S1; S2; S3; S4; S5; S6). Effective superintendent communication skills include interpersonal skills, good listening skills, building positive relationships, being genuine, and leading by example

(McCullough, 2009; NSPRA, 2006). Effective district-level leaders maximize personal interactions (S1; S2; S4; S5), listen genuinely (S1; S4; S5) and enhance their visibility among various stakeholders (S1; S6) in order to communicate effectively.

Be proactive.

When communicating effectively, successful school superintendents incorporate the strategy of being proactive. Five of the six participants in this study incorporate this strategy (S1; S2; S3; S5; S6). When communicating with stakeholders, a pro-active approach is essential, because it builds trust (McCullough, 2009). Effective district-level leaders ensure communication is intentional and proactive (S1, S2, S3), understand good public relations begin in the classroom (S1), and promote a positive and consistent message (S4, S6).

Use a variety of methods.

Successful school superintendents include the strategy of using a variety of methods when communicating effectively. Four of the six participants in this study include this strategy (S1; S2; S4; S6). In a previous study on successful school superintendent communication (NSPRA, 2006), superintendents stressed the importance of communicating student achievement goals, requirements, and expectations with staff, parents, and students; community engagement; and celebrating successes. Although the review of literature for this study did not reveal using a variety of methods as a specific strategy for effective communication, it could possibly be inferred these superintendents would list this strategy as a way to increase their effectiveness in communicating the aforementioned activities. Effective district-level leaders use communication methods ranging from face-to-face and small group conversations to various technology tools, including email, blog posts, digital newsletters, Facebook, and Twitter (S1; S2; S4; S6).

Deploy a communications director.

When communicating effectively, successful school superintendents utilize the strategy of deploying a communications director. Four of the six participants in this study utilize this strategy (S3; S4; S5; S6). Effective district-level communication includes developing strategic communication plans (McCullough, 2009; NSPRA, 2006). Although the review of literature for this study did not reveal deploying a communications director as a specific strategy for successful school superintendent leadership, it could possibly be inferred these strategic communication plans are developed through the help of a communications director. Effective district-level leaders develop a formalized communication plan facilitated by a communications director (S3; S4; S5; S6).

Building and sustaining relationships.

Previous research (Goens, 2009; Kelleher & Van Der Bogart, 2006; Philips & Philips 2007; NSPRA, 2006; Richard & Kuse, 2008) and the results from this study (S1; S2; S3; S4; S5; S6) indicate successful school superintendents build and sustain meaningful relationships. The quality of their relationships figures prominently in how satisfied and how effective a leader is at their work (Bolman & Deal, 2008; Maxwell, 1993; Kouzes & Posner, 2007). The success of effective school superintendents is determined by the quality of the relationships they develop with all stakeholders (S2; S6). Building and maintaining relationships are contributing factors to how some superintendents get vastly different results (NSPRA, 2006; Philips & Philips, 2007). Influence is the heart of leadership, and relationships are the avenue through which leaders influence others (S1; S3).

Care about others.

When building and sustaining relationships, successful school superintendents utilize the strategy of caring about others. All six participants in this study utilize this strategy (S1; S2; S3; S4; S5; S6). As they build relationships, effective leaders support others by showing consideration, acceptance, and concern for someone's needs and feelings (Yukl, 2006). Effective district-level leaders show empathy, respect, and friendliness toward others (S2; S3; S5; S6); are genuine and treat others the way they want to be treated (S1; S5; S6); and help others when the opportunity arises (S4).

Build trust.

Successful school superintendents incorporate the strategy of building trust when establishing and maintaining healthy relationships. All of the six participants in this study incorporate this strategy (S1; S2; S3; S4; S5; S6). Effective school superintendents establish trust and meaningful relationships with others, both inside and outside of their organization (Bredeson et al., 2011). Effective district-level leaders increase their visibility and actively listen to others (S1), create positive first impressions (S3), and daily display consistency and honesty through each interaction (S2; S4; S5; S6). Trust is the foundation of successful superintendents' relationships (S1; S6).

Utilize effective communication.

When building and sustaining relationships, successful school superintendents include the strategy of utilizing effective communication. Four of the six participants in this study utilize this strategy (S1; S3; S4; S5). Developing interpersonal skills and emotional intelligence are vital, because relationships are a central element in the daily life of a leader (Bolman & Deal, 2008; Maxwell, 1993). Effective district level leaders invest time listening to others (S1; S5),

display interpersonal skills (S3), employ timely communication (S4; S5), and develop others as “key communicators” (S1; S3).

