

JOURNEY TO BECOMING A SUPERINTENDENT IN NEW YORK: A  
TRANSCENDENTAL PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

by

Jeremy R. Koch

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

Liberty University, Lynchburg, VA

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand the lived experiences an individual encounters on their journey to becoming a superintendent at a school district in New York. The theory used in this study was the push-pull model (PPM) by E. G. Ravenstein and the push-pull mooring model by E. S. Lee and later B. Moon, to study the lived experiences of those who have become school district superintendents. The PPM was used to determine what themes are present in an individual's journey to the superintendency that pulls them to the position, pushes them away, or causes them to remain in the position. Qualitative data were collected from 10 participants who held the superintendent position or are currently employed as a school district superintendent in suburban communities across New York. Qualitative data were gathered from participants through semi-structured interviews, questionnaires, and focus group sessions. Data were coded and categorized into three themes: professional relationships and skills, motivations and goals, and career development. Delve software was used to analyze data. Results indicated that most superintendents followed a traditional role, starting as an educator and moving through administrative-level positions before attaining a superintendent role. Some pushes were participants feeling they would be a better option for the district than current or future candidates. Others were seeking stability and professionalism within their districts. The pulls to superintendency were predominantly around doing the best for students in their own way. Participants explained that their time in upper administrative roles prepared them as best as possible for a superintendent's position.

*Keywords:* superintendency, push-pull-mooring theory, leadership, career path

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## **Dedication**

To my wife, children, father, mother, and so many more who have supported, encouraged, inspired, critiqued, and empowered me to push beyond my own expectations and limitations to succeed, thank you. I quite literally could not have done this with you. This dedication does little justice for the abundance of gratitude I have for each of you who have helped in so many ways along this journey. With all the love and appreciation I hold, I give thanks from a full and humble heart. I also have to thank my work family as they have assisted me in their own way, allowing me to embark on this journey by taking on additional burdens to provide me with support. Lastly, to my dissertation chairperson who did not lose faith and was always there for support and intelligent feedback regardless of life events experienced personally by the both of us. To all, this research is a result of the support provided in a plethora of ways, thank you.

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**List of Abbreviations**

Board of Education (BOE)

Push-Pull-Mooring Theory (PPM)

## **CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**

### **Overview**

The purpose of this transcendental, phenomenological study was to understand the journey and lived experiences an individual encounters when acquiring and carrying out the role of superintendent in New York. The study's historical, social, and theoretical contexts are described to understand what the superintendent's position is, what is experienced, and how it will be viewed throughout the current study. The lack of research on the specifics of lived experiences throughout a superintendent's career leaves gaps in understanding what pathway a person takes to become a superintendent. Additionally, Chapter One focuses on key terms and their theoretical, empirical, contextual, and practical significance in broadening and extending the body of literature related to the position of the superintendent.

### **Background**

The chief executive officer in a public school district is typically the top individual who holds the position of superintendent. In New York, other positions existed before 1910, such as elected school commissioners (New York State Education Department, 2021). The role of superintendency spans the globe as a chief school agent driving educational mandates and modeling social practices for the communities they serve (Hardy & Salo, 2022). Superintendents impact community stakeholders, BOE members, administration, faculty, students, and those in other school districts; they implement topics such as racial literacy, which can spread across a region with political, ethical, and legal implications (Horsford, 2010). To understand why a person is drawn to, pushed towards, or remains in a superintendent's position, the push-pull mooring theory, postulated by Moon (1995), explains and demystifies the migratory behaviors leading to and within the executive superintendent role.

## Historical Context

In New York, the superintendency evolved from an elected position known as a commissioner. Districts were first divided into 113 sections, and commissioners were elected to serve 3-year terms in office (New York State Education Department, 2021). Aside from politics, the core issue was the qualifications of commissioners as educational experts. However, a superintendent's duties are similar to those served a century ago (Duties of a Superintendent of Schools, 1921). The change from commissioners to appointed superintendents of New York school districts was completed in 1910 through an amendment to educational law (New York State Education Department, 2021). As the title has changed, the number of districts in the state has also changed; 11,000 school districts have been reduced to the current 704 public school districts (New York State Education Department, 2021). Though this change occurred in New York in the 1900s, the title was familiar, as the National Association of School Superintendents (NASS) formed prior in 1865 (Griffen, 2022).

Since 1910, superintendents have been the lead authority and supervisors of school districts across New York, and for over a century it has been a position that has battled politics, gender, and race across the United States (Kalbus, 2000). Though the initial responsibility to manage public schools has not changed, the way schools are effectively managed and have imposed pedagogical practices has increased in breadth and responsibility (Nir & Eyal, 2003). An example of the increased breadth of effectively managing schools and the imposition of new pedagogical practices that superintendents across the United States have had to handle include enormous technology gaps resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic (Rubin, 2020). This breadth of responsibility has focused on the whole student, where superintendents have also faced atypical issues, such as feeding students who hunted for food or trapped and sold furs for warmth



and income (Bock, 2018).

From the first superintendents gathering in 1865, there has been an increase in state, national, and international consortiums available, as well as a rise in certifications and educational requirements superintendents are expected to hold when acquiring the position (Petersen et al., 2008). The increase in training, experience, and certifications resulted from high BOE expectations for superintendents to execute leadership responsibilities within an allocated budget (Rapp et al., 2022). Though this position has grown in responsibility, the essence of its genesis can be observed throughout history.

### **Social Context**

Superintendents are the top executive in most New York and United States districts. This position has long impacted towns, cities, and counties with the power to appoint teachers, settle discipline cases, and even seek to change district boundaries (Mowry, 1895; Rapp et al., 2022). More than a century ago, the expectation of this position was to contribute to educational periodicals and stay informed on the success or failure of educational experiments (Duties of a Superintendent of Schools, 1921). Since then, the role of the superintendent as a public administrator has been refashioned as a facilitator of community involvement, requiring social and interpersonal skills, including relationship building, conflict negotiation, and the ability to listen to and dialogue with school-community issues when weighing in on contemporary social issues (FitzGerald & Militello, 2016).

Public engagement requires social resources and skills, such as building trust and engagement, which can have vast social implications for the school community (Poynton et al., 2018). School leaders such as superintendents have an important role in cultivating problem-solving skills in other stakeholders (Friedman, 2011), underscoring the importance of social

connectedness and social relationship building. Aspiring superintendents can learn from veterans and promote the valuable transfer of information between both parties. When collaboration can occur between young and veteran school leaders, it bolsters the potential to increase achievement across the student body (Clayton et al., 2013).

An individual in an acting superintendent position must have the professional, inner-circle social support to take on burdens (Henriksen & Aas, 2021) such as controversial social-political issues in the districts they are serving. One of the social implications that comes with superintendency is that they can impact the social dynamics of the administrative team that they lead and broadly impact internal and external stakeholders, such as faculty, parents, students, and district community members. Stakeholders may benefit from understanding the journey of a school superintendent, particularly how they will impart their values and beliefs when making decisions that directly impact the stakeholders. Knowing that leadership potential is of more value than leadership performance can help hiring committees understand their potential biases when interviewing (Player et al., 2019).

Another key social context is an individual's promotion pathway to the superintendent. When searching for leadership candidates, the level of diversity of those in the hiring pool can pose varying benefits and challenges to the hiring committee, depending on the dissimilarities between candidates (Žnidaršič et al., 2021). Similarities are generally found, with most candidates beginning as teachers and progressing through a low-to-mid-level administrative role, reaching district-level administration and then on to the apex of superintendency (Kim & Brunner, 2009). Though the path for many may appear similar, the rise to superintendency through the ranks of a school district can be heavily political, as the individual must foster fruitful relationships with internal and external stakeholders along the way (Paulsen et al., 2014).

BOE members and other community stakeholders must understand the pathway and intentions of those acquiring the position, which can be the impetus for great systemic change or pecuniary increases (Grissom & Mitani, 2016; Rapp et al., 2022).

### **Theoretical Context**

The reason that a person moves into any new job position can vary greatly. Monetary gains, increases in health care benefits, rise in hierarchical social power, or resigning from an undesired position can all be motives for why a person seeks employment opportunities in other roles (Grissom & Andersen, 2012). Many individuals with administrative degrees in education choose not to leave their current positions to fill administrative roles (Davis et al., 2017). Individuals can be pushed or pulled into or from a position within an organization for many reasons. The researcher will examine the determinants of why an individual is pushed, pulled, or remains stationary in the superintendency from a school district standpoint. Moon (1995) revised the traditional idea of push-pull theory to include adding the mooring concept, which considers factors for why a person might resist migratory behavior (Lin et al., 2021). Push factors are typically the negative factors that steer individuals away from a role or profession, compared to pull factors which are primarily positive factors that pull employees into a new role that presents better working conditions and new opportunities (Bansal et al., 2005; Heffernan et al., 2022). The mooring factors within the PPM framework correlate to personal and social factors that cause individuals or employees to stay retain (Fan et al., 2021; Fu, 2011).

The push-pull-mooring framework is widely utilized in many industries to understand migration; it has been applied to consumerism, hospitality, and tourism (Choi & Park, 2020; Haldorai et al., 2019), but it has also been used extensively in the field of education relating to patterns of turnover in educators and administrators (Farley-Ripple et al., 2012; Heffernan et al.,

2022; Heffernan, 2021). Findings in Mombaers et al. (2023), who explored influential career choices among educational professionals, revealed that the leading factors of support, workload, autonomy, self-efficacy, general job motivation, and commitment to students to play a germane role in influencing the career choices of teachers and administrators. Motivation to influence school policy, positive relationships within the work environment, challenge and variety, and commitment to students have been determined to be significant pull factors for individuals to be pulled to an administrative position compared to push factors of workload, stress, lack of work-life balance, and extensive task range that keep educational professionals from advancing to administration positions such as school principal (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Howley et al., 2005; Shen et al., 1999).

Mombaers et al. (2023) expanded on the PPM theory in education as there are few studies that have examined the push, pull, and mooring factors of staying a teacher, and even less research on why individuals are push-pulled-moored into the executive role of superintendent. Literature on an individual's career pathway toward superintendency and what preceded these decisions is scarce, and even more scant is the research into the variables that cause an individual to remain in this position once they attain it (Kalbus, 2000). The researcher seeks to use the information in this study to contribute to the field by examining educational career pathways within the role of superintendent. As such, the theoretical context of the PPM theory guided the foundations of the interview questions and the analysis of responses to understand why individuals are willing to take on such demanding, challenging, and ambitious roles within a school district. This research can be extended into real-world applications for those interested in becoming a superintendent by summing the roles, responsibilities, education, and experiences an individual needs to attain and retain this position.

## **Problem Statement**

The problem is that the experiences needed to obtain the role of school superintendent are not clearly defined, especially from the perspective of those who have acquired the position (Davis & Bowers, 2019). Thus, district BOE members do not have the knowledge to promote potential candidates towards those experiences, except for the required classes and tests New York State Education Department requires for proper certification. This lack of knowledge encompasses the unknown pushes toward and pulls away from public education as there are alternate educational opportunities within the educational career domain (Mombaers et al., 2023).

Investigating this topic and exploring the perceptions of individuals' experiences and how those experiences have influenced their push, pull, or stasis toward their career path is essential to close research gaps and further understand what experiences lead to the superintendency and how impactful those experiences may have been. In addition, examining the outcome data may enable others to make better career predictions when faced with potential next steps (Celine et al., 2020). Exploring what types of experiences, a successful superintendent has encountered and what decisions can lead to negative or positive systematic and cultural shifts within a district is essential (Shapira-Lishchinsky & Levy-Gazenfrantz, 2020). This line of research may be critical to BOE members and those involved in the school community in which superintendents serve.

Empirical and contextual limitations of previous research have included small sample sizes and research that focuses solely on why teachers become principals and do not extend upwards in the hierarchy to include superintendents (Davis & Bowers, 2019; Holmes Jr. et al., 2021). Gaps in previous research give reasoning as to why further exploration into how few

individuals reach the superintendent position is needed (Davis et al., 2017). Although this research will have a similar sample size and regionality limits, as other studies, it will add to the body of research regarding school superintendents and assist in narrowing the knowledge gap regarding the path to the superintendent position, which has been mostly absent from existing educational literature.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand the lived experiences an individual encounters on their journey to becoming a superintendent at a school district in New York. In this study, the journey to the school superintendency was defined as the path to gaining the certification, education, experience, and skills needed to attain a superintendent's position in public school district in New York. The goal of this study was to determine commonalities in lived experiences that have aided superintendents in acquiring and remaining this position in a school district.

### **Significance of the Study**

The theoretical significance of this study lies in the link between the journey experienced over time to achieve what is needed to become a superintendent and the pulls that drive them toward that role. By examining the influential factors that an individual may see as advantageous or disadvantageous, it may be inferred what individual and contextual factors may be pushing or pulling a person in that position. Sawchuk (2022) discussed financial reasons, skill level expectations, stress, and workload; however, many other influential factors to the superintendency pathway may be undiscovered but may now be addressed by the current study. By understanding PPM factors that affect attaining this position or not, practical knowledge has

been gained and adds to the information about the quality and type of impact a superintendent can have on a school district.

Empirically, this study sought to add to the scant literature concerning an individual's journey to the superintendency. In general, few studies have offered insight into the rise to the superintendent position and what helped individuals attain it, resulting in a profound literature gap and creating an avenue for further research into this underexplored area (Davis & Bowers, 2019). Instead of focusing on the journey holistically, outdated research involves the gender and race profiles of superintendents (Kalbus, 2000). Previous studies have been narrowed in scope but additionally limited by population, sample size, and location, and data collection has been related to a specific region or small country. While the current study has taken place in a specific region, it examines additional research variables and answers key questions adding to the existing body of work for further exploration.

The practical value of the current study is to inform academic institutions and the research community about the pathways individuals have taken to superintendency and what actions and experiential events have kept them employed in that position. Though a superintendent does not directly instruct students, this person can heavily influence a district; they are its chief leader and carry forth its vision (Asada et al., 2021). The relevant information contained in the current study can help the many stakeholders produce and locate the best superintendents suited for that position. BOE members are responsible for securing the best leaders from top-tier candidates who can positively impact their students (Decman et al., 2018), while minimizing district costs and taxpayer implications. This process must be well-balanced in attracting top-quality superintendent candidates while maintaining competitive salary and benefits packages without fiscal impacts on the district's tax base. When compensation rates are

high in regions where taxes are high, the optics of the taxpayer-funded salary can reflect poorly on the position of the superintendent and the district's political landscape.

### **Research Questions**

The lack of existing literature on school superintendency leads to key unanswered questions that will provide further contextual clarity to the executive role of the superintendent and the field of educational research. This research focused on qualitative interviews with superintendents in New York who answered questions linked to the central research and sub-research questions regarding district leaders lived experiences during their journey to becoming a superintendent. A semi-structured interview style facilitated conversation and gave the researcher opportunities for follow-up questions. It also provided opportunities for participants to expand on their thoughts regarding how they achieved their role in the school district. The central research question targeted the comprehensive journey towards superintendency. The sub-questions explore the origins, motivations, and other factors that impacted their journey and offer moments for participants to reflect on critical moments along their career path that have influenced their decisions.

#### **Central Research Question**

How do school district leaders describe their lived experiences during their journey to becoming a superintendent in New York?

#### **Sub-Question One**

What were the motivations and career goals superintendents set before entering the field of education in a school district?

#### **Sub-Question Two**

What are common pushes and pulls that lead educational professionals to pursue the



position of school superintendent?

### **Sub-Question Three**

What experiences most prepared district leaders for the superintendent role?

#### **Definitions**

The following terms relate to the superintendency, leadership, or PPM theory.

1. *Journey* – the career pathway a person takes, including the education, experiences, certifications, and skills gained to qualify them for a potential opportunity for a different role (Davis & Bowers, 2019).
2. *Push-Pull-Mooring (PPM) Theory* – initially used to describe the migration of humans between two places, this theory has also been used to explain why consumers are drawn to and from retail organizations, as well as explain why employees are attracted to, from, or remain in a position within the organization that employs them (Kim et al., 2020; Ravenstein, 1885).
3. *Superintendent* – the chief executive officer of a school district who is responsible for the safety and appropriate education of students, who proposes and manages the school budget, establishes clear goals and objectives to carry out the mission and the vision of the BOE, and leads the administrative team to support educators to provide appropriate instruction to students using the best pedagogical practices available (Grissom & Mitani, 2016).

#### **Summary**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand the lived experiences an individual encounters on their journey to becoming a superintendent at a school district in New York. The problem is that the experiences needed to obtain the role of school

superintendent are not clearly defined, especially from the perspective of those who have acquired the position. The current study sought to deepen the limited understanding district stakeholders or educators seeking advancement have of the superintendent's lived experiences and functions in that role. This study aimed to understand a person's journey and the lived experiences an individual encounters when acquiring and carrying out the role of the superintendent for past and present superintendents in New York.

The institutional knowledge required to hold and be successful in the superintendent position can be formidable due to high expectations from various stakeholders within the district. Historically, this position has existed for over a century across different parts of the United States (New York State Education Department, 2021). Some of the many responsibilities and burdens that come with the title of superintendent can drive away top-qualified candidates. In contrast, other individuals may be driven toward this role based on a variety of factors. The PPM theory explains and demystifies the migration behaviors within the executive superintendent role to better understand why a person is drawn to, pushed towards, or remains in a superintendent position. More specifically, monetary gains, increases in health care benefits, rise in hierarchical social power, or resigning from an undesired position can all be motives for why a person seeks employment opportunities in other roles (Grissom & Andersen, 2012). Collegial relationships, challenge, and commitment to students have been explored as significant pull factors towards administrative positions compared to significant push factors of workload, stress, work-life balance, and task range, which have been previously explored as some determinants that keep educational professionals from advancing to administrative positions (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Howley et al., 2005; Mombaers et al., 2023).

The obligations, skill level, social resources, and skill set needed to be a superintendent may be push factors for some individuals but pull factors for others (Henriksen & Aas, 2021; Poynton et al., 2018). When weighed against compensation packages and the ability to positively impact student lives and the educational system, these factors can alternatively be the incentives and considerations that pull others into this role. Nevertheless, other uninvestigated variables may be present on an individual's journey to the role of superintendency which has been unexplored in educational literature. These factors may be of significant interest to those seeking the position and those attempting to procure or locate the top-qualified candidates that will exemplify the executive superintendent role and the impact they may subsequently have as a school district leader.

## **CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Overview**

To understand the journey and lived experiences an individual encounters when acquiring and remaining in the role of a superintendent, this chapter will examine and connect the overarching theoretical framework and provide empirical relationships to the purpose of the current study. The literature review begins by describing the PPM, its evolution, and how it can be applied to the role of the superintendency. Leadership skills and theories that are paramount to the role of the superintendent include strategies, methods, and techniques that contribute to the success or failure in acquiring a position as a district leader (Addi-Racah, 2015; Asada et al., 2021; Hardy & Salo, 2022). The literature review then conceptualizes variables that explain why an individual may aspire to reach the superintendent position and the complexities that go with it. Individual traits such as egoism, narcissism, leadership styles, and emotional intelligence (EI) are discussed as they are integral components of an individual as they journey towards and live the experiences of a superintendent (Grissom & Mitani, 2016; Kamrath, 2022). The literature review concludes with a review of potential obstacles, challenges, and failures associated with the superintendency.

### **Theoretical Framework**

One of the most frequently used theoretical paradigms, push-pull polarity, was initially developed by Ravenstein (1885) to describe human migratory experiences (Cohen, 1996). Ravenstein's (1885) seminal papers generalized into several "laws of migration" that attempted to account for an array of migration variables such as distances, stages, transportation, economics, and motives and concluded that migration is guided by a push-pull force that drives individuals from unfavorable conditions and pushes individuals out, while favorable conditions in another

location pull individuals in (Passaris, 1989). Lee (1966) restated and reformulated Ravenstein's (1885) push-pull theory, positing that migration is selective and built on Ravenstein's postulations to include other factors, individual characteristics, personal responses to "plus" and "minus" factors at origins and destinations, and individual's differing abilities to cope with these variables (De Haas, 2010; Reniers, 1999).

More recent models of human migration include cognitive-behavioral facets in which individuals make conscious decisions to migrate based on more than economic considerations (Hagen-Zanker, 2008). Moon (1995) coupled the "mooring effect" to the push-pull theory and presented the PPM model. Mooring effect factors can encourage or discourage an individual's migration decision (Gupta & Garg, 2021). Further, Lin and Wu (2021) applied the PPM model widely to food safety decisions demonstrating the versatility of the PPM design as a useful and functional theoretical paradigm extending to various daily life activities. Fu (2011) utilized the push-pull mooring framework in a study investigating important antecedents of career commitment, viewing a career as a virtual place to stay and a career change as a migratory decision.

### **Push-Pull Theory**

There are many variations of the push-pull theory postulated throughout the years; however, the push-pull theory of migration, first developed by E. G. Ravenstein, proposed several laws of migration (Grigg, 1977). The most significant contribution to the theory of migration explained that the contributing factors to migration could be categorized in two ways: factors that pushed individuals out of their current residence and factors that pulled them out. Modern-day studies have expanded on Ravenstein's work and applied this theory to broad contemporary issues such as employment performance, food safety, career commitment, and

entrepreneurship (Benson & Rissing, 2020; Fu, 2011; Lin & Wu, 2021). Removing the term migration from the push-pull theory and replacing it with the movement of school leadership, specific school leadership positions and why an individual may be driven towards or away from a school principalship have been examined (Boyce & Bowers, 2016). The factors that push an individual from a position may differ uniquely from the effects of being pulled from a position and provide some understanding of the complexities of school administrator career paths when examining retention, turnover, and mobility (Farley-Ripple et al., 2012).

### **Push-Pull-Mooring Turnover Theory**

Since the push-pull theory did not fully account for all migratory behaviors of individuals, Moon (1995) incorporated important social, personal, and cultural factors into the previous push-pull theory, offering a further explanation of why a person may or may not resist migratory behavior (Bansal et al., 2005; Lin et al., 2021). Moorings may be personal or cultural in their impact on facilitating or hampering individuals switching or migratory behavior (Bansal et al., 2005; Gupta & Garg, 2021). Heffernan (2021) applied mooring to the push-pull turnover theory explaining that school principals often remain in their positions because of personal factors rather than organizational ones. Personality traits, such as humility, and those who tend to exhibit a healthy amount of humility within their tenure tend to remain or be moored into their position longer (Wang et al., 2022).

### **Push, Pull, and Mooring Factors**

Push factors have generally negative implications and are typically unfavorable conditions where an individual is compelled to move away from a destination (Gupta & Garg, 2021; Lee, 1966). Misplacement of administrators in positions they are not well-suited for by those hiring them can be another relevant push factor (Grissom et al., 2019). In contrast, pull

factors attract an employee to a position from elsewhere due to perceived positive benefits or advantages in the new destination (Gupta & Garg, 2021; Lee, 1966). Higher compensation can be an example of a pull factor, and organizations have been encouraged to make these offerings with fiscal responsibility (Rahmandad & Ton, 2020).

Mooring factors add the third and final dimension to the PPM theory (Moon, 1995). Mooring factors include job satisfaction, adequate compensation, or supportive relationships with upper administrators and district decision-makers (Cieminski, 2018). Push, pull, and mooring factors can change with individual situations and can be influenced by controllable and uncontrollable factors (Kirkwood, 2009). Pay satisfaction can be listed as a push, pull, or mooring factor, which can undoubtedly be an impetus for change or remain in a position if a person feels they are inadequately or adequately compensated for their work (Sawchuk, 2022). Thus, the PPM theory will be used when analyzing the reasons participants sought and attained their positions as superintendents of schools.

### **Related Literature**

Though the majority of previous studies on school leadership have explained its impact on learning, most studies on school leadership focus on classroom teaching; there has been limited research into the superintendency and the lived experiences an individual has on their journey to this position (Leithwood et al., 2020). While turnover is not explicitly examined in the current study, why a person is pushed, pulled, or remains in this position is explored. Investigating how and why an individual attains the superintendency position through a qualitative lens is a much-needed avenue of research (Davis & Bowers, 2019).

### **Leadership Styles**

The acquisition of leadership skills is essential to the role of a superintendent. It provides

a context to understand how they will make school district decisions and provide educational opportunities for students. Leadership styles of superintendents are a vastly complex subject that has been heavily researched (Avolio, 2007; D'Souza & Gurin, 2016; Pielstick, 1998). Service delivery systems needed today for stakeholders require different leadership styles to implement changes required in the district that the superintendent serves and widely differ from the system needs in the past (Hodge & Larwin, 2020). Leadership model styles such as instrumental, change, servant, transformational, and adaptive leadership can all be linked to effective practices and cover a broad range of leadership traits school leaders must display effective practices to improve school districts and overall student achievement (Kiral, 2020). Conversely, poor leadership skills and styles, intentional and unintentional ethical and unethical decisions hinder leadership ability, increase employee turnover, create a detrimental workplace culture, and reduce outcomes (Mo & Shi, 2015).

Having a strong leader in the position of superintendent has an array of impacts that are not only on students or faculty but also on the community (Webner et al., 2017). The superintendent must navigate political issues within the community, BOE members, faculty, and student body and be equipped with versatile leadership skills that potentially pull from various leadership styles. Superintendents' challenges often define their role as they are expected to cover comprehensive and extensive management-related and leadership-related responsibilities (Przybylski et al., 2018). A meta-analysis of the roles that United States superintendents are expected to perform revealed that district-level leadership and student achievement mattered most (Waters & Marzano, 2006). More specifically, superintendents are expected to establish district conditions such as curricular, instructional, and assessment practices, improve student achievement, control resources, supervise personnel, organize operations, inspire people, foster



coalitions, and implement programs from state and federal direction (Bredeson & Kose, 2007; Rallis et al., 2006). Successful superintendents are creative motivators, facilitators, and implementors of change (Przybylski et al., 2018). Superintendents must be adept and creative at navigating political issues within the community, the BOE, faculty, and student body.

### **Instrumental Leadership**

Though there are many leadership models, instrumental leadership would have superintendents exhibit the ability to set tasks, develop plans, execute, and provide feedback to their teams (Antonakis & House, 2014). As leadership has been studied frequently over many years, labels such as transformational or charismatic are popular, but many theories are found in top leadership positions (Dinh et al., 2014; Meuser et al., 2016). Instrumental leadership is essential to note because, unlike other leadership types, this speaks to the need for leadership to have the ability to evaluate, train and establish goals aside from the ability to influence others (Antonakis & House, 2014). This leadership style emphasizes a leader's knowledge, not just interpersonal or political skills.

### **Change Leadership**

As potential or future superintendents strategize, set goals, and think of scenarios when reaching their position of power, they must address how they will approach the community and stakeholders along with their perceptions of the status quo and the conflict that comes from the interaction between each (Fusarelli, 2006). Regardless of hardship, adversity, and disdain within an organization, changing the status quo can be challenging though there may be no foreseeable advantages to staying with it (Bekir & Doss, 2020). However, the status quo in education has changed even within particular departments within a district, such as music (Odegaard, 2017). Change leadership author John Kotter (2012) explained how leaders must establish urgency,

create guiding coalitions, produce clear visions and strategies, and effectively communicate incentives for change to break the status quo and steer organizations in a better direction.

Understanding how to incentivize and create motivation for change is essential in a superintendent's role, as board members look to incorporate academic goals into contracts more than in previous years (Maranto et al., 2017).

### **Servant Leadership**

The servant leadership style incorporates the empathic requirements of a leader and assists in the role of superintendent (Webner et al., 2017). With any leadership style, it is crucial to understand that individuals are the most valuable resource because, without individuals, there is nothing to lead. As a superintendent, it is imperative to understand how the individuals comprising district staff and faculty become valuable resources, as they can be instrumental in achieving outcomes within departments and buildings (Jennings & Stahl-Wert, 2016). This grouping of individuals will likely have official leaders, such as administrators, or unofficial leaders, such as strong teachers and assistants, who participate in unifying the team towards their goals, by maximizing their output through several facets, including intellectually and ethically (Eva et al., 2019). Though individuals are selected for leadership positions for different reasons, a superintendent can provide for the district to establish a functional hierarchy amongst the different buildings, departments, and stakeholders.

As a servant leader, the superintendent is a dedicated member of the district and supports individuals helping remove obstacles and building on each member's strengths while driving a greater purpose derived from the BOE (Jennings & Stahl-Wert, 2016). One common misconception is that leaders are selected because of skill area; however, Jennings and Stahl-Wert (2016) indicate that the most skilled individual will not be the most effective leader.

Instead, Jennings and Stahl-Wert (2016) suggested that individuals are most likely to become the most effective leaders when they understand that people are the most valuable resource and support, encourage, and improve opportunities for success rather than give directives. Leadership traits of humbleness, empathy, and a keen ability to identify struggles, issues and tap a team's strengths will result in a higher likelihood of achieving rigorous goals (Bass, 2000; Sendjaya et al., 2008). Superintendents are often charged with achieving specific goals, which BOE members generate from personal experience or community pressure from stakeholders.

As a servant leader, a superintendent will gain influence among staff and faculty and the community they serve. Superintendent influence can be found in various circumstances, for instance, when a superintendent assists school principals to ensure they are about to carry out the expectations of the local education authorities (Addi-Raccach, 2015). Influence can also be gained through a more holistic approach to leadership, which describes several interactive elements to foster the greatest success for each member (Eva et al., 2019). These elements may be ethical, emotional, or spiritual avenues for those striving to be the most effective superintendent (Eva et al., 2019). Emphasizing and prioritizing members' growth, well-being, and development subsequently improves engagement and work effectiveness, and servant superintendents see members' value and seek to grow this resource.

Jennings and Stahl-Wert (2016) used a visualization of the servant leadership model, depicting it as an upside-down triangle or pyramid, where the *why* is the basis of the foundation at the bottom. In model superintendents would be serving others', running to great purpose, development, and growth. The four layers that build on a leader's why of upending the pyramid are when the leader goes from the paramount position atop the hierarchy to that below in supporting it, thus becoming a servant leader. In the upended pyramid, superintendents raise the

bar, challenging students, faculty, and staff to strive towards rigorous goals while they, along with others, blaze the trail, removing obstacles from these groups as best as possible. The top layer of servant leadership has the leader building on each member's strengths to foster the highest success or output for each person and, as a result, the team together. In this last step, superintendents, as the leader of leaders in a school district, empower their members with what they need, bolstering positive effects throughout the membership, which enhances innovation and strengthens the decision-making process for all involved (Hassi, 2019). The superintendent serves while leading to transform subordinate leaders, staff, and faculty into something more than they were previously.

Superintendents have a variety of whys ranging from personal and self-derived or a charge from an outside entity such as students or the BOE. If a superintendent's levels of leadership are strong, their district likely enacts best educational practices to bolster improvement throughout (Bird et al., 2013). The superintendent serves while leading to transform subordinate leaders, staff, and faculty into something more than they were previously, as they take on risks, make mistakes, and turn these into valuable learning experiences (Jennings & Stahl-Wert, 2016).

### **Transformational Leadership**

Transformational leadership is often compared and contrasted with transactional leadership in educational literature, frequently regarded as two ends of a single continuum (Judge & Piccolo, 2004). However, they have fundamental differences that are easily observed through action and behavior (Hyseni Duraku & Hoxha, 2021), and similar to servant leadership, the name is closely linked to what defines transformational leadership. Transactional leadership models restrict change, while transformational leadership utilizes resources and relationships for

successful educational leaders (Hoy & Miskel, 2005). Transformational leaders lead by having members adopt the leader's transitional or transformational goals (Bass, 1999; Bush, 2018), and this style of leadership impacts job performance and motivation. In combination with transactional leadership (i.e., leadership member exchange), transformational leadership gives the flexibility to change relationships with team members in real-time rather than just perceptions and attitudes (Ng, 2017). If success is going to be an actuality, relationships between the superintendent and the individual or group must be fostered as they strive toward a shared vision. For instance, a superintendent leading with a transformational leadership style will broadcast these behaviors to instructional leadership, which members will pick up and demonstrate, thus increasing student outcomes (Kwan, 2020).

Transformational leadership can be linked to servant leadership, as both styles strive for change. However, like many other leadership strategies, transformational leaders can veer towards unethical behavior that does not support team members and may sabotage the team or organization's goals and interests (Hoch et al., 2018). Despite this caution, leaders should not assume that all transformational mindsets are negative. Transformational leadership requires that those in charge do more than quantitative changes but also work on qualitative changes within themselves and team members (Burns, 2003). Burns (1978) also noted the importance of integrity and fairness when setting clear goals, encouraging others, and supporting team members as a hallmark of transformational leadership.

Several essential areas mentioned above for a transformational leader to hold onto are similar to those in servant leadership. Support and encouragement of others and setting clear goals and expectations could all be subsumed within the steps of Jennings and Stahl-Wert's (2016) upside-down servant leader pyramid. Transformational and servant leadership must be

compared to one another when examining how to lead educational teams effectively.

Superintendents can also be flexible and take on several leadership styles when adjusting and adapting to new challenges presented by day-to-day changes within educational organizations, entities, and the community they serve.

### **Adaptive Leadership**

Adaptive leadership is a leadership approach in which a leader helps those in an organization flourish under challenging circumstances, directing individuals toward a collective purpose rising above individual ambition (Heifetz et al., 2009). The defining feature of adaptive leadership is the distinction between technical and adaptive issues. Heifetz and Linsky (2017) described technical issues as those that are serious and should not be underestimated, but the solutions are found within the organization and its capabilities. Adaptive issues require the team or organization to change as they do not possess the skillset, materials, or knowledge, thus requiring adaptation (Heifetz & Linsky, 2017). Just as transformational and servant leadership styles use their names as adjectives, adaptive leadership also does the same.

Adaptive leadership traits can assist those aspiring to upper-level leadership positions, such as the superintendent of schools. The status quo may need to be altered mildly or severely, and adaptive traits like developing a vision are essential, or the leader attempting to facilitate change will yield little performance in their favor (Adnan & Valliappan, 2019). Though a vision is just one task under an adaptive leadership style, it can build momentum and pave the way to empower employees, which can foster the success of an organizational initiative (Adamovic et

al., 2020). Aspiring superintendents can use adaptive leadership skills to lead teachers and other support staff to take on meaningful professional development (Boylan, 2018).

The object of having adaptive leadership skills in a position of power is to positively impact whatever outcome is set by the district or organization (Heifetz & Linsky, 2017). Suppose a school leader displays interpersonal skills and empathy toward others and acknowledges the mental well-being of individuals. In that case, they signal that a workplace is a place of safety, positively impacting workplace outcomes (Kock et al., 2019). Heifetz and Linsky's (2017) first step of getting on the balcony can help those aspiring to higher-level leadership positions gauge the needs of employees and garner a better understanding of the workplace to begin establishing an adaptive strategy that increases the chances of organizational success. During the COVID-19 pandemic, getting on the balcony to address the needs of others were demonstrated through the plans superintendents were required to create, follow, implement, and enforce governmental policy and procedure. Government healthcare entities have been tied to school districts more than ever, requiring superintendents to foster relationships with these organizations to protect students, staff, and their districts (Rubin, 2020). More than ever, superintendents oversee wellness and health policies for all attending school buildings (Asada et al., 2021). Navigating such volatile conversations requires leaders skilled in managerial traits who can stand back to assess and reassess situations and adapt to the ever-changing landscape and challenges.

It is difficult for those attempting to hire a leader to foresee prior to leaders standing on the proverbial balcony. Biases, prejudice, and other negative attributes can impact an organization, especially those in higher-powered and likely higher-paid positions. Better organizational outcomes from a hiring process will result from improving the hiring discretion and finding less biased leaders (Hoffman et al., 2018). Those on the journey to superintendency

should also assess their personal views and unconscious biases and use the interview process to assess the biases in the environment they are seeking employment.

When leaders can adapt to situations, it displays their ability to problem-solve outside of the box, demonstrating adaptive skills. Adaptive leadership encourages leaders to seek information from their team members and outside stakeholders to develop a strategy that the team can enact, which is not currently practiced within the organization (Garavaglia et al., 2021). Functionally, adaptive leadership has been linked directly to servant leadership. The unknowns that organizations face require change within departments and teams supported by leaders who are comfortable in these situations of rapid change and can empower their membership to take charge while building on their strengths, bolsters results (Valeras & Cordes, 2020).