Employing collaborative and shared leadership.

Previous research (EWA, 2003; Kelleher & Van Der Bogert, 2006; Laub, 2010; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003; Richard & Kruse, 2008) and findings from this study (S1; S2; S3; S4; S5; S6) indicate successful school superintendents employ collaborative and shared leadership. Effective superintendents believe in employing collaboration and shared decision making (S2; S5; S6), and emphasize the impact this process has on a school’s climate and culture (S1; S2). School superintendents enhance the performance and climate of their district by providing opportunities for staff to participate in decision making about issues that affect them (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003)

Make it an embraced attitude.

Successful school superintendents utilize the strategy of making it an embraced attitude when employing collaborative and shared leadership. All of the six participants in this study utilize this strategy (S1; S2; S3; S4; S5; S6). As schools evolve as professional learning communities and emphasize the importance of shared goals and effort, effective superintendents promote and embrace this attitude of cooperation and assist others to work together toward common goals (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003). Effective district-level leaders set the tone, model collaboration (S1; S2; S3; S4; S5; S6), and hire staff who embrace collaboration (S1).

Create formal structures.

When employing collaborative and shared leadership, successful school superintendents incorporate the strategy of creating formal structures. Four of the six participants in this study incorporate this strategy (S1; S2; S3; S6). Effective school superintendents encourage

collaboration through building a trusting environment and creating structures such as professional learning communities (Weast, 2008; DuFour, 2004). Effective district-level leaders put together highly effective teams (S3) and implement formal collaboration processes (S1; S2; S6) and systems thinking (S3).

Use a balanced approach.

Successful school superintendents include the strategy of using a balanced approach when employing collaborative and shared leadership. Five of the six participants in this study utilize this strategy (S1; S2; S4; S5; S6). Effective superintendents practice a balanced style of collaborative leadership that includes top-down practices of articulating core values and establishing expectations for accountability methods, and bottom-up practices of including all stakeholders and developing leadership in others (Kelleher & Van Der Bogert, 2006). Effective district-level leaders employ genuine collaboration and shared decision making when appropriate, but incorporate balance with a more direct approach when needed (S1; S2; S4; S5; S6).

Functioning as change agents.

Previous research (Fullan, 2010; Kelleher & Van Der Bogart, 2006; Kotter, 2002; Laub, 2010; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003; Portis & Garcia, 2007; Reeves, 2009; Waters & Marzano, 2006) and the findings from this study (S1; S2; S3; S4; S5; S6) indicate successful school superintendents function as effective change agents. Leading change is one of the most important and difficult leadership responsibilities (Yukl, 2006). Serving as an effective change agent comes with risks, but is one of the most important leadership characteristics for a superintendent to possess, especially when trying to move a district from mediocrity to excellence (S1).

Communicate the reason for change and use data.

When functioning as effective change agents, successful school superintendents incorporate the strategy of communicating the reason for change and using data. Five of the six participants in this study incorporate this strategy (S1; S2; S3; S5; S6). It is essential for superintendents to create a sense of urgency, use data to drive systemic change, and to communicate the vision and reason for the change initiative (Fullan, 2010; Portis & Garcia, 2007; Reeves, 2009). Effective district-level leaders communicate a sense of urgency and the reason for change (S1; S2; S6), establish transparency surrounding the reason for change (S3), and tell stories and use data (S1; S2; S5) in order to continually improve and promote necessary change.

Develop a strategy and plan.

Successful school superintendents utilize the strategy of developing a strategy and plan when functioning as effective change agents. Five of the six participants in this study utilize this strategy (S1; S2; S3; S4; S6). Effective change agents create short-term wins, think systemically, and develop strategic plans (Fullan, 2010; Kotter, 2002; Portis & Garcia, 2007; Reeves, 2009). Effective district-level leaders implement change slowly and strategically (S3; S4; S6), and develop a plan for the change that includes collaboration and shared decision making (S2), aligning the change with the school vision (S1), and considerations for the current school's culture and values (S6).

Displaying ethical and professional behavior.

Previous research (Goens, 2009; Laub, 2010; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003; NSPRA, 2006; Thomas & Brainbridge, 2001) and the results from this study (S1; S2; S3; S4; S5; S6) indicate successful school superintendents display ethical and professional behavior. Successful school

superintendents believe one of the most important leadership practices is displaying ethical and professional behavior (S2; S4; S5).

One of the top four skills listed by recognized superintendents as important skills to the success of their job was displaying high moral and ethical character (NSPRA, 2006).

Follow your moral compass.

When displaying ethical and professional behavior, successful school superintendents incorporate the strategy of following your moral compass. All six participants in this study incorporate this strategy (S1; S2; S3; S4; S5; S6). Leaders should be deeply reflective and profoundly explicit about core values and beliefs (Bolman & Deal, 2008; Kouzes & Posner, 2007). Moral leadership starts with clarifying your values and finding a set a guiding principles and ideals (Kouzes & Posner, 2007). Effective district-level leaders develop a core set of values that helps them ‘do the right thing’ (S1; S3; S5), remain diligent in following their values (S4), and strive daily to live a moral life (S2; S6).

Treat others well.

Successful school superintendents utilize the strategy of treating others well when displaying ethical and professional behavior. Four of the six participants in this study utilize this strategy (S1; S2; S5; S6). Successful superintendents show respect for their staff and concern for their individual feelings and needs (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003). Displaying ethical behavior includes treating others with fairness, dignity, and respect (Kouzes & Posner, 2007; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003; Maxwell, 1993). Effective district-level leaders model how to treat others well by ‘treating others the way you want to be treated’ (S1; S6), develop meaningful, trusting relationships (S2), and act with genuine care towards others (S5).

Engage in personal growth.

When displaying ethical and professional behavior, successful school superintendents include the strategy of engaging in personal growth. Four of the six participants in this study incorporate this strategy (S1; S2; S3; S6). Some strategies for engaging in personal growth for school superintendents include: asking other leaders for advice (NSPRA, 2006; Laub, 2010); surrounding themselves with a team of bright, energetic, and optimistic subordinates and colleagues (Laub, 2010; Maxwell, 1993); developing a network of professional peers (Bolman & Deal, 2008; Laub, 2010); and including reflection and deliberate practice at learning new behaviors (Kelleher & Van Der Bogert, 2006). Effective district-level leaders rely on a network of colleagues (S1; S2; S3; S6), spend time with their leadership team (S2), spend time alone in personal reflection (S1; S2) and attend conferences, read professional literature, and find a good mentor (S1) in order to grow personally and professionally.

Navigating school politics.

Previous research (Ball, 2012; Bolman & Deal; 2008; Bredeson et al., 2011; EWA, 2003; Yukl, 2006) and the findings from this study (S1; S2; S3; S4; S5; S6) indicate successful school superintendents effectively navigate school politics. Effective superintendents use politics to bring about change, leverage their relationships with school board members, and have the political will and personal commitment to stay the course (Ball, 2012; EWA, 2003; Mountford, 2004). When dealing with school politics, successful school superintendents consider the existing culture (S6), keep their senses wide open (S1), and do what's best for kids (S2).

Build strong relationships.

Successful school superintendents utilize the strategy of building strong relationships in order to effectively navigate school politics. All six participants in this study utilize this strategy

(S1; S2; S3; S4; S5; S6). Successful school superintendents who effectively manage the political climate employ the following strategies: (a) develop strong relationships with board members and other key stakeholders, (b) provide their school board with information required to develop realistic expectations and make informed decisions, (c) utilize board members to inform the general public, and (d) use various media outlets to manage public perception (Bredeson et al., 2011). Effective district-level leaders build strong relationships with all stakeholders (S1; S2; S3; S4; S5; S6), focus on informing the school board and maintaining those relationships (S1; S3; S4; S5), and establish positive connections with the media (S1).

Effectively managing school operations.

Previous research (Kelleher & Van Der Bogert, 2006; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003; NSPRA, 2006) and the results from this study (S1; S2; S3; S4; S5; S6) indicate successful school superintendents effectively manage school operations. Successful superintendents lead the district by managing the finances, facilities, and personnel (Kelleher & Van Der Bogert, 2006). Successful school superintendents must be effective managers and leaders (S3; S4; S6).

Manage through others.