### **Skills and Traits in Superintendency**

Skills and traits are the building blocks for successful professional leadership enterprises, and they are often used interchangeably because of the undeniable connection between the two concepts. However, there are some key well-known differences. Traits often refer to qualities and characteristics that an individual is endowed with; however, to reach potential, additional skills are necessary (Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1991). It is well thought out that key leadership traits help a leader acquire the necessary skills to carry out a vision, plan, and execution of their plan. Skills and traits serve and form the foundation for acquiring any new knowledge, be it personal or professional. Since the tasks and functions of a superintendent vary significantly between school districts, it may often be challenging to generalize skillsets and trait characteristics of the best leadership by school board members during the hiring selection process.

### ***Skills in Superintendency***

Skills for the superintendency are vast but can be categorized as an extensive skillset



critical to superintendent success. The superintendent can be the person making the ultimate decision where teachers, students, parents, or other stakeholders may not be happy and require a response that has a negative perception. Skills can be narrower than traits and involve actions such as decision-making, problem-solving, and performance appraisal (Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1991). Self-awareness, moral integrity, relational transparency, and balanced processing are skills that current superintendents should exude and are foundational in the authentic leadership style (Bird & Wang, 2013). As many community members and other district stakeholders seek transparency, authentic leadership can be a powerful leadership style for current superintendents. The superintendent role requires skills such as being an effective manager, teacher-scholar, political leader, scientist-practitioner, and strong communicator (Björk et al., 2014). Additionally, being a superintendent requires strong organizational skills and commitment (Sergiovanni, 1982; Sullivan & Shulman, 2005).

Since the superintendent serves as both manager and leader, additional skills such as enforcing rules and guidelines, controlling the flow of budgetary materials and human resources, and the knowledge and application of skills for continuous school improvement are needed (Kowalski, 2006; Sullivan & Shulman, 2005). The role of the superintendent has grown into a more instructional and information technology leader who must be connected to the community. Information technology skills are needed now, more than ever, with the integration of the internet and social media platforms that connect stakeholders. The position also requires strong coping skills and strong social resources (Ledesma, 2014), yet there is some overlap with internal traits such as positive self-esteem, self-efficacy, optimism, adaptability, determination, and the ability to focus (Conner, 1993; Kotter, 2012; Ledesma, 2014), which can be considered innate but shaped by lived and professional experiences. For instance, communication will be essential

and is typically a skill honed in other leadership positions. However, those on the journey can break the mold and disseminate information inter-departmentally versus the typical intradepartmental conveyances of lower- and mid-level management (Norqvist & Ärlestig, 2020).

### ***Traits in Superintendency***

Potential leaders should be aware of the connection between leadership theories and how personality, which may include ego, impacts decisions at the executive level, such as the superintendent (Holmes Jr et al., 2021). Literature on what traits superintendents may possess include terms such as motivated and competitive and may also embody the ability to hustle with a good heart and have a sense of humor under great humility (Roberts et al., 2012). Similar traits, such as motivation and determination, are essential to have as a superintendent, but another crucial trait is to take ownership over the actions of themselves and others within the organization (Wang et al., 2022). The traits of superintendents help track the accomplishments or failure of those within the position who may find specific traits critical to success where others are detrimental. Hiring members on the committee should also be familiar with a least some basic leadership traits, including those of a new generation filling higher-level leadership roles (Anderson et al., 2017).

Another important personality trait closely related to cognitive ability is EI, which is closely tied to how leaders perform their required roles. It is affiliated with transformational leadership styles and involves how a leader influences others (Görgens-Ekermans & Roux, 2021). Although EI is not a specific trait or skill set in and of itself, there have been positive correlations between an individual's leadership style and self-efficacy (Halliwell et al., 2022). Adaptive, transformational, and authentic leadership encompass domains in which EI may play a

role. For superintendents, EI can help make difficult decisions and be an agent of change; however, how staff and faculty perceive them impacts student outcomes (Goldring et al., 2015). A superintendent with higher EI is likely to have increased self-efficacy and be apt to complete goals they are striving towards as directed by the BOE (Halliwell et al., 2022). While this study will not precisely measure the EI quotient, EI is considered part of the superintendent selection process by hiring committees and, therefore, it is essential to note.

More loosely related to personality traits, religiosity has also been found in leadership roles and often studied as a personality construct, as 75% of people in the United States have some form of religious faith (Pew Research Center, 2014). Those with religious faith in leadership roles rely on their beliefs, which impacts how a person influences others (Hage & Posner, 2015). Leadership theory, religion, spirituality, or some of each, help leaders establish a firm foundation before they can take on the changes of whatever role they acquire (Heifetz & Linsky, 2017). Though employers cannot inquire about a person's religious faith during the hiring process or while employed, religiosity and their accompanying beliefs will, nonetheless, impact the organization for which they are hired.

It is common for employees, or those working with leaders, to express the negative traits associated with those in charge with words such as egotistical, narcissistic, or self-centered. Nevertheless, other forms of ego, such as quiet ego, can be a positive trait as it describes how a person balances understanding the needs of oneself and others (Buonomo et al., 2021). Quiet ego can assist superintendents in understanding the dynamics between stakeholders and BOE members, building administration and faculty, and department chair-people and teachers to assist in making optimal decisions for the district. The ego can be a mixed blessing, taking an individual down a poor decision path. However, if maturely developed, the ego can provide

viewing situations from different perspectives, which can later impact a superintendent's success.

### **The School Superintendency**

Attaining high-level educational positions can be difficult as several factors impact selection, such as student achievement, empathizing genuinely, and communicating effectively (Davis, 1998). Limited research focuses on the superintendent selection process (Glass, 2001); however, the skills, qualifications, competencies, experience, and past performance levels influence the path toward the superintendency and serve as push or pull factors in various circumstances. Wallace (2003) indicated that there are many factors and considerations for selecting a superintendent; the consideration of candidate qualifications and objective criteria such as experience, leadership skills, management skills, communication skills, board and community relationships, and management of resources is essential when selecting a potential superintendent candidate. These aforementioned objective candidate criteria may be related to more external factors regarding candidate selection; other factors that may influence candidate selection could be internal to the organization, such as political factors that prevent a specific individual from advancing to the superintendency. According to Kalbus (2000), a current superintendent may act as an external pull factor for a potential superintendent candidate. Other factors may also contribute to internal push or pull factors, such as a candidate weighing the likelihood of attaining the position throughout the selection process. Many more internal and external factors may be revealed when uncovering a superintendent's various lived experiences and provide great insight to those who have yet to operate in the capacity of an executive-level leadership role.

### **Educational Requirements**

Potential superintendents may hold the certification needed to take on the position.

However, the question for hiring committees is, are these people qualified to take on the lead position in a district successfully? During the selection process, BOE members or hiring firms will look to fit previous experiences and years of experience into the district's profile rather than examining the candidate's actual leadership qualities and skills (Davis & Bowers, 2019).

Therefore, the path to a superintendent position should include leadership training, as they will be responsible for a multimillion-dollar organization with hundreds and thousands of members and stakeholders. The experiences of school superintendents do not usually include leadership training or experience as an educator, thus making the selection process difficult for hiring committees.

### **Experiences**

Those with the appropriate education and certifications needed to become a superintendent may take extra caution and consider the responsibilities in attaining this position, as the responsibilities are substantial and span many roles within the organization. Many studies agree that gender and race disproportionalities within the position across the United States exist (Petersen et al., 2008; White, 2021). Regardless of the belief in race or gender being the factor in why a person may be pushed towards, pulled to, or remain in a superintendent's position, these factors are heavily weighted in United States society and can impact the personal beliefs of a superintendent or those hiring and are important to acknowledge. However, race and gender will be noted but not overtly sought out as part of the considerations for this study on the reasons that superintendents are in their position.

### **Striving Towards Success**

The breadth of leadership literature focuses on the many different ways of motivating others, making positive changes, and ensuring desired outcomes. Superintendents are the top

leaders in the school district's hierarchy and must be a guiding force toward achieving the goals set to strive towards the mission and vision set by decision-makers. Within organizations, individuals move to and from positions, and this internal movement may result in immediate productivity impacts compared to bringing in applicants from outside of the organization (Benson & Rissing, 2020). According to Carter and Cunningham (1997), those who have moved to become effective superintendents share common attributes: innovation, implementation, and strategic planning ability by incorporating priorities with goals to achieve desired outcomes. A superintendent must broadly serve the masses within district bounds and, therefore, they may choose servant leadership using the view that to be successful, they must serve many by serving a few (Jennings & Stahl-Wert, 2016). Servant leadership is just one of the strategies those in charge can use to support their team's effectiveness.

Several other leadership strategies can be effective and even quite similar to servant leadership in one or more ways. To be effective, superintendents must operate at different levels and align the skills of administrative and faculty members to meet the challenges they face (Wheelan et al., 2021). Effective superintendents play a variety of roles on many levels: integrator, observer, and learner; they bring together groups of members, deliver critical feedback, and they must quickly learn from successes or failures (Vilkinas et al., 2020). Using adaptive leadership skills, a superintendent can quickly identify these levels using the metaphor get off the dance floor and go up to the balcony, representing operating at the many different levels (Heifetz & Linsky, 2017). To be a positive force and succeed, a superintendent must leverage their power by serving their direct team members while stepping back to observe and reflect on the situation and steer the district to the best course of action.

As for most in education, leading to success is a primary goal, which is just as crucial for

superintendents to remember. Education leaders may possess various leadership skills and styles, some of which have been expanded upon previously. However, two themes in educational leadership literature were noted: the promotion of stakeholder-centered leadership and leadership that encourages the needed change (Preston & Barnes, 2017). Key characteristics of a dozen successful school systems were combined so that educational leaders could change their school system into an open systems model, which recognizes inputs, the transformation of inputs, outputs, and feedback loops (Gurr et al., 2022). Successful school leaders are essential to districts as their impact is only surpassed by the educators delivering direct instruction to the student body (Bush, 2021).

Leadership skills that emphasize a person-centered or humanistic approach tend to raise the bar for students and staff with this leadership style and have even been shown to significantly impact students' character education (Effendi et al., 2020). To meet the large-scale demands for managing and leading actions with the array of complexities present in contemporary school districts, successful superintendents utilize a person-centered, consultative leadership style now more than ever (Björk, 1993; Björk et al., 2018). Improvements to the system that superintendents operate within can come from an in-depth understanding of the educational system and the stakeholders' influence and role. Leadership that needs to understand individuals in their organization will achieve little to no success (Bolman & Deal, 2017). At the superintendent level of leadership, success is found when an individual in charge can conceptualize how their personality and others can combine for the betterment of the district (Pillay & April, 2022). Pillay and April conversely found that when viewing the workplace through different lenses for analysis, leaders were much less successful as it improved their reflection, growth, and expansion of skills.

The number of literature reviews of successful school principal leadership styles is far more common than reviews of successful school superintendents within the study of the United States educational system. While the practices of effective and successful principals were more frequently and initially studied (Björk, 1993), the instructional leadership roles where superintendents can use their bureaucratic positions to lead improvements can both be examples for aspiring superintendents. Successful principals create a vision and enlist the right team to collaborate on the school's direction by providing professional development, being innovative, and including internal and external stakeholders as change agents (Ylimaki et al., 2022). If a superintendent is familiar with how successful principals run a school building, they can be more prepared to support a principal leadership style to support the success of their district's common goal.

Another comparison drawn in educational literature exists between CEOs and superintendents and how they both aspire to deliver success by understanding the environment in which they operate. This understanding is essential to a superintendent's success, as without that understanding, even the best of changes can end with stakeholders looking to rejoice in the resignation of the district's top leader (Baxter et al., 2019). The superintendent candidate must navigate what a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) represents to the stakeholders they serve. One way a superintendent must understand the environment in which they operate is when defining what FAPE means in their community. For example, as schools move past issues faced due to COVID-19, many schools have provided each student with an electronic device, and some may consider removing this device a denial of FAPE (Hozien, 2019). Litigation over denial of FAPE may contribute to a lack of perceived superintendent success.



The financial environment is also vital to the success of a superintendent. The environment can provide information, funding, and resources to their district. A person must have the wherewithal to withstand pressure and distress, which can come from several environmental angles and negatively impact the leader's role (Stelmach et al., 2021). Since 2019, superintendents have had to navigate a menagerie of potential options to educate their students differently when state and federal mandates have required restrictions to ensure all safety because of COVID-19 (Rubin, 2020). The division observed in the media is apparent at BOE meetings, where stakeholders argue both sides of mandates placed on a district, especially regarding the students. That atmosphere provides a volatile environment and requires grit, determination, and a focus on long-term goals with short-term wins to be a successful leader or superintendent (Caza & Posner, 2019).

The success of a superintendent can be measured in an abundance of ways. Technological proficiency is one-way superintendent success can be measured, as those implementing technological innovations within a district are successful (Sterrett & Richardson, 2019). The amount of trust a superintendent can be given is another measure of success as it correlates with a strong district and community (Benna & Hambacher, 2022). Eventually, however, the yardstick of success typically returns directly to impact the students, as over 70% of interviewed parents felt that stability in a superintendent would lead to school and student success (Kamrath, 2022).

### **BOE Impact on Superintendents**

School boards are elected officials subject to public pressure and must remain present by engaging with stakeholders in the community (Piscitelli et al., 2022). Much research has demonstrated the connection that the success of school districts is contingent on the relationships

between the board and the superintendent (Björk, 1993; Carter & Cunningham, 1997; Kowalski, 2006). Available research points to the fact that school superintendent leadership is vital for change and improvement (Björk, 1993); therefore, it stands to reason that selecting a superintendent is a pivotal action the BOE performs for the success of the district and the community. The selection of a superintendent is just as important as the monitoring of this person and the school budget (Bartanen et al., 2018). Board members must be aware of the multidimensional functions required by contemporary superintendents and recognize vital characteristics essential to superintendent success. Since there have been limited investigations describing the nature of superintendent searches and the factors that are involved in their selection processes (Wallace, 2003), it seems reasonable that understanding how a superintendent reached their position can furnish BOE members with more information and help them better select stronger and more successful candidates that have the best fit for their district.

In addition to the stress of a typical executive-level position coupled with the new environment in which they operate, superintendents are often confronted by the expectations of the BOE they serve. The expectations can change depending on the locality, but overall, it typically can be described as the management of personnel and funds to ensure the highest levels of student success (Rapp et al., 2022). Though BOE members describe these expectations, other skills, such as instructional leadership, are needed as they permeate the building level (Whitt et al., 2015). High demands are placed on the superintendent, assuming they are masters of all specific areas they are responsible for, which is nearly impossible. Instead, BOE members and hiring committees of superintendents should also evaluate the team the superintendent candidate will lead and understand how the candidate's strengths and weaknesses impact the team's strengths and weaknesses.

The superintendent's influence reaches the building level into the classroom, which potential candidates should understand well through their coursework. When the superintendent or BOE members make a decision, they must weigh out the effects on students, understand how stakeholders from the community can be involved, and be able to describe how it aligns with the school's mission statement (Decman et al., 2018). When decisions are made without these considerations, a superintendent may observe public pushback resulting in the BOE placing responsibility on the superintendent for political preservation.

It is vital to back decisions with data to ensure they align with BOE decisions and not result in a district's culture downturn (Superville, 2020). Less than adequate relationships with school board members can result in a higher rate of turnover in the superintendent's seat (Grissom & Andersen, 2012). Navigating the political environment within a school district is a survival skill superintendents need.

Overall, a superintendent's success may not be found in their accomplishments, which can be counterintuitive to what is typically noted when measuring success. The topic of the school superintendent and school board relationships has been cited in education literature, and many studies have cited the relationship between the superintendent and school board determines the superintendent's rate of success or failure (Alsbury, 2003). Therefore, superintendents must foster positive relationships and avoid toxic relationships with members to ensure success. Regardless of its impact, success can be reduced to insignificant actions if toxic relationships are fueled (Flood & Angelle, 2022). Minimizing the negative impacts of poor relationships while fostering relationships with the BOE members throughout a superintendent's time in that role can determine how effective a superintendent can be.

### **Challenges in the Leadership Role**

As a person takes on and endures the stress of being a superintendent, numerous factors can result in failure. This position is the most politically aligned hired position in the school district aside from the elected BOE members who hold the superintendent accountable (Maranto et al., 2017). An individual needs to understand the politics of the BOE and the community they serve to be more likely to succeed in the position. The misalignment of the superintendent's and BOE's authentic leadership skills can increase the probability of political disarray and sabotage relationships, negatively impacting the district they serve (Shapira-Lishchinsky & Levy-Gazenfrantz, 2020) and drives home the importance of researching the district and its BOE before accepting the position.

To avoid failure, a superintendent must know how they are evaluated directly by the BOE and indirectly by internal and external stakeholders. A perceived failure on evaluation must be carefully examined by those seeking an adverse action due to that poor evaluation. Even when each BOE member uses a rubric to assess a superintendent, conflicting results may occur for various reasons, including but not limited to motivations for seeking a BOE position (Henrikson, 2021). Thus, a superintendent must be cognizant of more than their pitfalls but also those of the people they lead and serve.

Candidates for superintendents should consider the expectations and goals that BOE would have them implement and their alignment to their own specific goals they would potentially set for the district. Misalignment of goals, priorities, or funding can lead to increased potential for turnover among superintendents who take on positions that are lower paid and display lower achievement for students (Grissom & Mitani, 2016). Avoiding a role in a lower-achieving district should not be a consideration; properly aligning district expectations and goals

with data and benchmarks to track success is critical for professional continuity and superintendent retention. BOE members should examine compensation, especially in rural or low-achieving areas, to reduce the turnover of people in the superintendent's position and entice highly qualified professionals to their districts (Grissom & Mitani, 2016). There is no basis for the assertion that those who are paid more will succeed more; however, the reason why a person is compensated more may speak to their level of success in previous roles. Overall, setting expectations and goals is crucial to avoid failure where possible.

### **Job-Specific Factors Along the Pathway to Superintendent**

The following sections will describe other determinant factors and variables that influence superintendents along their career pathway before becoming a superintendent while employed and their decisions to stay, leave, or remain in this position. When differentiating between a push and a pull factor, push factors are nondiscretionary, meaning an individual has little or no decision-making power in either leaving one position or being forced into another (Seet et al., 2021). Several factors can push a person away from a role in an organization, including moving a person's family to accommodate a different position at a different location (Richardson, 2006). Where push factors can be forceful, pull factors are at the discretion of the person making the career move. Pull factors tend to be more positive in nature due to the discretionary trait these factors carry. For example, positive organizational relationships can increase the likelihood that a person remains at and moves into a leadership role (Sasso et al., 2019). As stressful as leadership jobs can be, change can be a different stressor that moving positions can pose. The sense of created purpose or affiliation in a position can prevent an individual from moving, even if it is a promotional move (Reinhardt et al., 2020). Financial considerations, relocation of family, household, or personal or social implications may be

considerations to remain in a leadership role. The following section will describe job-specific push and pull factors to and from superintendency and other job-connected mooring issues.

### ***Burnout as a Factor in Turnover***

Burnout would be classified as a push factor. Burnout is most closely associated with emotional or psychological exhaustion and was coined by clinical psychologist Herbert Freudenberger in 1974 (Jackson et al., 1986). Depleted emotional resources, detachment from co-workers or those being aided, and adverse self-perception are the three concepts that separate burnout from stress (Awa et al., 2010). Ultimately, burnout is the imbalance between the employee and the work environment in which they are being paid to function effectively with minimal success (Maslach, 2003). People can remain in a position throughout burnout, but the results of their achievements diminish. Burnout can become a factor that can result in a superintendent being pushed from their position as an internal force or externally from the BOE because of poor performance.

### ***Job Effectiveness***

Job effectiveness will affect the intensity at which an employee feels pushed from a position. The alignment of the superintendent's skillset in the operating environment will be a part of how effective they may be in their position. Connolly et al. (2019) referred to this alignment as the context in which the leader operates determines their effectiveness. Berkovich and Bogler (2020) argue that academia's perspective of effectiveness revolves around the administrator's professional and collegial skillset, whereas conversely, effectiveness is the functionality of managerial skills applied in real-time. Managerial skills are a significant part of a school administrator's job description (Grissom & Bartanen, 2019). If a superintendent can effectively manage their faculty and staff, they are less likely to be pushed from their position.

### ***Pay Satisfaction***

Financial benefits can pull someone from a position, but it may not be enough if they are content in the financial situation of their current position. However, employees are more likely to leave if they are unsatisfied with their current monetary compensation. Pay satisfaction can be broken down into different compensation levels, such as raises or benefits (Tran, 2017). Like superintendents, the higher the pay level for building principals compared to their peers, the more stable they are within the position (Baker et al., 2010; Grissom & Mitani, 2016). For example, if administrators are satisfied with their compensation, they may be less likely to be pulled to a new position or pushed from the current one. Likewise, employees are more likely to be satisfied with their job if they feel their pay is commensurate to their tasks, thus reducing the chance of being pushed out or pulled towards another position (Terpstra & Honoree, 2004). Pay satisfaction could be a pull, push, or mooring factor, depending on the referenced position and person.

### ***Leadership Success and Promotion***

Promotion is typically a positive move for the employee and the organization. The overwhelming majority of school administrators start as teachers. However, many begin teaching to acquire an administrative position. A pull into an administrative position is a desire to have a border impact on students, a building, or a district than within one classroom (Farley-Ripple et al., 2012). Promotion to superintendent is revered as it has the most extensive reach in most districts.

### ***Job Preferences***

Just as a promotion can be a motivator or pull to a superintendent position, a specific job preference can be a pull out of a position one is currently satisfied. For example, aspiring

superintendents will likely take on the role immediately after acquiring the credentials and certifications that qualify them for that position (Davis & Bowers, 2019). If a professional's intentions are known, this pull could be forecasted to reduce any negative impact as a result of leaving a previous position. A candidate for a superintendent position likely has a preference towards leadership as this executive position requires honed leadership skills rarely found in first-time school administrators.

### ***Cost of Transition***

A superintendent may remain in position because of personal reasons. For example, though financial factors may attempt to pull a superintendent elsewhere, the cost of making the switch may not be worth the raise. Time and money have previously been considered in the cost of transition, and recent literature also includes the psychological costs that are factored into this change (Lin et al., 2021). For instance, a \$20,000 raise may not be worth the cost of switching to a different working environment, which may also require a longer commute and increased travel expenses that negatively impact the employee's family. The transition cost toward another position for a superintendent may not be worth a potential raise elsewhere.

### ***Routine/Habit***

Sometimes, an employee is moored to their position because of routine and comfortability. Routine and comfortability can be reasons to look towards terminating a superintendent to benefit the organization as mooring becomes a negative factor. The longer a person is in a position, the more likely work habits will have been formed. When an employee recognizes the amount of repetition required to perform a task to gain efficiency, it may become a deterring factor to take on another position (Cheng et al., 2019). If a superintendent's efficiency benefits the district and its stakeholders, routines, and habits may be beneficial mooring factors.



### ***Job Satisfaction***

As with several other sub-sections, job satisfaction could be found in any of the three primary categories: push, pull, or mooring. An individual may be offered another position, promotional or lateral, with higher pay, but because of the satisfaction within their current position, they may not move. Job satisfaction can include organizational-to-employee goal congruence, professional interactions, respect, and resources (Whipp & Salin, 2018). Job satisfaction can be paired with positional comfort, which is difficult to separate. An individual comfortable within their position may report being satisfied for the sole reason of not wanting to change positions because change can be difficult. An individual in a school district's current middle or upper management position may remain in that position, not moving on to a superintendent, because they are satisfied with their current role within the organization.

### **Why Leaders Become Leaders**

When a person decides to become a leader, there are infinite factors for each individual. The push, pull, and mooring factors describe just a few. Sometimes individuals aspire to be the leader that mentored them. Other times people seek to better their department, team, or organization more than the leader before them. Rising to the role of a leader may include responding during unprecedented times, making real-time decisions with limited knowledge, and understanding how to change based on previous errors (Watkins, 2012). A superintendent likely rose from a previous leadership role within education, although some have come from the private sector.

As aspiring superintendents strive to establish a well-crafted skill set, they must collaborate with other veteran leaders. Research has shown that collaboration between aspiring and veteran leadership members in education has fostered more student success (Clayton et al.,

2013). Not all superintendents have had the opportunity to collaborate with more veteran educational leaders. This lack of collaboration is especially true for those coming from the private sector. Ultimately, as BOE members are charged with enhancing the educational outcomes for the community students, pushing for leaders who have collaborated with more veteran leaders may put students in a better position to achieve.

### **Summary**

Literature on leadership and the school superintendent positions allows future superintendents to evaluate what type of leader would best fill a district's specific need when seeking a potential position. This understanding comes with the expansion and increased expectations the position has, taking in the managerial role to capture instructional leadership as well (Björk et al., 2014). Many factors influence how superintendents are selected, including certification, education, leadership skills, and instructional skills, and depending on the community, gender, and race can be as well (Fortenberry, 2022). The PPM theory provides a basis to understand why a person may be pushed towards, pulled towards, or remain in the superintendent's seat in a school district. This research narrows the gap in the literature to explain the concerns that impact those seeking the position and those that seek to fill the position of the superintendency.

The practical value of this research can provide information for school districts to hire more qualified individuals for a superintendency and educate those aspiring to the position (Fortenberry, 2022). However, colleges and universities may also find this helpful information, as almost half of the superintendents have earned a terminal degree, and the evolution of the superintendent's position can help mold the curriculum for future superintendents (Tienken, 2021). Stakeholders and entities can utilize the literature review to understand better the

leadership styles they may either look to implement or look for in a candidate. Overall, the pushes, pulls, failures, and successes of those who have lived the journey of attaining a superintendent's position give more information for those who attain or seek to attain the position at any point along their career path.

## **CHAPTER THREE: METHODS**

### **Overview**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand the lived experiences of people who have sought and acquired the role of school superintendent in New York. The research design provides an avenue to understanding the lived experiences of superintendents. Chapter Three provides an explanation of the research design to reveal a superintendent's lived experiences in attaining the prominent position. The research questions provided the basis for generating and asking questions during interviews and focus groups. Procedures are then detailed for each data collection method for triangulation. This chapter concludes with the trustworthiness section for analysis.

### **Research Design**

Qualitative research imparts understanding or extends the depth of understanding on a topic by exploring lived experiences, the actions a person or people take, or through the lens a person perceives (Tenny et al., 2021). A qualitative design was appropriate for this study because this phenomenon is unfamiliar to potential superintendents, school districts, and higher educational institutions and requires exploratory research to explain the meaning behind a person's journey to the school superintendency (Fortenberry, 2022). A phenomenological design is used in a qualitative study to gain a deeper understanding of the essence of a specific life experience and the change resulting from those experiences (Patton, 2015). The rationale for using a phenomenological design is the emphasis on exploring a person's experiences while pursuing a district superintendent role.

To explore the lived experiences, research questions are the basis of interview questions generated, questionnaire questions, and focus group questions. The research questions also

guided the study in developing themes throughout the data analysis and synthesis of a superintendent's lived experiences. Research findings and conclusions were analyzed and synthesized to provide information about the lived experiences of superintendents in New York for future interpretation and inquiry, which will add to the current body of literature on this topic.

The specific type of phenomenological research is transcendental. Transcendental was selected because the researcher will engage in setting aside biases to examine the phenomenon and then using imagination to understand the underlying forces of the experience better (Moustakas, 1994). The phenomenon in this study is the journey and lived experiences a person is exposed to when acquiring and carrying out the role of a school superintendent. The transcendental avenue was chosen as it captures more of the participant's knowledge with minimal alteration from the researcher's predispositions (Duncan, 2020). Phenomenology is common in educational research as understanding the conscious experience is key to learning (Hamilton et al., 2019; Van Manen, 1990). Though other approaches to understanding the human experience are available, transcendental phenomenology points toward the sciences of actualities (Moustakas, 1994).

### **Research Questions**

Evidence for a phenomenological study is generated using information from individuals who have lived experiences in a specific area (Neal, 2020). To gather information, interviews, focus groups, and questionnaires were used to obtain answers to the research questions. The research questions are the foundation for the questions created for each information-gathering process. Of the three research questions, the central research question is the cornerstone from which the other three sub-questions originate.

**Central Research Question**

How do school district leaders describe their lived experience during their journey to becoming a superintendent in New York?

**Sub-Question One**

What were the motivations and career goals superintendents set before entering the field of education in a school district?

**Sub-Question Two**

What are common pushes and pulls that land educational professionals into the position of school superintendent?

**Sub-Question Three**

What experiences most prepared district leaders for the superintendent role?

**Setting and Participants**

The setting and participant sections provide the information necessary to visualize and replicate this research. The setting and participants for this study were selected from within the state of New York. The settings for interviews, questionnaires, and focus groups varied depending on the preference and availability of the participants and researcher. However, the locations were all places familiar to the participants as nine of them met virtually from the comforts of their home, office, or vehicle using the media platform Google Meet. One participant invited the researcher into her office which was also a familiar setting. The participants were all current or former superintendents of school districts in New York. Age and gender varied though the youngest interviewee was not less than 35 years old.

**Setting**

The geographic location for this study was in New York. There are 731 school districts,

4,413 public schools, and 355 charter schools serving 2,448,537 K–12 students by 212,296 public school teachers in New York (New York State Education Department, 2023). The districts that superintendents hail from or were previously employed with vary in size, serving graduating classes from less than 100 to over 1,000 students.

As New York is large geographically, the further away from Long Island the participating current or former superintendent was located, the higher the likelihood that the interview or membership within a focus group was conducted through a virtual platform. The settings were selected jointly between the researcher and participant as interviews and the focus group occurred face-to-face or via video conferencing software. Interviews were mostly held virtually with participants in offices, homes or another quiet meeting areas to allow the interview and recording to occur. However, the participants' preferences took precedence to foster more participation in the study.

The school leadership is a standard hierarchy, with superintendents being the highest-hirable position working directly with elected BOE officials. School superintendents directly supervise the upper management in school districts which can include deputy or assistant superintendents, executive directors, and directors of one or more departments. Each superintendent is the head of one school district which is independent from other districts in a county. New York is unlike some other states as counties are likely not a signal school district. A school district in New York can be comprised of a single town or a few towns combined into an independent district from those that surround the school district within the county. Superintendents from this study were selected from Suffolk or Nassau counties, which combined have over 100 school districts. These public-school districts report to the New York State Education Department. Between 10–15 school districts were represented assuming each

participant was the superintendent of only one district. Superintendents in New York directly supervise administrators in the roles of principals, directors, executive directors, and assistant superintendents in the district.

### **Participants**

Participants in this study were current or former superintendents employed by a public school district in New York. Gender varied among participants, and the selection process was not biased toward age or gender. The number of participants was 10, which aligns with qualitative research requirements (Marshall et al., 2022), allowing for data saturation. In qualitative studies, there are typically not more than 10 unique opinions on a specific topic; thus, having 10 participants covered 10 unique opinions with the understanding that there would likely be repeated opinions instead of 10 unique ones (Cobern & Adams, 2020). The sole criterion for this study is that participants currently hold or have previously held the role of school superintendent in New York. To be qualified for a superintendent position in New York, participants earned at least a master's degree and hold or have held state certification for a district level administrative role. All participants were numbered and given pseudonyms for confidentiality purposes.

### **Researcher Positionality**

The motivation behind this study is the personal drive toward achieving a superintendent position in a public school district. Since childhood, leadership has been a part of my life, as I grew up in a multigenerational family business led by my grandfather and now my father. Since the purpose of the study is to understand the lived experiences of a superintendent and the journey up to it, the interpretive framework will be social constructivism. Developed by psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1962), social constructivism stands with a person learning through their knowledge and experiences within social/cultural settings rather than in isolation (Davis et



al., 2017). Just as my background has shaped my motivation for this study, researching the background and lived experiences of superintendents will inspire understanding of the motivation of others who have strived towards this specific position (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Exploring the choices and experiences superintendents have made can contribute to the field of education in a similar fashion to how Mombaers et al. (2023) did using the PPM theory with educators. Though my interpretation of findings altered my perception of the path and life of a superintendent, maximum effort was used to reduce bias throughout the research by bracketing out known biases (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

### **Interpretive Framework**

The interpretive framework for this study is social constructivism. Though constructivism is not only social, but this framework is also based on making or deriving meaning from lived experiences (Pilarska, 2021). Social constructivism is used to gain information directly from people regarding their specific lived experiences as phenomena that occur in everyday life (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Hay, 2016). Use of the social constructivism framework assisted my ability to understand the reason district professionals made a variety of social, personal, and institutional decisions progressing on the path toward superintendency (Davis & Bowers, 2019). Social constructivism shapes this study because it uses individuals' knowledge derived from the experiences that they have lived through to get from one point to another in their lives (Davis et al., 2017).

### **Philosophical Assumptions**

Philosophical assumptions are the basic beliefs or foundation for the logical thinking and reasoning of a research approach that capture the assumptions described in the following sections which influence the researcher's methods, interpretation, and data analysis (Creswell &

Creswell, 2017). In qualitative studies, philosophical assumptions may include rhetorical and methodological assumptions (King & Horrocks, 2010). The three philosophical assumptions, ontological, epistemological, and axiological, are required by Liberty University. The purpose of the following descriptions is to describe the lens through which I view the world.

### ***Ontological Assumption***

Ontological assumptions from a transcendent viewpoint pose reality as intrinsic to a person based on their conscious perceptions (Neubauer et al., 2019). I believe reality to be a singular unit as it is perceived through each person's mind. My belief hinges mainly on what I can sense. However, as many perceive reality, I believe the argument for multiple realities holds weight. Social constructivism points toward the belief in multiple realities based on the lived experiences of other people (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Thus, ontological assumptions will assist my interpretation of results through the viewpoint of superintendents rather than my lens of what superintendents might have experienced and interpreted from those experiences.

### ***Epistemological Assumption***

Epistemological assumptions enable the researcher to take themselves out of this world to produce interpretations, with minimal bias, of the phenomenon they are examining (Neubauer et al., 2019). The epistemological assumptions I hold reside in my knowledge from my lived experiences. I feel most people are influenced by their lived experiences and are naturally biased as a result. However, I am a more logical thinker, and part of my experience is that a person's subjective perception is not indicative of fact. Removing myself from the world will allow the facts derived from experts in a field and research to come out and be interpreted with minimal bias.

### ***Axiological Assumption***

Axiological assumptions are the researcher's biases and beliefs being made known to provide for further transparency to critique potential inadvertent biases that may be found (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As the pathway towards and during superintendency is an area of interest, my biases are found toward those in leadership roles. Generally, I believe that those in leadership roles have a more difficult job than those they lead. True leaders take little credit and the most responsibility. As I aspire to be a superintendent, the information garnered must be carefully gathered, analyzed, and synthesized using techniques such as Epoché to mitigate biases. Epoché, or bracketing, is the process of eliminating a researcher's bias about the phenomenon they are studying (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). As a current school administrator, my biases were addressed to reduce any influences on the data.

### **Researcher's Role**

I was the sole gatherer of data during each phase of the data collection process. Analysis and synthesis were completed almost entirely by me. However, third parties and dissertation committee members were a part of this process as a series of checks and balances to avoid assumptions or biases from entering the study. I did not have any authority over any of the participants. Of all participants, there were three whom I have worked under. The transcendental phenomenological design was chosen because this specific phenomenon in education has minimal literature stating such. I assume that the superintendency is an arduous journey getting to the position and holding it. I feel this position is prestigious and challenging to do well. This design required individual interviews, which I believe to be the most significant and accurate source of knowledge based on the lived experience being studied, while avoiding my personal biases towards the position.

## **Procedures**

The steps to conduct my study included approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB), gaining consent from superintendents to gather data, collecting the data, and finally, analyzing and synthesizing data. The recruitment process for selecting superintendents to complete an interview, participate in the focus group, and fill out the questionnaire was based on credentials and regional location. Questions for interviews, the questionnaire, and focus groups are indicated in the sections that follow were used to conduct each data collection method. I started contacting superintendents in New York to solicit their participation in the study. All participants were given an informed consent form to review and sign (see Appendix B).

## **Permissions**

Permission for this study is comprised of two parts: this study was approved through the IRB (see Appendix A) and after the IRB approval of the study, a consent form was completed by participants prior to data collection. The consent form was given to participants to ensure they understood that the process requires consent, and the researcher also explained their rights (see Appendix B). As most participants could not complete the interview or focus group in person, the consent was emailed to them for review and a signature was obtained before they participated. Site approval was not needed as the one visited site was by invitation of the participant in their office.