When effectively managing school operations, successful school superintendents utilize the strategy of managing through others. All six participants in this study utilize this strategy (S1; S2; S3; S4; S5; S6). Successful school superintendents who effectively manage school operations incorporate the following strategies: delegating tasks to others (Laub, 2010); placing people in the right roles and relationships (Bolman & Deal, 2008); recognizing that people are their most important asset (Bolman & Deal, 2008; Maxwell, 1993); and having the courage and conviction to replace ineffective faculty and staff (Laub, 2010). Effective district-level leaders hire good people and get out of their way (S1; S2; S4; S5; S6), strive to delegate tasks, empower

others, and not micro-manage them (S1; S3; S4; S5; S6), stay informed and follow the chain of command (S4; S5), tell others the ‘what’ but not the ‘how’ while accomplishing tasks (S1), and replace people who are not providing the level of services required (S1).

Conclusions from this study were interpreted from the data gathered from the interviews and the review of relevant literature. When examining the 24 strategies listed in this study, 22 of the 24 strategies were directly supported by previous research. Of the 24 strategies listed in this study, nine of the strategies were supported by four participants, seven of the strategies were supported by five participants, and eight of the strategies were supported by all six participants. The following similar strategies could merit additional attention from school leaders, because they support multiple leadership practices: (a) lead through others and manage through others, (b) care about others and treat others well, and (c) utilize strategic planning and develop a strategy and plan. The similar strategies of ‘lead through others’ and ‘manage through others’ support the leadership practices of ‘serving as instructional leaders’ and ‘effectively managing school operations.’ The similar strategies of ‘care about others’ and ‘treat others well’ support the leadership practices of ‘building and sustaining relationships’ and ‘displaying ethical and professional behavior.’ Lastly, the similar strategies of ‘utilize strategic planning’ and ‘develop a strategy and plan’ support the leadership practices of ‘establishing and promoting a school vision’ and ‘functioning as change agents.’

When examining the nine leadership practices outlined in this study, the following four practices may deserve extra focus from school superintendents, because the participants mentioned their importance and because they impact other leadership practices: (a) communicating effectively, (b) building and sustaining relationships, (c) displaying ethical and professional behavior, and (d) employing collaborative and shared decision making. The

leadership practice of ‘communicating effectively’ was listed by a participant (S1) as one of the most important leadership characteristics needed by superintendents and as a prerequisite for other leadership practices to emerge. Additionally, the data reveals this leadership practice supports the leadership practices of ‘building and sustaining relationships’ and ‘functioning as change agents.’ The leadership practice of ‘building and sustaining relationships’ was emphasized by two participants as one of the leadership practices that determines the success of school superintendents (S2; S6). Additionally, the data reveals this leadership practice supports the leadership practice of ‘navigating school politics.’ The leadership practice of ‘displaying ethical and professional behavior’ was discussed by three participants as being one of the most important leadership practices (S2; S4; S5). Additionally, the data reveals this leadership practice supports the leadership practice of ‘building and sustaining relationships.’ Lastly, the data reveals the leadership practice of ‘employing collaborative and shared leadership’ supports the leadership practice of ‘establishing and promoting a school vision.’

Limitations of the Study

Limitations of this study include participant and researcher bias and the scope of the study. In this qualitative study, participant bias was a limitation, because the resulting data relies on the truthfulness of the participants’ responses. Each participant answered the questions based upon his previous leadership experiences. The researcher attempted to structure the interview guide to allow the participants the opportunity to provide objective data pertaining to each question. Also, the researcher triangulated the data from multiple participants before including it as an emerging theme.

Researcher bias was a limitation of this study due to the fact that the researcher analyzed the data under the assumption that the participants would be able to offer valuable insight

concerning how they employ the nine research-based leadership practices. The researcher was not a practicing superintendent, and therefore analyzed and interpreted the data through their own experiences and knowledge. Additionally, the researcher believed school leadership to be a worthy topic of study and believed the findings from this study would benefit current and future school superintendents. The researcher clarified their biases at the outset of the study, and enhanced their credibility by incorporating member checks, peer examinations, rich and thick description, and triangulation of the data.

The scope of this study was a limitation, because the study only focused on conducting in-depth, semi-structured interviews with six purposefully selected school superintendents from Southwest Missouri pertaining to the nine, research-based leadership practices. Despite limiting the method of data collection to interviews, data was triangulated from multiple sources and analyzed using multiple levels of analysis. Even though the study was limited to six participants from Southwest Missouri, specific criteria were established to ensure quality participants were selected. The quality of the superintendents and their combined experiences provided valuable insight concerning how they carry out their leadership practices. Although the study was limited to the nine leadership practices, a thorough review of the current literature was conducted to identify the research-based practices. Additional leadership practices might have been studied; however, the nine leadership practices were a result of the synthesis of the review of literature, and provide a comprehensive view of successful school superintendent leadership. Lastly, if this study were replicated, it might produce different results. Even though the results might vary slightly with a different group of participants, it would not diminish the perspectives of the participants in this study.

Implications for Practice

The school superintendent is in a unique position of authority. They have numerous responsibilities, face increasing demands for high student achievement levels, and while they exhibit some direct influence over the success and operations of their school district, they must often influence indirectly as they lead through others and collaborate with stakeholders. This study supported the previous research pertaining to effective school superintendent leadership practices. The study revealed that all six of the participants were implementing the nine effective, research-based leadership practices identified by the researcher. This study went into further detail exploring “how” each of the six successful school superintendents carried out each of the nine leadership practices. Findings from this study revealed 24 strategies the participants utilize pertaining to “how” they serve as effective district-level leaders; all 24 strategies were triangulated with multiple participants; 22 of the 24 strategies were triangulated with previous research. This study excluded vague generalizations, and therefore provides a more realistic view through the rich, descriptive data of how the participants employed each leadership practice. It is encouraged that these 24 strategies be included in discussions pertaining to effective school superintendent leadership and the daily practices of school superintendents.

In order to make a practical application of the findings of this study, it is advised that superintendents carefully examine each of the 24 strategies, reflect on their own personal practices, and strive to implement any missing strategies as a part of their daily routine. It is recommended that school superintendents striving to serve as effective district-level leaders consider implementing all 24 of the strategies listed in this study. It is recommended that extra attention is devoted to the strategies supported by almost all (five) or all (six) of the participants. In particular, it is advised that school superintendents focus on the leadership practices of

‘communicating effectively’, ‘building and sustaining relationships’, ‘displaying ethical and professional behavior’, and ‘employing collaborative and shared decision making’, because these practices were emphasized by the participants as being important and appeared as strategies for other leadership practices. Additionally, it is advised that school superintendents focus on the strategies of ‘leading and managing through others’, ‘caring about others and treating them well’, and ‘utilizing strategic planning and developing a strategy and plan’, because they appeared multiples times as strategies for different leadership practices.

This study has important implications for current and aspiring school superintendents, school board members, leadership organizations, institutions of higher education, and anyone interested in school leadership or effective leadership practices. Current and aspiring school superintendents should carefully examine each of the strategies listed in the study and reflect on their own personal practices. Current and aspiring school superintendents should consider how their leadership practices align with the findings from this study, and incorporate any missing strategies as a part of their daily routine. School board members should consult the findings in this study as they hire, evaluate, and support their superintendent. Leadership organizations and institutions of higher education should refer to the findings of this study in order to better support school leaders and effectively prepare them for district-level leadership positions. Anyone interested in school leadership or effective leadership practices should explore the findings listed in the study as a means of becoming more knowledgeable concerning this topic and as a guide for implementing practical strategies to grow as an effective leader.

Recommendations for Future Research

When considering future areas of research, one might consider building upon this study by conducting a qualitative study of other stakeholder’s perceptions regarding successful school

superintendent leadership practices, by conducting a qualitative study surrounding the challenges successful school superintendents face or their perceptions regarding contextual leadership, or by conducting a quantitative study pertaining to successful school superintendent leadership practices.

This study focused on how successful school superintendents carried out effective, research-based leadership practices. The study incorporated semi-structured interviews to gather the participants' insight regarding their leadership practices. Another worthwhile topic of study, would be conducting a qualitative study exploring school board members', principals', or teachers' perceptions regarding successful school superintendent leadership practices. Interviews could be conducted with one or several of these groups pertaining to how they perceive their successful school superintendent is carrying out the same nine research-based leadership practices. The resulting descriptive data could be compared with the findings of this study for similarities and differences.

The review of literature for this study revealed the importance of employing contextual leadership and some of the challenges school superintendents face. However, the scope of this study did not include either of these topics. Another worthwhile topic of study would be conducting a qualitative study exploring how successful school superintendents employ contextual leadership or how they effectively respond to the challenges they face. Interviews could be conducted with participants to gather descriptive data, and the resulting data could be analyzing to determine emerging themes.

This study took a qualitative approach to exploring how successful school superintendents carry out effective, research-based leadership practices. Another worthwhile topic of study, would be conducting a quantitative study of effective school superintendent

leadership practices. The study could focus on the insights of successful school superintendents regarding how often they employ particular research-based leadership practices or the research-based leadership practices that are most important to their success as school superintendents. A survey could be developed asking the participants to rate how often they use each leadership practice and to rank the most important leadership practices.