## **Recruitment Plan**

A sample pool is the specific group of individuals the researcher intends to study (Subedi, 2021). The sample pool for this study is  $n = 125$  which is the number of public-school districts in Nassau and Suffolk counties in New York, each with one superintendent (New York State Department of Education, 2023). However, this number was slightly more with referrals to two

retired superintendents and another in a different role all found through snowball sampling. The sample size is the actual number of participants from the sample pool for a study (Subedi, 2021). Convenience sampling was also used as I have professional connections to superintendents. The sample size for this study was 10 participants comprising of school superintendents from New York. Participants were introduced to this study via email using the recruitment script (see Appendix C). Superintendent's email addresses were acquired through school district websites or through other superintendents, as many may know or know of one another. The participants' accessibility to the researcher is the basis of convenience sampling (Stratton, 2023). Accessibility to and discussions with superintendents will also lead to snowball sampling, which is a form of chain referral sampling where participants suggest or refer other potential subjects to pursue, be it word-of-mouth or other media (Spencer et al., 2021). Snowball and convenience sampling were used to obtain the 10 participants.

### **Data Collection Plan**

Transcendental phenomenological data can be collected using several methods, but the primary method is a lengthy interview that "involves an informal, interactive process and utilizes open-ended comments and questions" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 114). Data collection was approached using three different methods. The primary method is influenced by Moustakas's research on individual interviews. The second method was a questionnaire for participants to fill out individually. The third method was the creation of a focus group. The focus group invitation was extended to all participants but only six participated of the 10 from the individual interview

stage. The order of this data collection allowed for individual introduction and gaining rapport with participants.

### **Individual Interviews**

The individual interviews were the primary data collection method for phenomenological research (Moustakas, 1994). Interviews were conducted with current or previous superintendents of school districts within New York in a semi-structured format. Moustakas (1994) indicated that the interviews should start with social conversation to create a relaxed ambiance and foster trust between the researcher and participant and are important in gathering a specific point-of-view outside of the researchers. The semi-structured interview style allows for a more conversational format, as follow-up questions can enter after open-ended questions are answered (Raworth et al., 2012). Interviews provide a method of collecting information from a different lens because questions and discussions were held with people who are or have been school superintendents.

Interviews were conducted in person or virtually using Google Meet as the virtual platform. Virtual platforms have been found to produce usable data (Tabachnick et al., 2022). For the interview that occurred in person, the researcher met at the participant's place of preference, private office, with the condition that it was a quiet place where discussion can occur with minimal distraction. Each interview consisted of one candidate and the researcher, who collected answers and discussion points on a laptop using a Microsoft Word document. The interviews were recorded electronically using a laptop and a smartphone as backup. The audio was transcribed afterward into text. For the interviews completed remotely, the video and audio were recorded on the selected platform and simultaneously auditorily recorded with a smartphone. A pen and pad were brought to each interview in case of technical difficulties to ensure interview questions, answers, and discussion topics were not missed. However, the pen

and pad were not needed for any of the data collection sessions.

The 15 interview questions for this research were written to answer the central research question: How do school district leaders describe their lived experience during their journey to becoming a superintendent in New York? Each interview was scheduled for 60 minutes with the time for questioning between 30–45 minutes. The purpose of open-ended questions was to gain insight and substantive description of the details regarding what the experiences are when heading toward the superintendent’s position (Moustakas, 1994). Thus, questions were posed to create conversation on the participants’ experiences in journeying toward a superintendency. The researcher opened with a grand tour question and integrated open-ended style questions which target traits and experiences of the participants (Jiménez & Orozco, 2021). As Moustakas (1994) suggested, creating a social and comfortable setting evokes trust between the researcher and candidates. Marshall et al. (2022) also noted that creating a comfortable and more social discussion style transition increases the participant’s likelihood of getting deeper into their story regarding the phenomenon.

### *Individual Interview Questions*

1. What was the career path that led you to your current position professionally? CRQ
2. How did you enter the field of education? SQ
3. What were the motivations that pulled you towards a superintendent’s role? SQ1
4. How did you come to the decision that you knew you would pursue this position? CRQ
5. What experiences created the path that placed you in the position of superintendent?  
CRQ
6. What college or university experiences, courses, or extracurricular activities do you feel best prepared you for the position? SQ1

7. What undergraduate or graduate programs were most beneficial in securing your position as a superintendent? SQ1
8. What type of career opportunities, successes, or failures do you feel best prepared you for the position? SQ1
9. Describe any negative influences outside yourself that pushed you towards a superintendent's position? SQ2
10. Aside from the college and career experiences, what personal life events or experiences guided you towards the superintendent's position? CRQ
11. What were the short-term goals (i.e., three-year, five-year, ten-year) that you set once you knew you wanted to pursue a superintendent's position? SQ2
12. If you were to take a different career or educational path than the one you have previously described, describe the path you would take to help you acquire and hold the superintendent position? CRQ
13. How has the journey toward the position molded you to better serve the district as a superintendent? SQ2
14. What is the most challenging task or skill needed when striving for a superintendent position? CRQ
15. What is the most valuable advice you have to offer someone who is seeking a superintendent position? SQ2

Experts in educational research have reviewed the questions for validity and conciseness. The first two questions are grand tour questions which allowed participants to describe themselves eliciting general information on their background that is pertinent to their journey towards a superintendency (Jiménez & Orozco, 2021). Questions three, four, and five focus on



how superintendents found themselves on a path towards the position in more detail. These questions focused on motivations, decisions made, and other experiences that participants engaged in. Questions seven and eight target specific educational and career experiences that participants felt were necessary to increase their employability as a superintendent.

Questions nine and 10 focus on personal life aspects of the journey that each participant experienced. These questions from the participants personal experience sought to retrieve data points across a broader spectrum by asking specifically about negative events or experiences in their life. The personal aspects of studying careers and gaining different career positions incorporate work-life balances need to be factored in with professional choices (Warren, 2021). Numerous variables can impact work-life balance and Questions nine and 10 target the personal areas other questions do not.

The objective for Question 11 was to identify common goals that superintendents need to reach their position. Career indecision is impacted by the lack of setting career goals along with some other factors (Creed et al., 2021). Question 11 focuses on those first steps when entering the field which future professionals seeking a superintendent's position can use as goal examples. Similar to Question 11, Questions 12–15 were designed for reflection on the potential actions or pathways that did not occur or were not taken by participants. The reflective process facilitates the understanding of past actions or emotions during the time the reflection is targeting (García Iriarte et al., 2023).

### ***Individual Interview Data Analysis Plan***

Once the data was collected, I used Moustakas's (1994) recommendations and placed the information in front of me to study what was captured during the interview process. I used the seven steps Moustakas modified to analyze without bias when reading through the data. Though

van Kaam (1966) originally had six steps, Moustakas (1994) modified version consisted of seven steps: (a) horizontalization: listing and preliminary grouping, (b) reduction and elimination: determination of invariant constituents, (c) categorization and thematization of invariant constituents, (d) application and validation: final identification of invariant constituents and themes, (e) construction of individual textural description, (f) construction of individual structural description, (g) compositive description: construction of structural-textural description (Galinha-de-Sá & Velez, 2022).

Phenomenological research requires a back-and-forth examination between looking at the data and then describing it to reference repetitive statements of “textural qualities” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 90). I took the interview answers and searched for key phrases, interpreted them, checking for reoccurring features, determined the meanings of the essential phenomenon, and created a definition of the key repeating features of the phenomenon to start the organization of data (Patton, 2015). Horizontalization of data occurs in all phrases where data points are treated equally. Horizontalization is important because the process identified common themes from the interviews of the lived experiences the superintendents described (Moustakas, 1994). Coding key phrases into themes allowed the researcher to look for a more profound understanding of answers given during individual interviews (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Last, the interview themes and meanings were synthesized to look for “textual and composite structural descriptions” to determine the meaning of the studied phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994, p. 144). Superintendents’ answers during the individual interviews were broken down into small data pieces. I used the Delve software to categorize and develop the essence in the current time and space of the study. Delve software supports the data analysis of each participant's answers, as the software is designed to assist in analyzing data that does not

have numbers or a standard structure. I developed themes from the emerging essence(s) to help explain a person's journey to the superintendency.

### **Questionnaires**

Creswell and Poth (2018) suggested that phenomenological researchers conduct multiple interviews and gather information outside the research interview process. A questionnaire enabled the participant to respond to questions without the researcher's presence, as the research is present during the individual interview and focus group. The questionnaire may also capture more information for introverted personalities who may not use as many words verbally rather than written versus more extroverted personalities who typically prefer the social interaction of an interview (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The purpose of having a questionnaire is to capture a different perspective, as participants had time to analyze and formulate a written response rather than delivering an immediate response during individual interviews or the focus group.

The questionnaires were handed to participants after the individual interview or emailed to participants who are participated remotely. The goal of the questionnaire is to provide participants with time and a different media and tone from the questions asked orally during the interview to address the central research question. The goal is to enable time for participants to think of their lived experiences in answering the questionnaire. A questionnaire eliminates the researcher as a pacing and driving force allowing for an anonymous and self-paced answering of questions that cannot occur during the interviews and focus groups (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

To promote participation, there are fewer questions on the questionnaire than in the interviews. The questionnaire is comprised of seven questions that were generated by the researcher. The questionnaire is expected to take 14–28 minutes, estimated at two–four minutes spent on each question. Participants had the option of hard copy or electronic copies of the

questionnaire provided to them, though all preferred electronic copies for ease of access.

### ***Questionnaire Questions***

1. What do you feel should be added to undergraduate or graduate programs that would most likely help future district leaders secure a position as a school superintendent? SQ1
2. What childhood or early adulthood experiences encouraged you to pursue a superintendent position? SQ2
3. Describe the most influential person who encouraged you to seek the superintendent's position. SQ2
4. Describe the most important reason you chose to pursue a job as a superintendent. CRQ
5. What three pieces of advice would you give a candidate who is seeking a superintendent position? SQ3
6. There are multiple, well-documented leadership styles such as:
  - a. Instrumental Leadership (*Directs focus on task accomplishment; emphasizes efficiency and productivity*),
  - b. Change Leadership (*Guides teams through transitions; fosters adaptability and innovation amidst organizational shifts challenging status quo*),
  - c. Servant Leadership (*Prioritizes serving others; focuses on the team's well-being and growth*),
  - d. Transformational Leadership (*Inspires and motivates; encourages creativity and fosters a shared vision for organizational change*),
  - e. and Adaptive Leadership (*Navigates challenges dynamically; responds flexibly to evolving situations for organizational success*).

In your experience, how do you describe your leadership style?

7. The traits of those in leadership positions may include some of the follow: motivated, competitive, good hearted/moral, takes responsibility, good sense of humor, humility/humbleness, strong intelligence, strong EI, confident, and flexible. Which you would associate with yourself that helped you secure a position as a school superintendent and why do you think they are important?

### ***Questionnaire Data Analysis Plan***

The questionnaire requires a written response which slows the rate at which superintendents can respond. Questionnaires are important as they provide a more standardized method to data collection in qualitative research (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Similar to individual interviews, van Kaam's (1966) modified seven-step analysis system was used to create small data points from answers given by participants and combined to derive answers to the phenomenon. After collecting the individual data and building individual themes, the questionnaire data was utilized to categorize codes and develop themes in search of consistencies or commonalities among participants' answers.

The questionnaire answers were coded using Delve to determine the phenomenon's essence from a second perspective. The first task was uploading all the text data from the questionnaires into the Delve program. Epoché was used to limit biases about the experiences superintendents have to secure their position (Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenological reduction limited biases through bracketing and suspending biases about the journey toward superintendency, which is the phenomenon being studied in this case.

### **Focus Groups**

In qualitative research, focus groups are group interviews with questions being asked by the researcher or another selected party (Guest et al., 2017). The focus group provided an

opportunity for rapport to be further established between myself and the participants. Focus groups include people as homogeneous participants who participate in discussion with a series of questions that collect qualitative data for a study (Richard et al., 2021). Though participants in focus groups have displayed difficulties eliciting information on sensitive topics, the interactions and dynamics among group members can help increase comfort levels, thus, increasing the depth of the discussion (Woodyatt et al., 2016).

Based on timeframes for the study and the schedules of superintendents, there was one focus group created that participants engaged within. The focus group contained six participants from the group of 10 who completed the individual interviews and questionnaire (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). As there were not enough participants that were willing to participate in a focus group, there were no more groups created. The point of the focus group is to facilitate more natural conversations, which can yield more information beyond answering questions individually (Guest et al., 2017).

The focus group was conducted virtually via Google Meet for convenience to the participants, promoting increased participation by avoiding unnecessary travel. Like the individual interviews, a computer with audio and video recording was used along with a smart phone. The purpose of multiple recording devices is to avoid data collection issues if technology fails, which it did not. The focus group was scheduled for 60 minutes to allow all participants to answer all questions and give opportunities to build of one another's input. The focus group enable extended contact time and provide more open and controversial exchanges between superintendents (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Though the focus group questions guided the discussion, they remained open-ended to promote conversation among the group members and not exclusively with the interviewer. The

focus group was performed using a semi-structured interview style to elicit responses encouraging participants to discuss the subject during the session (Thomas, 2008). Follow-up questions were asked to increase data input based on the participant's responses to questions. The focus group conversations ended once participants had answered questions from their perspectives.

### ***Focus Group Questions***

1. Where can future superintendent candidates find mentors when pursuing a top position?  
SQ2
2. What classes, professional development, or job roles that prepare someone for superintendency beyond the curriculum taught during the school district leader or administrator classes for certification do you feel made you a stronger candidate for the superintendency? SQ2
3. Describe the major challenges of seeking a superintendent's position? CRQ
4. What makes being a superintendent worth all the experiences you have had up to this point? CRQ
5. What factors encouraged or discouraged you to obtain a superintendent position? SQ2

### ***Focus Group Data Analysis Plan***

To analyze the focus group data, van Kaam's (1966) modified seven-step process was enacted to derive the phenomenon's essence (Moustakas, 1994). The answers were input into the Delve software to create common themes and find the phenomenon's essence. Phenomenological reduction assists in examining the data using strategies such as bracketing, horizontalizing, and organizing themes and then reference "textural qualities" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 90). Focus group data was analyzed for key phrases and reoccurring themes to determine the meanings of the

essential phenomenon and create a definition of the key repeating features of the phenomenon (Patton, 2015). Horizontalization of participants statements from focus group responses were used to derive significant phrases and couple them with other data points creating emergent themes (Williams et al., 2021). Last, the focus group codes were synthesized to look for “textual and composite structural descriptions” to determine the themes which provide the essence of the lived experiences of a district leader as they sought to become a superintendent (Moustakas, 1994, p. 144).

### **Data Synthesis**

The data collected from the individual interviews, questionnaires, and focus groups were synthesized to determine common themes through data triangulation. The triangulation process was completed using the Delve software. Using Delve, the data were organized and engaged in horizontalization to ensure no biases to specific data points collected. Answers to all questions were analyzed from the interviews, questionnaires, and focus group(s) and reduce it into a simpler meaning through the reduction and elimination process (Moustakas, 1994). The textual descriptions were then categorized into themes and checked against the data. Each theme was synthesized using the Delve software into a single node. A node combines data into themes or common concepts and can be compared from different sources such as interviews, questionnaires and other media (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). This node combined the themes gleaned from the data points allowing for conclusions to be drawn and the essence of the lived experienced found (Moustakas, 1994). The data synthesis led to the answer to the central research question.

### **Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness is a study's transparency, transferability, and confirmability (Stahl & King, 2020). Lincoln and Guba (1985) developed a way to measure trustworthiness in a



qualitative study as a truth value. Trustworthiness answers the question of how much truth is found within the data presented in a study. This truth value contains five key concepts as follows: (a) credibility, (b) transferability, (c) dependability, (d) confirmability, and (e) authenticity. The following subsections provide a more detailed look into each section.

### **Credibility**

Credibility is an essential factor in evaluating the trustworthiness of a study's findings. Credibility is weakened if the data collected does not accurately depict the phenomena or if the analysis appears biased or untruthful (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility can be increased by ensuring internal validity where the actual research portions of the study coincide with the study's intent (Moser & Korstjens, 2017). Natow (2020) indicated that information acquired from high-profile interviews can be problematic if there are self-serving answers or misrepresentations of a recalled situation. Comparing the interview information with the data from the focus group and questionnaires helped to determine biases, self-serving, or elusive answers and labeled them as outliers, so patterns can be found using multiple data points for validation (Natow, 2020). To increase the credibility of the focus group, the findings were verified with the participants. Member checking allowed participants to review the interpretations of their focus group and weigh in with their opinion (Stahl & King, 2020).

Peer debriefing reveals the research to peers with minimal interest to analyze different parts of the study, such as the questions, to clarify areas that may be assumed or implied by the researcher (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Using peers to discuss data points and findings throughout the study will allow outside critiques while immersed in the research. The peer debriefing was completed before member checking which allows members to give feedback on specific interpretations of data collected from peers (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Motulsky, 2021). A school

administrator and a psychologist assisted in completing the debriefing for this study. Both members have attained a doctorate in their areas of profession, Doctor of Education, EdD, and Doctor of Psychology, PhD. Peer debriefing also helped the researcher during the reflection process during data collection (Francois et al., 2018). Understanding the participant's views and representations and accurately reconstructing them by the researcher was essential to credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2015).

### **Transferability**

Transferability determines how information can be used across different areas instead in isolation within the study itself (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). It is important to describe how the information can apply beyond the research and be used in different geographic areas or professions (Shenton, 2004). As all participants were current or previous superintendents, it is important for future researchers to adhere to this criterion if trying to replicate the study. Using information from superintendents in New York may coincide with those seeking a superintendent's position in their district. Transferability will be most applicable to New York superintendencies as those are the participants included in all three data collection methods. The researcher will create the conditions to increase the probability of transferability, but it is important to acknowledge that transferability can only be made by the reader.

### **Dependability**

Dependability is the ability to replicate the findings consistently if the same participants, setting, questions, and methods were used (Shenton, 2004). All the questions used for interviews, questionnaires and focus groups are written out so future researchers could use them verbatim. Chapter Three of this study details each section to allow outside researchers to replicate specific research areas, creating a more dependable outcome (Janis, 2022). The effective description of

the procedures gives detailed information to strengthen the dependability and overall trustworthiness of this study. The dissertation committee members and research director will assist with the inquiry audit.