Summary

Successful leadership has the ability to positively impact school districts. As schools face increasing pressure to raise student achievement, superintendents must ensure they are employing effective leadership practices. The main objectives of this study were to determine how successful school superintendents in Southwest Missouri carry out effective, research-based leadership practices, and to discover if there are additional leadership practices these superintendents utilize to be effective school leaders. In depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with each of the purposefully selected participants. The descriptive data was analyzed using constant comparative analysis, and emerging themes were identified. Conclusions were reached by comparing what the relevant literature says with the descriptive data gained from the superintendent interviews. Findings from this study revealed 24 strategies the participants utilize pertaining to “how” they serve as effective district-level leaders; all 24 strategies were triangulated with multiple participants; 22 of the 24 strategies were triangulated with previous research. The findings from this study can be used to help guide school leadership practice, policy, and research. They can help address questions surrounding how successful school superintendents carry out effective leadership practices, and can guide dialogue about the future of school leadership. Chapter 1 included the problem statement, research questions, rationale for the study, and theoretical framework for the study; Chapter 2 presented the review of related

literature; Chapter 3 included the methodology of the study; Chapter 4 presented the results of the study; and Chapter 5 included the conclusions and recommendations of the study.

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APPENDIX A

Request for Participation

July 1, 2014

Participant Name
Participant Address

Dear Participant,

I am a doctoral student at Southwest Baptist University, and I am working on my doctoral dissertation. It will be a qualitative study focusing on school superintendents' perceptions of effective leadership practices, and I would like to ask you to participate. You have been purposefully selected as a potential participant in this study, because you meet the following specific criteria established by the researcher: (a) serving a superintendent in DESE Supervisory Zone C, (b) nominations by leaders in professional organizations, (c) special recognition received by the superintendent, and (d) serving at school districts receiving at least 90% of their Annual Performance Report (APR) total points possible for the 2010-2011, 2011-2012, and 2012-2013 school years.

The study will help determine "how" successful school superintendents carry out leadership practices identified as effective by current literature. Individual participants will be asked about their own school leadership experiences.

Your involvement will require setting aside time for an interview in which you are asked to elaborate on how you carry out effective, research-based leadership practices. You will be provided a transcript of our interview and will have the opportunity to change any statements that you feel are not clear or are inaccurate. There may also be follow up contacts by me in the event that I need to clarify any information that I have obtained as a result of our interview.

If you can participate, we will set up an interview at a time and place that is convenient for you, and I will provide interview questions in advance. Please contact me at one of the phone numbers or the e-mail below to let me know if you can participate.

Thank you for your consideration.

Tim Garber
Bolivar Middle School Assistant Principal
Doctoral Student, Southwest Baptist University
417 xxx-xxxx (home)
417 xxx-xxxx (cell)
tgarber@xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx.org

APPENDIX B

Informed Consent Form

Dear Colleague,

My name is Tim Garber and I am the Assistant Principal at Bolivar Middle School in Bolivar, MO. I am a doctoral student at Southwest Baptist University and I am conducting a research study to gather information about school superintendent perceptions regarding effective leadership practices. I would like to invite you to participate in this qualitative study incorporating in-depth, semi-structured interviews. You have been purposefully selected as a potential participant in this study, because you meet the specific criteria established by the researcher. Possible benefits include an opportunity for you to reflect on your leadership practices and offer insight to others concerning how you implement those practices.

I realize that you are very busy; the interview should take about 1 hour of your time to complete. During the interview, I will ask you for demographic information and your experience with how you carry out leadership practices identified as effective by current literature. I will follow the included researcher developed Interview Guide which contains nine questions pertaining to effective, research-based leadership practices.

Your privacy is important; information reported will not indicate individual participants or school districts. Each participant will be given a fictitious name and no identifying characteristics will be acknowledged. There is no penalty should you choose not to participate or answer all of the questions. Your response to this letter will indicate your consent to participate and permission to use the information that you have provided in my study.

Before you make a final decision about participation, please read the following statements about how your responses will be used and how your rights as a participant will be protected:

- Participation in the study is completely voluntary. You may stop participating at any point without penalty.
- You need not answer all of the questions.
- Your answers will be kept confidential. Results will be presented to others in summary form only, without names or other identifying information.
- Your participation will take approximately 1 hour. During this time you will answer questions about how you carry out effective, research-based leadership practices.

This project has been reviewed and approved by the RRB Committee at Southwest Baptist University (326-1659). The committee believes that the research procedures adequately safeguard the subject's privacy, welfare, civil liberties and rights.

You may contact me at 417-326-xxxx if you have questions or concerns about your participation. If you would like a copy of the results of this study, you may contact me via email at tgarber@xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx.org. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,
Tim Garber
Bolivar Middle School

APPENDIX C

Interview Guide

Effective Leadership Practices: A Qualitative Study of School Superintendents' Perceptions

Participant: _____ Date/Time: _____ Location: _____

Demographic Information

Number of years in education: _____ Number of years as a superintendent: _____

Number of years in current position: _____ Highest degree obtained: _____

Size of district: _____ Number of buildings: _____ Number of CO staff: _____

Number of building administrators: _____

- 1.) As a school superintendent what does it look like to carry out the following leadership practices? (Please provide any examples that might further support your answers).
 - a. From your experience, how do you create and promote your school's vision?
 - b. As a school superintendent, how do you strive to be an instructional leader?
 - c. From your experience, what are some ways that you communicate and how does that influence your effectiveness?
 - d. From your perspective, how do you build meaningful relationships with various stakeholders?
 - e. As a school superintendent, how do you foster collaboration and employ shared decision making?
 - f. From your experience, how do you effectively implement change in your district?
 - g. As a school superintendent, what does being an ethical and professional leader mean to you?
 - h. From your experience, what do you do to manage the politics and increase your political awareness?
 - i. As a school superintendent, how do you effectively manage the daily operations of a school district?
- 2.) Do you have any additional comments concerning the leadership practices you use to help you be a successful school superintendent?

APPENDIX D

Member Checking Letter

Participant Name
Participant Address

Dear Participant,

Thank you again for taking part in my doctoral research project concerning how successful superintendents carry out effective, district-level leadership practices. The descriptive data you offered during our interview provided valuable insight towards answering the research questions for this study.

I am currently in the process of analyzing the descriptive data you provided. Ensuring trustworthiness is an important component of qualitative research. Therefore, I am using member checking as one step towards addressing the validity of this study.

I am including a copy of the transcription of our interview for you to review. Please let me know if there are any statements that need to be corrected or changed for accuracy or clarity purposes. These transcriptions will not be published and will remain confidential. Quotations and paraphrases from our interview will be used to support the emerging themes, but confidentially will be maintained throughout the study.

I am also including a copy of the emerging themes for the study for you to review. Please let me know if these emerging themes seem plausible to you. The emerging themes are listed according to each of the nine leadership practices. For a theme to emerge, at least 4 of the 6 participants provided descriptive data to support each theme.

Your feedback is important, and I value any input or comments you may have to enhance my research. Thank you again for taking the time to participate in this study and allowing myself and others to learn from your knowledge and experiences.

Sincerely,

Tim Garber
BMS Assistant Principal
Doctoral Student, Southwest Baptist University

APPENDIX E

Peer Review Letter

Colleague Name
Colleague Address

Dear Colleague,

I have a small favor to ask of you. I am working on my dissertation: "Effective Leadership Practices: A Qualitative Study of School Superintendents' Perceptions." I have interviewed six superintendents to gather their perceptions concerning "how" they carry out effective, research-based leadership practices. I identified nine effective leadership practices from the literature and asked each superintendent an open-ended question pertaining to each leadership practice.

I am currently in the process of analyzing the descriptive data from each of the interviews. I coded all of their responses and looked for emerging themes. For each theme to emerge, at least four out of the six participants provided descriptive data to support that theme. Ensuring trustworthiness is an important component of qualitative research. Therefore, I am incorporating peer examinations of the emerging themes as one step towards addressing the validity of this study.

I am including a copy of the emerging themes for the study for you to review (the themes are in italics under each leadership practice). I have also included notes paraphrasing each of the superintendent's descriptive data. Each of the emerging themes are highlighted a specific color and the matching supporting data from each superintendent is highlighted the same color.

Please review this document and let me know if the themes that emerged from the supporting data seem plausible to you. Your feedback is important, and I value any input or comments you may have to enhance my research. Thank you for taking the time to assist me in this process.

Sincerely,

Tim Garber
BMS Assistant Principal
Doctoral Student, Southwest Baptist University