### **Confirmability**

Two techniques were used to ensure the greatest degree of neutrality possible including triangulation and reflexivity. Triangulation ensures that numerous data points are used to derive a conclusion on the phenomena being studied (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Patton, 2015). Triangulation was achieved using three data collection methods: individual interviews, questionnaires, and focus groups for analysis and synthesis in searching for commonalities and themes. Reflexivity is the last technique of confirmability. In seeking out how interactions between the researcher and participants are “bidirectionally interactive and interdependent,” I journaled thoughts as a reflective process using my laptop (Patton, 2015, p. 70). Reflexivity will be completed throughout the study as part of the Epoché process.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Before any participants were contacted, the study was approved through the IRB at Liberty University (see Appendix A). The written and verbal dialogs from the questionnaire and asked during interviews and the focus group(s) were respectful, non-biased, and just to the participants as recommended by Aluwihare-Samaranayake (2012). The participants were given an informed consent form to sign (see Appendix B), which notified them that the study was voluntary and that they had a right to cease participation at any time without penalty. Confidentiality will be maintained with minimal identifying information such as gender, age range, and years of experience (Pascale et al., 2022). Names of school districts and participants will be limited to numbers and pseudonyms for confidentiality. All information is stored on a

cloud-based system accessible only through security passwords held only by the researcher. After 3 years, the data will be destroyed per Liberty University IRB protocols. The risks or benefits the participants may experience are minimal, as the media used for interviews are based on the participant's preference and kept secure by password protected technology. The researcher will demonstrate reflexivity during the process to find and remedy potential issues (Potthoff et al., 2023).

### **Summary**

Chapter Three detailed the reasoning and methodology used to collect, analyze, and synthesize data for this transcendental phenomenological study. I sought to understand the lived experience school superintendents encountered on their journey to the position. The three philosophical assumptions I have are, ontological, epistemological, and axiological, as described by van Kaam (1966) and modified by Moustakas (1994), give the reader a background through which I view the world. My ontological assumption includes viewing the world through a single reality which can be sensed and verified by others. I also believe that a person is significantly impacted by their experiences, which summarizes my epistemological assumption. My last assumption, axiological, notes that I believe that those in leadership roles have a more difficult job than those they lead.

Data were collected through individual interviews, questionnaires, and focus groups and the Epoché process was used during and after each collection to mitigate biases. Using van Kaam's (1966) modified seven steps, data were analyzed and synthesized to identify common themes using Delve software. Trustworthiness and credibility were achieved through data comparison between different data collection actions, peer debriefing, and member checking.

Triangulation was achieved through cross checking three different data collection processes with the PPM theory to validate findings.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS**

### **Overview**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand the lived experiences an individual encounters on their journey to becoming a superintendent at a school district in New York. The following sections depict the themes that were drawn from the participants' answers in individual interviews, questionnaires, and the focus group. Three themes were derived from the data analysis process: professional relationships and skills, motivations and goals, and career development. The subthemes of mentorship, educational leadership and skills, pushes, and pulls are expanded upon under the theme associated with each. Participant numbers are aligned with pseudonyms in this section for reader convenience and to maintain participant confidentiality. The findings under the central research question note that professionals in New York commonly describe their journey to becoming a superintendent as traditional, encompassing experiences of mentorship, leadership skill development, and work situations essential for successful acquisition of a superintendency.

### **Participants**

The 10 participants, all current or former superintendents, with seven currently in the position, engaged in individual interviews comprising 15 open-ended questions in a semi-structured format. Data was collected manually and transcribed with the assistance of TurboScribe. Following each interview, participants received a thank-you email along with the questionnaire and an invitation to join a focus group, with responses electronically submitted or returned via email.

Scheduling the focus group led to significant challenges due to the conflicts of schedules among the superintendents. Nonetheless, once the focus group commenced, the group dynamic

allowed participants to elaborate on their position as a school superintendent. Participants candidly shared their journeys to the superintendent's role, yielding rich raw data. All interviews and focus group discussions were transcribed, and combined with questionnaire text, uploaded to the Delve platform for coding and analysis. Common themes from diverse data collection methods and participant inputs were identified, with outliers noted and recorded accordingly. Pseudonyms were used to protect the privacy of participants.

**Table 1**

*Superintendent Participants*

Participant number	Pseudonyms	Years* as superintendent	Years in education	Highest degree earned	Retired Y/N
001	Maci	10	32	Doctorate	Yes
002	Sara	2	35	Master's & 2-years doctoral research	No
003	Chance	16	40	Doctorate	Yes
004	Sean	2	38	Master's & post-graduate certificate	No
005	Sylvia	4	23	Doctorate	No
006	Paul	7	29	Doctorate	No
007	Kaleb	2	34	Doctorate	No
008	Kaci	1	25	Doctorate	No
009	Jaimie	5	25	Master's & post-graduate advanced Certificate	No
010	Theodon	2	28	Doctorate	No

*\*Years as a superintendent are rounded up to the nearest year if the position is currently held.*

**Participant 001 – Maci**

Participant 001, Maci, is a White female who was a superintendent for a decade. She is between 55 and 65 years old. Her background differed from other participants as education was not her original career path. Maci noted, “I actually came from the corporate environment where I had spent a decade or so and then found my way into the business of education” (Individual Interview). Despite a business background, she worked in district office prior to her superintendency and in addition to her career in education, is an instructor for educational leaders. Maci’s guidance to leaders in education aligns with her beliefs in what likely helps future district leaders as she lists three additions to the training that is currently given as follows, “Internships with current practicing administrators; meaningful internships for course credit; professors who have direct experience in the field of study/course” (Individual Questionnaire).

**Participant 002 – Sara**

Sara is a White female superintendent between 50 and 60 years old. Sara’s background is traditional as she started her career as a teacher and was promoted from building administration positions of assistant principal and principal to district-level administrative positions as assistant superintendent for human resources and assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction. Sara’s position as superintendent was not her ultimate goal. Sara was content in her assistant superintendent position and when asked about the superintendency by the BOE president she responded, “No thank you, I have a 3- and 5-year-old at home” (Individual Interview). However, she did ultimately accept the position and held the position to fill the superintendent vacancy in the school district until returning to her position as an assistant superintendent.



**Participant 003 – Chance**

Participant 003, Chance, is a White male who held the title of superintendent for 16 years. He was between 55 and 65 years old. Chance held numerous positions, starting his educational career as a teacher. He was aware early in his career that the superintendency was a likely path he would take as he explained, “early on, I kind of saw it as what would be most impactful, where could I have the greatest effect on helping kids” (Individual Interview). His movement through a variety of administrative solidified his desire to become a superintendent. Chance’s experience in school administration spanned, “summer school [principal], assistant principal, three different principalships” (Individual Interview).

**Participant 004 – Sean**

Sean is currently a superintendent in New York State and has held this position for the past 2 years. He is White and between 55 and 65 years old. Sean’s path was similar to many other participants as he initially started as a teacher and was promoted through the administrative ranks. Sean has had experience as an assistant principal, principal, assistant superintendent for school personnel and deputy superintendent. He is the only superintendent interviewed who was previously told he had a position as school superintendent, only to have the offer retracted. Sean explained that when he wanted the position initially and interviewed for it, he was “actually named superintendent and then unnamed superintendent” (Individual Interview). However, Sean stated, “retrospectively, it was probably the best thing [that] I did not get that superintendent position” at the time.

**Participant 005 – Sylvia**

Sylvia is a current school superintendent. She is Black and between 50 and 60 years old. Sylvia’s journey in education started as an elementary teacher and then promoted to assistant

principal and principal prior to acquiring a district level administrative position. She explained that she was a principal when unexpectedly “the superintendent came and he goes, I really need you to be at central office” (Individual Interview). She was one of the two participants who did not have the superintendency as a goal initially, but overcoming the issues posed by COVID-19 while she was in the assistant superintendent’s role proved to be a deciding point for her district’s BOE to pursue her for the superintendent’s position. “They [BOE members] said, you're going to be the superintendent because you got us through this big storm. I’m like, I kind of like being assistant sup[erintendent]” (Individual Interview). However, Sylvia did ultimately take the position which she is currently holding.

#### **Participant 006 – Paul**

Participant 006, Paul, is a White male currently holding the superintendent position. He is between the ages of 50 and 60 years old. Although much of his career was on the administration side of education, Paul had a typical journey from teacher to administrator to superintendent. Paul stated, “I was an assistant principal. . . went back to [redacted] as the principal, . . . [and then] was the director of special education” (Individual Interview). A previous superintendent influenced Paul to think about the superintendency. Paul stated, “I was an assistant superintendent in my early 30s. So, he [the superintendent at the time] really had said, hey, you know, the sky's the limit for you. You should really consider being superintendent down the road” (Individual Interview). Paul’s various administrative positions were noted and have ultimately helped him attain the superintendent’s position.

#### **Participant 007 – Kaleb**

Kaleb is a current superintendent. Kaleb is a White male between the ages of 50 and 60 years old. He has been on a district level administrator past for over 20 years of his career. Like

many other participants, Kaleb's journey to the superintendency was traditional. He was selected as a teacher during a difficult hiring period and after was promoted through different administrative roles. Kaleb explained that back in the "Early 90s there weren't a lot of positions available in public school education on Long Island, very tough to get into. I think I sent 400 resumes out my first year and only got like three interviews" (Individual Interview). Kaleb's administrative experience prior to the superintendency was a chairperson for the humanities department, supervisor of the social studies department, building principal, and then assistant superintendent.

### **Participant 008 – Kaci**

Kaci is a White female between the ages of 55 and 65. Though she is a 1st-year superintendent, she has been a district level administrator for many years. As an administrator she was an "assistant principal and from there, went from district to district. I did move around a lot, which sometimes people frown upon. But in all of those places were opportunities for me to learn" (Individual Interview). During the times she was moving around, she earned her doctorate degree and has been an instructor for educational leaders focusing on research. Kaci noted that in addition to her learning experiences both collegially and professionally, she has "been a BOE vice president" (Individual Questionnaire).

### **Participant 009 – Jaimie**

Jaimie is currently a superintendent. Jaimie is a White female who is between the ages of 45 and 55 years old. She has held the superintendent's position for 5 years. Her journey started with teaching and went up through central administration prior to her position as superintendent. She jumped from helping with curriculum and writing proposals as a teacher to the right hand of an assistant superintendent after acquiring her degree in administration. The position she

acquired was described as “like an assistant to an assistant superintendent. It's a lot of curriculum and instruction work. It's AIS work. It's librarians and intervention work. So, I literally went from being a literacy coach to working in central office” (Individual Interview). After that move from teachers bargaining unit to central office administration, Jaimie became an assistant superintendent prior to her superintendency.

### **Participant 010 – Theodon**

Theodon is currently a superintendent. Theodon is a White male who is between the ages of 45 and 55 years old. He has held the superintendent’s position for 2 years. After acquiring a position as an English teacher, Theodon moved up through mid- and upper-level administrative positions before acquiring a superintendent position. Theodon’s administrative experiences started “as an assistant principal in two different schools. I became a K–12 coordinator of English language arts and reading. Then I was assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction. Now I am a superintendent” (Individual Interview). Theodon noted that his initial administrative role as an assistant principal was blended as he “still taught one period a day” (Individual Interview).

## **Results**

Data from the individual interviews, questionnaires, and a focus group session were used to create the themes and subthemes. Three overarching themes were developed: professional relationships and skills, motivations and goals, and career development. Professional relationships included subthemes of mentorship as well as education and leadership skills. Pushes and pulls were subthemes derived from the theme of motivations and goals. Career development was initially a subtheme of motivation and goals but was pulled as a general theme without subthemes. Results from data collection methods include participants' experiences when

journeying to their position as a school superintendent. It should be noted that the results from data collection presented one predominantly common code that all participants mentioned: mentorship.

**Table 2**

*Themes and Subthemes*

Themes	Subtheme 1	Subtheme 2
Professional relationships and skills	Mentorship	Education and leadership Skills
Motivations and goals	Pushes	Pulls
Career development	-	-

**Professional Relationships and Skills**

Current and former superintendents who participated in the research study noted the importance of developing professional relationships, such as mentors, and the significance of education. Professional relationships and skills are divided into two subthemes: mentorship and education and leadership skills. Mentorship and education and leadership skills are valued and necessary for personal and professional development when on the path to the superintendent's position. Some mentors were direct with participants, such as Sara's experience where her superintendent stated, "I want you to come to central office and do personnel" (Individual Interview). Chance explained that his mentors "help[ed] to steer me towards administration" (Individual Interview). A person's educational journey, the competencies and skills they regard as essential, and the impact of their relationships with others all contributed to their success. These relationships and mentors who contributed to participants' success were typically found

within the district they are or were employed in. Paul noted, “the best place is if you could find [mentors] within the district that you're working, because many times you're going to see the flow of what's happening, be able to check in on day-to-day things and ask questions.” (Focus Group).

### ***Mentorship***

Mentorship was a primary subtheme that all participants mentioned. Participants may not have stated that an individual who assisted them in their journey was a mentor; however, others were more direct in their assertion that mentors were essential on their journey to superintendency. Mentorship embodies a reciprocal process where the mentor and mentee contribute to each other's growth, fostering a sense of belonging, empowerment, and skill acquisition. Chance stated, “I had some mentors along the way that definitely helped me” (Individual Interview). Support and guidance were noted by Paul when he said, “having really good superintendents who allowed the assistant superintendent to participate in executive sessions and meetings and have a voice and communicate with board members really led me that it's something I wanted to do” (Individual Interview).

Maci stated, “I think that in the end, it was trusting those people that were around me” (Individual Interview). She further explained, “the superintendent asked to meet with me and encouraged me to come into the field” (Individual Interview). When looking for trusting relationships, Chance added to Paul's comment from the previous section explaining that there is importance to external mentors stating, “having also, in addition to somebody internally, having someone externally that really has no vested interest in the work you're doing except for helping you.”

### *Education and Leadership Skills*

Education is a requirement to be in the public-school setting as an administrator of any capacity. However, all participants continued their education past the minimum requirement for a master's degree, with seven of the ten participants going as far as earning their doctorate. Mentorship was also a part of education for several candidates. Kaci noted that one of her mentors “took me under his wing. He was the one that really encouraged me to expand my knowledge...and become a doctoral candidate” (Individual Interview). Though mentors pushed participants towards further education, Chance stated, “I don’t think the college programs do an adequate job at all preparing [people] for the superintendency” (Focus Group). Other candidates built on that answer, noting district level administrative experience as more impactful than education, especially in building needed leadership skills.

Leadership skills were built through each participant's experiences before becoming superintendent. Jaimie noted that her work in a school district was “tremendous in leadership. It was during really difficult times. We lost funding, we excessed teachers. We closed buildings” (Individual Interview). Kaleb noted that patience is the most important but challenging skill, especially with himself. He noted, “The most important thing I think is patience, which I don't often have. I have patience for other people, but not a lot of patience for myself” (Individual Interview). Maci, a veteran superintendent, stated that you need to be “effective, clear, [and have] concise communication” (Individual Interview) to be successful in your journey to the superintendency. Kaleb noted several traits to be successful starting with being “humble and kind...you must [also] be a scholar of your field and continue to learn even as a superintendent” (Individual Questionnaire).

## **Motivation and Goals**

Motivation is a theme generated from participants' descriptions of how or what pushed or pulled them in the direction of the superintendency. The data did not lend itself to measuring the intrinsic motivation of each participant. However, based on their accomplishments, experiences, or the situations they were faced with over time, alluded to the pushes or pulls they felt. Jaimie had intrinsic motivations towards her district and the potential there noting, "I knew I could make a difference for this community and that we had the recipe for success" (Individual Questionnaire). Kaci explained that goals were not so streamlined, "Even though I had those 5-year goals, they didn't come to fruition at all. They just didn't, even though I tried; it wasn't from me not trying to get there" (Individual Interview). Though goals were set, external factors changed the outcomes though motivation was still apparent. Getting to the superintendency is a series of many small goals. As Kaci explained, the goals changed though she did not lose her motivation and achieved her ultimate goal of being a school superintendent.

### ***Pushes***

Pushes are negative reasons a person would move towards a superintendency. One push towards this top position was due to mistreatment. Sylvia stated, "When I was a teacher, we had a principal that wasn't really always nice to people, you know, and I'm like, [you] can't treat people that way" (Individual Interview). Sylvia's push was also a result of "observ[ing] leaders who fell short in treating staff with the respect and support they deserved, a sense of responsibility emerged. Witnessing instances where educators and other staff were mistreated fueled my determination to pursue a position of influence" (Individual Questionnaire). Others were pushed into the position because of imminent need. Sara commented on a previous superintendent she worked under who left her position. It was a difficult time for Sara and the



district as she explained that this person impacted the administrative team, noting, “She was pulling us apart. She was very divisive when she came here. And, you know, we were pretty tight, the group of administrators that we had here” (Individual Interview). Seeking stability was another push noted as the high turnover of superintendents was problematic. “In a period of 10 years, we had six superintendents, and both the board and the educational community of my school district were looking for consistency and stability” (Individual Interview). Overall pushes led participants to take the position to make their district better by providing more professionalism, cohesiveness during tumultuous times, or stability within the district.

### ***Pulls***

The draw to the superintendent's seat was not that different from the pushes, though a more positive connotation was found in this data set. Chance wanted to be where he could be impactful as he delineated, “I guess early on, I kind of saw it as what would be most impactful, where could I have the greatest effect on helping kids” (Individual Interview). Theodon explained that “after 8 years of being a lieutenant to three different superintendents, I came to the conclusion that my time is now” (Individual Interview). Theodon further noted that “I wasn't interested in waiting around to become the superintendent in my own district” (Individual Interview). The prospect of a superintendent's role had internal pulls for some, such as Theodon, or external pulls from mentors or colleagues; as Paul stated, “I was an assistant superintendent in my early 30s. So [the superintendent] had said, hey, you know, the sky's the limit for you. You should really consider, you know, being superintendent down the road” (Individual Interview). Though not all pulls were a result of direct mentorship, each participant noted inspirational people, either professionally or personally, who encouraged the pursuit of the superintendency. Maci explained several people who pushed her towards the superintendency which was the,

“teacher’s union president, current leadership team, current board of education members, my mom. If I had to choose one, it would be the teacher’s union president” (Individual Questionnaire).

### **Career Development**

This theme was generated from the different work experiences and career pacing participants explained regarding their journey. All study participants transitioned from educational to administrative positions except for one individual, who will be discussed in the next section. Theodon stated, “I was an English teacher [and then] I was an assistant principal in two different schools” (Individual Interview). Jaimie noted she “was a teacher for about ten years” prior to becoming “a literacy coach at the elementary level” (Individual Interview). Sara had a similar path expanding on her position when she said, “In my career path [I] was [a] teacher in special education, which was basically because of my father, who was a teacher, and I used to go to his classroom with him. I knew that I wanted to be a teacher” (Individual Interview). Sara further explained that she, “only had dreams of being a special education teacher” (Individual Questionnaire) but influential people who promoted further career development were, “my principal when I was a teacher, and an assistant superintendent and Superintendent when I was a principal. The BOE president was literally the one who offered me the position, encouraging me to accept” (Individual Questionnaire). Throughout the different journeys, teaching was a prominent theme along with central or district office administration among participants.

All the positions in career development are work experiences that were elaborated on by participants. Sara stated that as assistant superintendent, “all the workshops that we do with the board, the budget planning workshops, when we do the 5-year budget planning, those kinds of

workshops prepared me best for the mechanical part of it” (Individual Interview). Sylvia’s career experience as a teacher was the “turning point for me. The realization that the only way to impact the educational system substantially was to step into a position where I could influence policies, culture, and overall leadership” (Individual Questionnaire). Many attribute the skills they honed and used as superintendents to specific times in their careers. Kaci's unique experience helped her as she noted, “I became a board member. And I think that was integral to the way that I work with the board now. That has absolutely helped me” (Individual Interview).

### **Outlier Data and Findings**

Overall, a traditional journey to the superintendency was a career within the field of education, and each participant described their time as a teacher. Participants further described pushes and pulls as well as professionals who guided them along their journey. However, one outlier piece of data was provided by Maci, whose journey started in the corporate world. This start in corporate changed the typical entrance into education as Maci as she did not teach in a K–12 classroom.

### ***Non-Traditional Path***

Maci explained that her “journey is basically a very non-traditional path. And I did not go through the educational ranks as a public-school K–12 teacher. I actually came from the corporate environment” (Individual Interview). Before becoming an employee of a school district, Maci’s interest was from the parental side. She stated she served:

On a budget advisory committee as the parent representative for my home school district.

And after the budget process was completed, the superintendent asked to meet with me

and encouraged me to come into the field of business of education. (Individual Interview)

Thus, Maci came into the district as a school business official, starting her educational career in a

district level administrative position. Maci did not feel that was a negative piece of outlier information. She further noted, “I felt like I made smart decisions that were calculated in my career. And fortunately, those decisions were very positive and paid off” (Individual Interview).

### **Research Question Responses**

The journey to a superintendent’s positions in New York State's public-school districts is often characterized as traditional or typical, evolving from the role of educator to leadership roles in administration. Participants held a variety of administrative positions along their journey. Throughout these professional pathways, individuals encountered a variety of hurdles and opportunities that shaped their professional development, including mentorship, leadership skill development, and real-world work situations. Some superintendents articulated early career aspirations towards leadership, undertaking administrative and leadership courses or assuming roles such as union president within their school districts. However, for others, the path to the superintendency was a more unorthodox or unexpected one, where participants were pushed or pressured from district stakeholders. The motivations reveal the complexity between personal aspirations and external influences that shape the career trajectories of those striving to be school superintendents.

### **Central Research Question**

How do school district leaders describe their lived experience during their journey to becoming a superintendent in New York?

The word *traditional* or *typical* was often used by participants when describing the journey. A traditional journey for this study includes a career move from teacher to administrator and then, superintendent. Nine out of 10 participants were K–12 educators prior to entering various administrative roles and the superintendency. The single outlier path, traveled by Maci,

who did not start her career as a classroom teacher, proved that though the overwhelming majority of superintendents start as educators, that is not the only experience a superintendent may have been involved with, nor the only place to find those seeking the position, as she noted, “I’ve always been the exception to the rule...I actually came from the corporate environment” (Individual Interview). However, this does not preclude encouraging potential superintendents from starting their careers teaching, as Macie “echo[ed] what [Paul] said...say[ing] it’s in building your network for the decades prior to the superintendency” (Focus Group). Paul had explained, “the best place, is if you could find them [superintendent candidates], is within the district you’re working in” (Focus Group).

Whether participants noted that they knew they would be a superintendent of schools early on or not, there were five categories of administrative roles, with at least one of which they had worked under. These roles included titles such as assistant principal, principal, curriculum director, executive director and assistant/deputy superintendent. At least one of the aforementioned titles were part of various paths in a person’s journey to the superintendency, but Paul stated that, “There is no one correct pathway to the superintendency” (Individual Questionnaire). There were no consistent data points noted of which titles were most important or more valuable than others in traveling to the superintendent’s position.

Participants' lived experiences included mentorship, development of leadership skills, and work situations, which provided the necessary tools to take on the superintendency successfully. Mentorship was part of the professional relationships almost all participants noted with the exception of Sylvia who stated:

My journey toward the superintendency was not marked by a lack of external influencers or mentors guiding my path. Rather than being inspired by a particular individual, my

motivation stemmed from a profoundly personal drive for self-preservation and a relentless commitment to positively impacting the educational landscape. (Individual Questionnaire)

All others stated that someone influenced them or pushed them towards achieving further in their educational careers, many of which were superintendents themselves as Sara noted her superintendent stated that she wanted her “to come to central office and do personnel” (Individual Interview). Sean built on the mentors that could be found when working in central office indicating that he found some “with the Superintendent’s Association...[and] found that it was very beneficial to speak to someone outside your sphere” (Focus Group).

### **Sub-Question One**

What were the motivations and career goals superintendents set before entering the field of education in a school district?

Superintendents who stated they knew early on in their career that they would place them in a superintendent position, career goals focused on acquiring leadership roles. Two of the 10 participants knew they were going to strive towards the superintendency early versus two others who did not hold higher administrative aspirations until they had been approached for the position. Kaci’s goals were not based in education when she started her career as she “started [her] career in catering and really taking care of other people making sure that everyone was happy” (Individual Interview). Kaleb had goals to get a teaching position and then become an administrator, but it was it was years after acquiring a teaching position which was scarce:

I think I sent 400 resumes out my 1st year and then about 14 the following year. [Of] the 400, I got like three interviews. The following year, I got like seven interviews.

So, it showed that things were changing. I wound up getting a job in the...School

District as a social studies teacher. Five years later, I was doing my administrative License. (Individual Interview)

Eight out of 10 of the participants started out as educators and did not know initially they would become a school district superintendent. However, as any administrative role has similar or identical prerequisites as far as higher education and state certification requirements, all participants took administrative and leadership courses through university or and began taking roles within their school district, such as union president as expressed by Sean in his individual interview. For the two superintendents, Sara and Sylvia, they were unaware they would end up in that position and were both concerned with their predecessor's leadership. Sara was approached by a BOE member with the directive "to keep the boat [district] afloat, keep the ship sailing... We just need someone to continue for the year" (Individual Interview) and Sylvia with a similar instruction from her BOE stating, "you're going to be the superintendent because you got us through this big storm" (Individual Interview).

### **Sub-Question Two**

What are common pushes and pulls that lead educational professionals to pursue the position of school superintendent?

Two superintendents took on a superintendency as a push because either they or others in the district felt they would be a better option than current or future candidates. Sylvia and Sara noted that previous administration pushed them towards the superintendency as noted previously in quotes from their individual interviews. Seeking stability and professionalism within the district were typical pushes. Sylvia explained that her "superintendent decided he was going to be home for a while" (Individual Interview) during the COVID pandemic which created the push from her BOE into the superintendency. Stability was also being sought after by the district in

Sara's situation as she stated, "The BOE president was literally the one who offered me the position, encouraging me to accept" (Individual Questionnaire).

The pulls to superintendency predominantly surrounded attempts to doing the best for students, but within each participant's own way. Theodon commented on his pulls noting, "I actually believe that I can make a contribution and do good things for my district and do good things with the people who I'm working with here" (Individual Interview). When questioned on specific pulls, Paul explained, "I was interested in the position for quite some time. I really was. So that intellectual curiosity, the management of complexity, taking the next step, those were all positive" (Focus Group). Chance brought to light the fiscal motivation stating, "there was there was a financial incentive that definitely helped push me along, realizing I could make more money in that particular area" (Individual Interview). The broad scope of impact as a superintendent, fiscal decisions, and mentorships were common pulls for participants.

### **Sub-Question Three**

What experiences most prepared district leaders for the superintendent role?

Participants explained their time in upper administrative roles, which prepared them as best as possible for a superintendent's role. Though all participants had higher education and post-graduate program experiences, many stated collegial level courses or programs had negligible to zero impact on their preparedness for the role of superintendent. Chance posited, "I don't think the college programs do an adequate job at all preparing for the superintendency" (Focus Group). Sean acknowledged Chance's statement noting that his work with previous superintendent gave him "about 12 credits, not on a transcript...I agree with [Chance as] policies are very, kind of sophisticated...[and] we just did case studies" (Focus Group). Kaci stressed, "Our current [higher educational] programs do not emphasize grit and determination...we need



to teach future superintendents about...local, state, and federal politics” (Individual Questionnaire).

However, all participants explained work experiences that best prepared them for the superintendency. Kaleb completed dissertation on the areas a superintendent most relies on, and he stated, “it's mostly experience, things that you've garnered over the course of your life and not just in their own profession” (Focus Group). Several noted that experiences in human resources and with the school business official were vital in their preparation. Chance stated he worked with a mentor who “was a superintendent...but he was also a business official” (Individual Interview). Chance did additional internship hours with this superintendent to “help me prepare me for that next step. I wanted more of a district perspective on how districts worked” (Individual Interview). Lastly, participants expanded on their work experiences that were helpful such as being in a role such as assistant superintendent. Assistant superintendent, or like roles, allowed for experiences to work with the BOE along with their superintendents at the time. Kaci noted that to survive in the superintendency “you will use everything you have learned from previous roles to be successful” (Individual Interview) and further noted that prior to a superintendency, candidates are “usually building principles for a couple of years and [then] assistant superintendent and superintendent” (Individual Interview). Chance supported the importance of work experience, especially with school BOE members noting that, “Much more attention needs to be dedicated to working with school boards” (Individual Questionnaire).

### **Summary**

Specific examples crucial for those aspiring to be New York State public school superintendents were revealed during the analysis and synthesis of data. The importance of the main themes: professional relationships and skills, motivations and goals, and career

development were expounded upon, and subthemes emerged. The subthemes of mentorship, educational leadership and skills, pushes, and pulls were also found to be commonalities found within the analyzed data sets. Results indicated that despite minor differences in approaches, these factors were all essential for success in achieving the superintendent's role. Though not all findings are a necessity to be acquired or experienced, participants typically had a robust journey in a myriad of professional areas which provided the needed expertise to become a superintendent. Participants were motivated by a desire to excel in their responsibilities, supported by mentors and peers, and guided by a commitment to prioritizing what is best for students in decision-making processes. Overall, these findings highlight the multifaceted nature of the superintendent role, where technical expertise, interpersonal skills, and a strong ethical foundation are needed to drive effective leadership as a school superintendent.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION**

### **Overview**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand the lived experiences an individual encounters on their journey to becoming a superintendent at a school district in New York. The interpretation of findings is connected through the following three themes: professional relationships and skills, motivations and goals, and career development. The implications for policy or practices derived from these themes capture BOE initiatives to entice and select superintendent candidates as well as practices BOE members and aspiring superintendents can implement. The theoretical and empirical implications tie the PPM theory to the themes which describe the pushes and pulls superintendents experienced on their journey. The limitations and delimitation of the research and the recommendations for future research are delineated in the sections below.

### **Discussion**

Interviewing superintendents provided detailed information to determine what it is like moving through a professional career and acquiring a superintendent's position. The overall pushes and pulls towards the position had similarities, though there were differences between each participant. Findings appeared to be pulls toward the position with more positive reasoning such as early desires for leadership or mentors urging the movement towards the superintendency. However, these findings did not omit pushes from part of the reasons why a person took their role as the school district's leader as found in other studies (Grissom et al., 2019). Three participants expressed that their time in the position resulted from a negative situation. However, it is critical to state that zero participants noted only one reason for taking on the superintendent role. There may have been one situation or a single reason that ultimately

made them make the appropriate career move, but none of them made the decision over time because of one push or pull.

### **Summary of Thematic Findings**

The interpretation of this research study's results demonstrated how the themes and sub-themes resonated with the participants' experiences, shaping their individual journey to the school superintendency through the lens of the PPM theory. The results of this study suggested that a minority of individuals, three out of 10, were not pushed away from, but rather pushed into the superintendency due to unfavorable conditions; where, the remaining participants were pulled into the positions because of favorable ones. Lee (1966) expanded on Ravenstein's theory by incorporating individual characteristics and personal responses to factors which are the individual responses participants shared common themes regarding professional relationships, motivations, and career development. Professional relationships and skills were broken into two sub-themes: mentorship and education and leadership skills. Motivations were descriptions of how or what pushed or pulled participants in the direction of the superintendency. Career development was generated from the different work experiences and career pacing participants explained regarding their journey. The PPM theory provides as framework creating an understanding of the factors influencing career and personal decisions leading to a superintendency.

### ***Internal and External Confidence***

In the context of professional relationships and skills, individuals may be pushed to seek a superintendency due to challenges or limitations they observed in the superintendent they are serving under. Observation may impact the internal confidence of those seeking the superintendency, as they recognize areas where improvements could or should be made but feel

that their current role or their superintendent inhibits them. For instance, four of 10 participants faced constraints that limit their ability to fully utilize their skills and expertise, leading to feelings of frustration or eagerness not to move up which solidified their motivation to strive towards the school superintendency to enact the necessary changes perceived to be required. Maci noted the connections she had in the community and the vested interest she had in her district stating, “those other entities were all very positive with me moving from the business and deputy role into the superintendency. So it really was a community effort that they thought that I had the leadership skills” (Individual Interview). Conversely, the pull factors toward a superintendency could include opportunities for greater autonomy, leadership, and impact within the education system. These factors may bolster their external confidence, as the participant’s vision widens as the superintendency becomes a more viable career move, they see themselves in to make a meaningful difference and exercise greater control over their professional environment. Theodon expressed confidence with two different statements, “I actually believe that I can make a contribution and do good things for my district and do good things with the people who I'm working with here,” and “I really genuinely believe that I can help make a difference” (Individual Interview).

Motivation and goals also play a significant role in the journey to a superintendency. Push factors may include a desire for professional growth, career advancement, or the need to escape stagnation in one's current role (Gupta & Garg, 2021). These push factors can promote and individuals' internal confidence, prompting them to seek opportunities for growth and change. Jaimie noted concerns with superintendent applicants stating, “I was intrinsically motivated to say, they're not the right people for this place. They don't know this place like I do. They don't know what we've been through. They don't know where we're headed” (Individual

Interview). The pull factors may also bolster internal confidence as some participants shared their aspirations for making a broader impact on education, shaping policy, or driving systemic change beyond the classroom, building, or department, motivating them to the highest position in the school district.

Moving to such a high position likely requires the belief that a person can enact the changes they see needed. Career development is another key theme illuminated by the PPM theory as a pull factor. As individuals progress towards a superintendency, they may draw upon their educational experiences, mentorship relationships, and practical skills acquired through their career trajectories (Lin & Wu, 2021). Chance expanded his skills further than many of his colleagues by, “taking on, voluntarily on my own, an additional 200 or 250 hours additional internship experience” (Individual Interview). The PPM framework helps to contextualize these experiences within the broader narrative of migration of positions in education, which builds confidence as successes accumulate over a career. Both internal and external confidence play crucial roles in career development process, as individuals navigate the challenges and opportunities inherent in pursuing a leadership position in education (Gupta & Garg, 2021).

### ***Some are Born; Some are Made***

Participants had varying ideas of when they would seek the superintendency. Timing for seeking the superintendency was interpreted as a spectrum of plausible decisions to move towards this position. The spectrum was impacted by participants reflecting the diverse paths they have taken in their pursuit of educational leadership. For some, the aspiration to lead began early, fueled by a leadership vision and other leaders around providing examples of what to do or not to do. Chance directly noted the former stating, “I decided pretty early on I wanted to do administration” (Individual Interviews). In contrast, Sylvia was trying her best to support her

district as her superintendent retired and the lead position in the district was vacant. She stated that the BOE, “had to put out an ad for a superintendent and I said, I’ll help them until they can find someone. Then they [BOE] finally said, well, you’re going to do the job” (Individual Interviews).

Motivation and goals were driving forces behind the decision to pursue a superintendency (Gupta & Garg, 2021). Early starters set ambitious goals and actively seek opportunities to position themselves for leadership roles. Whereas others may stumble upon the superintendency later in their career journey, drawn by the prospect of making a broader impact on education and shaping policy especially when there was a need pertaining leadership. Sylvia was moored in her position as assistant superintendent and ended up moving to the superintendency saying, “I kind of like being assistant sup[erintendent], because I think it’s a sense of your comfort zone. You have tenure, you’re comfortable, but no good thing comes from comfort. I said, all right, I’ll do what I need to do” (Individual Interviews). These late bloomers were inspired by new challenges or presented by unexpected opportunities from colleagues or BOE members, prompting them to reassess their career trajectory and pursue leadership roles they did not previously considered.

Early starters may possess an innate sense of confidence in their leadership abilities, cultivated through years of dedicated preparation and mentorship (Lin & Wu, 2021). Internal confidence propelled them forward, empowering them to navigate challenges and seize opportunities with conviction. In contrast, latecomers to the superintendency experienced a gradual buildup of confidence as they unknowingly approached a position they did not consider earlier in their career. External factors, such as mentorship relationships and career experiences, played a crucial role in bolstering participants confidence and affirming their readiness for leadership roles. Paul noted that one of his career experiences was part of a bigger plan stating,

“I became deputy superintendent. And when I became deputy superintendent, that was part of an overall succession planning for the BOE” (Individual Interview).

Ultimately, whether individuals are born with an innate drive for leadership or made through their experiences and circumstances, their journey towards the superintendency is shaped by a complex interplay of motivations, aspirations, and evolving confidence in their abilities. By recognizing and embracing the diversity of paths to leadership, potential or aspiring superintendents can be found in both likely and unlikely positions in an around education. Kaci noted the diverse path she took stating, “I think that is the big takeaway. The only position I have not done has been an athletic director, but everything else I've done. And now sitting in this role, I look back and I am so thankful” (Individual Interview).

### **Implications for Policy or Practice**

Implications for policy and practices support preparing or selecting strong candidates may be dependent on the stakeholder’s position, for example, most likely a BOE member. The preparation will most likely require funding for future superintendent training/mentorship programs or stakeholder hiring training such as for BOE members. By integrating research-backed leadership training programs into policy and practices, stakeholders and aspiring superintendents can ensure they are selecting or creating educational leaders capable of driving positive change and enhancing student outcomes in school districts.

### ***Implications for Policy***

Setting a policy for a person's journey to attain a superintendency may be difficult as it is improbable that a school district would make a policy for potential candidates’ years in advance of performing a hiring search. However, a policy may require hiring bodies such as a BOE to understand the motivating factors, leadership styles better, and pushes and pulls towards the



superintendency position so they can better understand each candidate. The better BOE members are able to identify important factors they are seeking in candidates, the better chance they have at selecting the best candidate for the tasks they are looking to complete.

Policymakers should allocate resources to develop leadership training programs, specifically for aspiring superintendents, that encompass a diverse range of leadership styles, including instrumental, change, servant, transformational, and adaptive leadership. Seven of 10 participants noted training such as advanced communication, school finance, and robust internships as recommendations to improve current programs. Any training or educational program should come with a system for evaluating the effectiveness of aspiring superintendents' leadership styles in achieving educational goals and fostering positive workplace cultures. Evaluations could involve regular assessments of leadership practices and their impact on student outcomes, staff morale, and community engagement (Hyseni Duraku & Hoxha, 2021; Kock et al., 2019). These programs should be informed by research on effective leadership practices.

As nine of 10 participants originated from the classroom, hiring committees may be biased towards candidates that do not come from that background. Policies should be developed to mitigate biases and prejudices in the hiring process for superintendent positions. Training programs for hiring committees, such as for BOE members, and creating standardized evaluation criteria, can help ensure that hiring decisions are based on skills and practices that align with the district's culture and goals.

### ***Implications for Practice***

Aspiring superintendents could create goals with a plan that captures their leadership style(s) and combines those styles with how they will enact positive change resulting in sustained student success. All participants noted the importance of leadership and directly spoke to or

inferred that understanding leadership proficiencies in oneself can assist in troubleshooting areas of weakness, bolster areas of strength, help candidates for the superintendency better understand how to advocate how they would improve a district to stakeholders as well as seeking out opportunities for mentorship (Adnan & Valliappan, 2019). Based on the findings, decision makers in public school districts should commit to continuous learning and professional development trainings to assist future superintendents to identify emerging trends and best practices in educational leadership. Continuous learning and trainings may involve participating in conferences, workshops, and networking events to exchange ideas and learn from peers and experts, in other words, creating a mentorship program (Adamovic et al., 2020). The object would be to train future superintendents including those for higher level administrative positions such as assistant superintendents as well.

All participants worked in a district level administrative capacity prior to securing a superintendent's position. Future superintendents could use this information to move into higher administrative positions to collaborate with stakeholders, fostering a positive school to community culture, a reputation for strong leadership skills, and shared decision-making. Information finding involves actively seeking input from staff, students, parents, and community members and integrating their perspectives into decision-making processes (Heifetz & Linsky, 2017; Rubin, 2020). Cultivating problem solving skills help to create healthy opportunities to engage in the decision-making processes for districts by embracing a proactive approach to needed changes by seeking input from differing stakeholder perspectives (Garavaglia et al., 2021; Heifetz & Linsky, 2017).

## **Empirical and Theoretical Implications**

The findings of this study have both empirical and theoretical implications. These implications comprise of the essential skills, traits, and theoretical underpinnings that result from studying the journey of a person towards a school superintendent's position. By integrating theoretical perspectives such as the PPM theory with empirical data gleaned from real-world experiences, this section seeks to address the empirical and theoretical implications of the study. Through triangulating data from 10 sources and synthesizing key findings, I aim to offer a holistic understanding of superintendent preparation and selection, empowering stakeholders to make informed decisions and enact evidence-based policies to create premier candidates for the superintendent's position.

### ***Empirical Implications***

By identifying key developmental experiences, such as early career aspirations, mentorship relationships, and adaptive challenges faced along the journey, educational stakeholders can design targeted interventions to support aspiring superintendents in their professional growth. These targeted interventions may open a path to categorizing those with the potential to strive toward the position. Moreover, recognizing the personal motivations, external influences, and leadership competencies that effect aspiring superintendents, enable the recognition of differing pathways for various candidates to pursue superintendency (Gupta & Garg, 2021; Hoch et al., 2018).

As there is not literature describing the specific journey to the school superintendency, this study may provide an opportunity for educators thinking of moving toward the position to compare their journey or a possible path to the participants in this study who have already done it. Comparison can be important to both the individual's journey but also the school district they

may lead in the future. By conducting further research into the longitudinal career trajectories and leadership development experiences of superintendents, scholars can contribute to filling gaps in the existing literature and advancing theoretical frameworks in educational leadership. By disseminating the findings from empirical studies on leadership, policymakers and educational institutions can create more evidence-based policies and practices to cultivate a stronger and more effective superintendents (Heifetz & Linsky, 2017; Kotter, 2012). Through collaborative efforts between researchers, practitioners, and policymakers, the field of educational leadership can evolve to meet the evolving needs of schools and communities, using the PPM theory as a guiding framework for understanding what influences people to become school superintendents (Gupta & Garg, 2021). Previous research on superintendent's focused on skills, attrition, or the impacts people had as a superintendent where this study focused on how people get the position. This study adds to the sparse information regarding school superintendents by providing more details on those who sought and accomplished their goal to work as a superintendent.

Another theory that could be used in understanding the journey and choices people make on their pathway to the superintendency is the social cognitive career theory as it focuses on the career choices that are influenced by interactions between personal characteristics, environmental factors, and behavior. The social cognitive career theory emphasizes self-efficacy beliefs, outcome expectations, and goals as crucial determinants of career development and advancement (Wending & Sagas, 2020). This theory may be beneficial if future research is conducted to seek the reasons behind setting the superintendency as a goal and focusing on ways to attain said position.

### ***Theoretical Implications***

The role of the superintendent should be examined closely to ensure a school district's most prominent decision-maker has the adequate skillset in a place of power. All 10 of 10 participants noted the need to strengthen the training for potential superintendents. Leadership development programs can better prepare aspiring superintendents for the complexities of the role by incorporating skills and traits are essential, such as strong communication skills, ability to problem-solve, and strengthening collaboration. Understanding various leadership styles can inform policies aimed at selecting potential superintendents and assist in grooming future candidates so they are better equipped to lead school districts (Avolio, 2007; Heifetz & Linsky, 2017). As there is limited research on a person's journey to the school superintendency, my study adds to field with themes from the descriptions of how superintendents attained their positions. The use of the PPM theory offers a framework for examining the factors, that combine with the aforementioned skills and traits, that influence individuals' decisions to pursue or resist migratory behavior into the school superintendency positions (Gupta & Garg, 2021). The information from this study solidifies the pushes and pulls that other students have noted regarding movement in careers. This study does not diverge much from extant theory as the PPM theory is currently in use and was applicable to this research.

### **Limitations and Delimitations**

Limitations in research studies encompass potential weaknesses of the study that lie outside the researcher's sphere of influence (Peoples, 2020). The limitations of this study were, most notably, the scheduling for the focus group. Scheduling was a significant factor in gaining participants, but it was most difficult to gain enough participants for the focus group. Each participant held employment full-time with the exception of one. However, all had employment

obligations, which spanned various hours of the day. The robust schedules each participant had required multiple attempts to gain full participation. The data was collected from January to March, the budget season for school districts in the region of study which may have contributed the inability to complete multiple focus groups. Thus, timing in addition to scheduling was difficult. Having more focus groups would have helped to ensure adequate representation of participants with diverse backgrounds and enhancing the validity and applicability of my study's findings (Gupta & Garg, 2021; Lin et al., 2021).

Delimitations refer to the specific parameters or boundaries set by the researcher to define the scope and focus of a qualitative research study (Peoples, 2020). The region and sample size were delimitations of the study. I did not travel outside of the state, and participants were selected from two counties, one of which I reside in. The rationale for these delimitations were based on the convenience sampling model. As participants produced contact information for other potential participants, all contacts were within the aforementioned counties, thus not requiring interstate travel by the researcher. The study's focus on superintendents within a specific geographic region may limit findings to other contexts with different educational systems, governing structures, and cultural norms.

Separately, another delimitation was the decision to only include participants who are or were superintendents in New York State. I did not include those currently on the journey towards the superintendency. The primary reason is that some candidates may not be successful in achieving this goal. The intention is to gather information from those who successfully reached the superintendent position. The secondary reason is that some of those who are going to become superintendent in the future may not know it yet, as three participants from this study explicitly explained that they did not aspire for the position.

## **Recommendations for Future Research**

This research study's findings, limitations, and delimitations provided three potential areas for future research: training and education, expanding into other regions, or motivation. Future research could include the area of superintendent training/education or the creating more robust, formal mentorships. Superintendents currently have programs they can attend throughout the state, but that is only once they attain the position. Mentorship was an essential part of almost all participants, and perhaps further research could shed light on a potential program to prepare people for a superintendent position. Administrative programs in the state certify you for building-level and district-level positions. The district-level positions could be anything from a director to an assistant superintendent or a superintendent. A mentorship program for those seeking a superintendency may be beneficial and research in this area could help shape what a program would entail.

Future studies could consider expanding the scope to include superintendents from diverse regions and backgrounds to enhance the breadth and depth of the journey superintendents embark on. Conducting comparative studies across multiple states or regions could offer valuable insights into the variations and commonalities in superintendent experiences and leadership approaches (Wang et al., 2022).

Another avenue for future research may be in the area of motivation. Motivation can be blended with the push-pull theory to determine specific motivators that drive a superintendent's decision to take the job. The other way motivation could be studied is by using a motivation evaluative tool to rate teachers, administrators, and assistant superintendents to compare them to superintendents to see if motivation ratings vary the higher up the hierarchical ladder someone in education travels quantitatively instead of qualitatively. Future research could also benefit from a

larger and more diverse sample to capture a broader range of perspectives and experiences among superintendents across different regions and school districts (Björk et al., 2014).

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand the lived experiences an individual encounters on their journey to becoming a superintendent at a school district in New York. Through detailed interviews, questionnaires, and focus groups, three primary themes were identified. My most significant understanding derived from the journey is that the pushes and pulls impact people in a variety of ways. Two significant implications were the need for advanced training in a multitude of areas and more robust mentorships while pursuing the superintendency. Advanced training can provide needed information that is not gained through current educational programs based on participants' responses. A robust educational program with mentorship can support the deficits participants noted and support those taking on the superintendent's position to better support students, teachers, and the district.

The theoretical and empirical implications of this study aligned with the PPM theory, shedding light on the factors that influence peoples' decisions to pursue or resist migratory behavior into superintendent positions. Understanding the interplay between internal and external confidence, motivations, and career trajectories can inform targeted interventions to support aspiring superintendents in their professional growth. Collaborative efforts between researchers, practitioners, and school district stakeholders will be essential in advancing the field of educational leadership, using the PPM theory as a guiding framework for understanding the complex dynamics of successfully attaining at school superintendency. Through these endeavors, we can work towards fostering a new generation of skilled and effective educational leaders capable of meeting the expeditiously evolving needs of schools and communities. The lived



experiences that current and former superintendents describe provide a new lens to look through when creating future training opportunities, mentorships, and motivations for those who aspire to reach such a prominent position in public school districts.

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## Appendix A

### IRB Approval Letter

Date: 5-1-2024

IRB #: IRB-FY23-24-802

Title: JOURNEY TO BECOMING A SUPERINTENDENT IN NEW YORK: A TRANSCENDENTAL PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

Creation Date: 11-12-2023

End Date:

Status: Approved

Principal Investigator: Jeremy Koch

Review Board: Research Ethics Office

Sponsor:

#### Study History

<b>Submission Type</b> Initial	<b>Review Type</b> Limited	<b>Decision</b> <span style="color: red;">Exempt - Limited IRB</span>
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#### Key Study Contacts

<b>Member</b> Jeremy Koch	<b>Role</b> Principal Investigator	<b>Contact</b> <span style="background-color: black; color: black;">[REDACTED]</span>
<b>Member</b> Jeremy Koch	<b>Role</b> Primary Contact	<b>Contact</b> <span style="background-color: black; color: black;">[REDACTED]</span>
<b>Member</b> Vonda Beavers	<b>Role</b> Co-Principal Investigator	<b>Contact</b> <span style="background-color: black; color: black;">[REDACTED]</span>

## Appendix B

### Consent to Participate in a Research Study

**Consent Form Version Date:** January, 2023

**IRB Study #** IRB-FY23-24-802

**Title of Study:** Journey to Becoming a Superintendent in New York: A Transcendental Phenomenological Study

**Principal Investigator:** Jeremy R. Koch

**Principal Investigator Email Address:** [REDACTED]

**Dissertation Chairperson:** Dr. Vonda Beavers, Adjunct Professor, School of Education

**Dissertation Chairperson Email Address:** [REDACTED]

**Dissertation Chairperson Phone:** [REDACTED]

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#### Study Summary

The purpose of this study is to examine the lived experiences a superintendent encountered on their journey to their superintendency. The information garnered from this study may help to develop the knowledge of future superintendent candidates, improve the hiring process for superintendent positions, and further develop the current body of study and curriculum used for training superintendents and higher education.

Participants in this study will be subject to an interview individually and/or as part of a focus group. Individual interviews will be completed in one session, with an estimated time of 30 to 60 minutes once the setup of recording equipment is complete and the interview questions



commence. Participants will also receive a questionnaire which can be completed without the investigator present through hard copy or electronic media.

### **What are some general things you should know about research studies?**

You are being asked to take part in a research study. To join the study is voluntary.

You may choose not to participate, or you may withdraw your consent to be in the study, for any reason, without penalty.

Research studies are designed to obtain new knowledge. This new information may help people in the future. You may not receive any direct benefit from being in the research study. There also may be risks to being in research studies. Deciding not to be in the study or leaving the study before it is done will not affect your relationship with the researcher.

Details about this study are discussed below. It is important that you understand this information so that you can make an informed choice about being in this research study.

You will be given a copy of this consent form. You should ask the researcher named above, or staff members who may assist them, any questions you have about this study at any time.

### **What is the purpose of this study?**

The purpose of this research study is to gain a better understanding of what superintendents experience when striving to attain their position.

You are being asked to be in the study because you currently hold or have previously held the job title of superintendent in a school district within New York State.

**Are there any reasons you should not be in this study?**

You should not be in this study if have not been hired and worked as a superintendent of schools in a public New York School District.

**How many people will take part in this study?**

Approximately 10-15 people at will take part in this study.

**How long will your part in this study last?**

The interview time for the individual sessions and focus group will vary between 30-60 minutes depending on the answers and follow-up questions discussed. The overall time for an individual interview would be 60-90 minutes, allocating for 15 minutes before and after the interview for setup and breakdown of equipment and supplies.

The questionnaire should take 12-20 minutes to complete.

**What will happen if you take part in the study?**

If you choose to take part in this study you will be subject to an interview with the investigator and questionnaire. You will be recorded through at least two different recording devices and your answers will be analyzed and compared with other superintendents and their answers.

**What are the possible benefits from being in this study?**

Research is designed to benefit society by gaining new knowledge. There is little chance you will benefit from being in this research study directly.

**How will information about you be protected?**

Participants will not be identified in any report or publication about this study. We may use de-identified data from this study in future research without additional consent.

- Electronic audio/video recordings will be kept on a password protected computer and network.
- Audio/video tapes/memory cards/etc. will be kept under lock and key.

Check the line that best matches your choice:

\_\_\_\_\_ OK to record me during the study

\_\_\_\_\_ Not OK to record me during the study (*Please Note: Checking "Not OK" for recording will prevent you from participating in this study.*)

**What if you want to stop before your part in the study is complete?**

You can withdraw from this study at any time, without penalty. The investigator also has the right to stop your participation at any time. This could be because you have failed to follow instructions or because the entire study has been stopped.

If you withdraw or are withdrawn from this study all data collected will be destroyed and no additional data will be collected.

**Will you receive anything for being in this study?**

You will not be receiving anything for taking part in this study. Your participation is voluntary and again, you can stop at any time.

**Will it cost you anything to be in this study?**

This study does not require participants to pay for any of their part in this study.

**What if you have questions about this study?**

You have the right to ask, and have answered, any questions you may have about this research. If you have questions about the study, complaints, concerns, or if a research-related injury occurs, you should contact the investigator listed on the first page of this form.

**Participant's Agreement:**

I have read the information provided above. I have asked all the questions I have at this time. I voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.

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Signature of Research Participant

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Date

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Printed Name of Research Participant

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Signature of Research Investigator Obtaining Consent

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Date

Jeremy R. Koch

Printed Name of Research Investigator Obtaining Consent

**Appendix C**  
**Recruitment Script**

Hello,

My name is Jeremy Koch and I am a doctoral student at Liberty University. I'm conducting a research study that will describe the lived experiences of superintendents in school districts within New York State. I am contacting you because I believe you will be able to provide relevant insights and perceptions about your experiences as a Superintendent in a New York school district. In order to participate in this study you must currently be employed as or previously have been employed as a Superintendent of schools within New York State. There will be an individual interview that will take between 30 and 60 minutes of active participation on your part and approximately 60 to 90 minutes total which factors 15 minutes before and after for setup and breakdown of recording devices. There is also an option to complete interviews remotely through Google Meet. There will also be a questionnaire to be filled out but does not have to be completed while the researcher is present. Before any interviews, questionnaires, or focus groups are completed participants will be given a consent form to sign indicating that they consent to the research and to being recorded. All personally identifiable information will be kept under lock and key and will not be published as part of the research. Lastly, some participants will be asked to participate in a focus group with other superintendents to conduct a second interview. Thank you for taking the time to read about my study. Please let me know if you are interested in participating.

Thank you,

Jeremy Koch

## **Appendix D**

### **Phenomenological Research Questions**

#### **Central Research Question**

How do school district leaders describe their lived experience during their journey to becoming a superintendent in New York?

#### **Sub-Question One**

What were the motivations and career goals superintendents set before entering the field of education in a school district?

#### **Sub-Question Two**

What are common pushes and pulls that lead educational professionals to pursue the position of school superintendent?

#### **Sub-Question Three**

What experiences most prepared district leaders for the superintendent role?